

23. A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Rose Hermann was my guide out of Egypt. Of course, my fate may have been worse than an oppressed people. I did not even know that I was in need of liberation. She had been watching me for months, all the while grooming me in her mind for the ultimate transformation.

“Are you ready to come over to the dark side?”

I simply needed to figure out where to sign.

“My name’s Rose.”

I could tell that she had a heart of coal. And she was hardly the sweet stuff of fairy tales. I believed that I finally had an ally. Nevertheless, I was going to be a hard sell. I felt perfectly fine on my own, and I didn’t need some up and coming seductress to initiate me into the finer points of sensuality. My asceticism had stood me in fine stead up to this point/

“I don’t need this kind of thing. I’m OK on my own.”

“But are you happy?”

“I’m not going to play that game with you. It’s a trick question. If I tell you that I’m unhappy, then you’re going to try to take advantage of my vulnerability. And if I tell you that I’m happy, then you’re going to try to lull me into one of your meaningless distractions.”

Rose was quick with a comeback, “You do have all the answers.”

“I have my answers. And they work for me. Anything else is frosting on the cake, and I can do without.”

I was not yet ready to cross over into her world.

She was doing her best to educate me. “This is something that adults can’t take away from us.”

“Maybe we’re just not ready for all that extra baggage.”

She was relentless, “That is what parents are so afraid of. Once we discover the secret, then they’ll never be able to control us again.

She talked like Eve in the garden. Nothing would stand in her way from tasting the nectar of the gods. She rejoiced in her pagan legacy.

“Why do you think that they teach us that sex is so bad. They know that it our scepter to rule over the galaxy.”

“I remained skeptical.”

“You’re exaggerating!”

This was the very myth that gripped her very being.

“I feel alive. I feel good. I’m having a great time.”

I remained cautious, “It feels good for now. But that kind of thing never lasts”

She tried to explain to me how exciting it felt finally to let go. Her parents couldn’t do a thing to interfere with that feeling. I had been trying to create this place to hide. And there it was right before my eyes all along.

She seemed really mature, “We finally figure out who we are when we create our sexual identity. It’s biology. It’s how we’re meant to be.”

I wondered why drinking was so much part of her ritual.

“It’s just a way for me to feel comfortable with myself. No embarrassment.”

“How is that?”

“When you’re naked with a boy, you feel that he can out you. Say all these nasty things about you. But if you’re a little tipsy, none of that matters.”

She seemed as if she was getting over all her insecurities. Just listening to Rose made my head spin. I felt that potent burn as if I was in the midst of a severe fever. I wondered how long this feeling would last. I wanted to get away. But we hadn’t even skimmed the surface.

Rose was ready to groom me for the next stage. But she wanted to soften me up a little. That would make me more open to the promise that she had in store for me.

“Take a drink.”

“I’m not really a drinker.

I didn’t want to trade my troubles for alcohol. I couldn’t imagine myself getting high just to deal with the world. I wasn’t that messed up.

“Chloe, what are you afraid of?”

I was afraid of everyone seeing what I had been hiding all this time. I didn’t want Rose getting that power over me.

“I know what it tastes like.”

“It’s not the taste. It’s the feeling. Have you ever drunk enough so that you feel that rush?”

She was trying to embarrass me. And she was doing a pretty good job at it. I felt that I just had to go along.

“I don’t want this to be a habit.”

I took the bottle from her. But I knew that this was just the beginning.

“That wasn’t so bad.”

“Nothing’s happened yet.”

After hanging out for a while, I started to get a little giddy. I felt more comfortable with Rose. I put my arm around her as if we were old pals.

I knew that she was going to get more daring as time went on. This was just a little too easy. I wanted to race home and try to pull myself together. I was melting. I needed my cue.

“Have another!”

I had lost track. I had lost myself. I couldn’t let it bother me. Still I felt that I was doing something wrong. This wasn’t June’s doing. It was just the opposite. I was becoming just like my parents, and I hated it. I had always marveled at my control. I had crafted a self that was separate from the melee. But now, I had nothing that made me special.

Why was Rose doing this to me? The more that I wanted to leave, the more that I wanted another drink just to forget about what was happening. Was that the merciless trick that she had pulled on me? I ran my fingers along my face just to know that I was the same person. But I had my doubts. If I saw my reflection, I would hardly recognize the horror that stared back.

“Dear, it’s all part of growing up. This is just the beginning.”

Her laugh echoed inside my head. I tried to brace myself.

“This is a big laugh to you, Rose.”

“We’re having fun! Don’t let it get to you.”

She was only making me more afraid. If I ran away, my legs would collapse from under me. How was I going to escape?

Rose ran around the park as if she was an airplane trying to land.

“This is a blast!”

“Are you regressing to early childhood?”

“Smarty pants!”

I hated her taunting me.

Rose freaked me out. I thought that I had made myself immune to June’s snooping and Bill’s rigid discipline. She only emphasized how I had taken my imprisonment in stride. Worse, I felt this deep hollow inside. It was as if there was something that I was hiding from myself. And I had suffered more severe damage than I was willing to admit. I did what I could to scour my past all the while hoping that I could discover what it was that set me off. I felt that my mind had been erased. If I could forget something so critical to my nature, what else was I repressing.

My dreams began to reflect the vague horror that I was already living. I again felt a sense of helplessness. I didn’t want to see myself as a victim of my own psyche. But I was now floating in this unformed nether world. I couldn’t identify the source of my hurt. I just knew something deep had shaken me to the core. I was being hunted in my own house. My way out had cut off.

I could feel the closet door lock behind me. My escape had turned into my entrapment. Even if he couldn’t get in, I couldn’t get out. And I knew that it was going to get worse. He was going to find a way to burrow into my hiding place and vanquish me.

My fear was actually more extreme than anything that my imagination could have conjured up. This was real. I simply couldn’t figure out how real. Rose had awakened a demon in me, something long dead. It was taking me over. And I didn’t know what to do. Part of me thought that this was all her doing. She had a history. It had made her the unusual girl that she was. And now she was trying to make me feel the same. I hated the way that her misery loved company.

I wanted my freedom. I didn’t want to react to my fear. There was little that I could do to assert myself independently. I was now a pawn in this game. All my moves had been mapped out. I could only glide down the rows in line with the rules. I had fought so hard against June. I had protected myself from the other kids at school. But Rose was getting in my head. I couldn’t close her off. She was becoming part of me.

Why was I so vulnerable? Had I always been this weak? I had created an inner monologue which had given me the illusion of strength. But it had just taken a nudge on Rose’s part, and I was panicking. As much as I wracked my brain, I couldn’t come up with the reason for these feelings. Nothing in Bill’s and June’s behavior seemed to cross the line of indignity. Had I compromised my memory so much that my past was no longer my own? Indeed, this was scary.

Rose made me feel as I had been living my whole life under the shadow of an incredible trauma. That was the reason for my total ignorance. The event had completely effaced every trace of its harm. I was questioning myself on the basis of this big nothingness that now haunted my being. Perhaps, I was being overly dramatic. Bill and June had spared nothing in impressing their iron grip on our household. Rose gave me the excuse to attribute some more bizarre explanation. I couldn’t let any of this get to me.

Rose had shaken my composure. Why had she been so relentless at getting under my skin? I wanted to learn more. I was her disciple waiting for my instructions. Rose had been

successful where June had failed. She had piqued my curiosity and was using her knowledge to get closer to me. There was nothing that I could do to stop the inevitable. Her suggestions became commands for me. I feared disobeying just as I feared coming face to face with the trouble that I had recently uncovered. The horror was pervasive. I was a girl under a spell. I could envision Rose tinkering with her voodoo doll of me. She was using her manipulations to effect her grand plan. I just fell into place. Surely, June and Bill had been involved in some perverse scheme that made me so vulnerable to Rose's plan.

Rose's words were like a spell. I could feel a new confidence coming over me. But it was like a tonic. And when it wore off, I was a little woozy. I had to do my best to rally my will.

In the hallway, I got that jolt that I needed.

"You know that you look hot."

It was Jack Bison.

"And you just noticed. You've been sitting behind me all year in English."

"He backtracked, "You seem different now."

I was excited just hearing him talk. I had always had a crush on him. I felt that I never had a chance with a guy like that. Now he was feeding me with all this attention, and I couldn't resist.

"I've got to go."

"Maybe we could hang out sometime. Let me get your number. I could text you."

It didn't take long before the fallout shook Cedar Valley High.

"You're not hanging out with Jack."

"What are you talking about?" I hardly knew Amy Mathers. She was a cheerleader. And not that friendly a girl. She was also a couple of years older than me. She felt that her own tawdry experience gave her some kind of advantage over the rest of the world. But Amy couldn't tell me who I could hang out with. This was a toothless warning, simply jealousy on her part.

All of a sudden, I felt like a target. It wasn't as if I had really changed. I hadn't done anything to attract attention. I wasn't dressing any differently. But girls had me in their sights as if I was some kind of rival. Had they become mind readers? Was that how they knew what was going on in my head?. Maybe I was walking down the halls with a new attitude. I guess that was all that it took for them to pick up on it. The new me.

I was in Math class and was doing my best to pay attention to what the teacher was writing on the board. In my path of vision, something kept getting in the way. I noticed Amy squirming in her seat. It was if she was doing her best to get things right with her body. I had seen that pained look on June. But my mother had none of Amy's focus. It was almost as if Amy was punishing herself. My gaze was somewhat sympathetic. The poor girl couldn't seem to shake the demon that possessed her.

Her tremor was only temporary. It was more a sense of psychological discomfort than anything else. It bore such a resemblance to my mother's attempts to subdue the spirit in the mirror. Amy did not simply have her suspicions. She knew it as a metaphysical certainty that she was the fairest creature of all. Her committed idealism had been able to shape external reality to such a degree that her host of admirers could only confirm what Amy knew deep in her heart. She was the seat of such eternal loveliness.

Of course, many a true believer felt her faith comforted by the fact that a benevolent deity

would inevitably punish such vanity. But Amy basked in the shining grace that blessed her speculation. Even in her darkest moments, she still felt intimately close to heaven. Only a cruel sceptic would try to burst the hapless child's bubble.

Ultimately, I knew that Amy was beset by the same sense of insecurity that marked my days. But Amy's devilish contract had put an end to her worst doubts. And her guile was so dexterous that she could have even fooled a circumspect providence. Even though Amy never saw the world through the eyes of others, she had fine-tuned her watch to accord with the reactions of her peers. And she had accustomed herself to the cruelty of the mirror. She gave the illusion of perfection to those who longed for a fundament to anchor their own deepest longing. To touch her was to be in the presence of one of nature's miracles.

I had never succumbed to this elegant propaganda. But I had felt the girl's wrath. And her disparaging regard convinced me that there was an element of truth to her mythology. As long as she could maintain her hold over her spectators, she could assume her place of majesty. I was doing my best to challenge her regency. But I also recognized that a string of easy victories had pumped the girl full of vigor. I had no intention to engage her in combat, but I knew that I would have to tread lightly around her authority. I did my best not to incite her. This was not going to be leisurely.

I did my best to get deeper into her mind. The territory was not completely unfamiliar. But Amy brought with her a unique twist that had made her ascendancy seem so effortless. Her parents had no doubt nurtured her fantasies. But Amy had acquired conjuring skills of her own that went well beyond those of her guardians. Somehow, she may have been not of this world; nevertheless, she was well versed in the art of smoke and mirrors. And she could sculpt a physical reality that was far more impressive than that provided by a multitude of budding Rodins.

I may have been appalled by her intent. But I realized that I would have to observe her technique if I was ever to attain that degree of confidence. If I failed in my task, I would be forever crushed by her evil eye and her well-placed taunts. There was no choice, I could well overcome this amateur sorceress. However, I wasn't going to try to turn her insults against her. I couldn't afford to play her game. And she knew how to use an opponent's weaknesses against her. I needed to stick to my wiles. When I could, I had to maintain my invisibility around her. Now and then, I would be on her radar. But I adjusted myself to attain maximum inconspicuousness. That didn't stop the boys from wondering. And that would continue to get under her craw.

I realized that I was starting to act as featherbrained as the girls that I despised. Why had I given in to these childish feelings?

I never realized how embarrassed I had felt in my body. No wonder I had retreated to a world of dreams. I was still reluctant to return to the world of the living. I looked down at my hands as if I was seeing them for the first time. And they seemed so strange. I was not meant to be like this.

I had always been so careful about everything that I did. I felt as if I was constantly threading a needle. Now, I needed to live with an air of reckless abandon; I was invigorated. But I was also a little scared. I wanted to celebrate what seemed to like a new power. I no longer had to hide in a labyrinth of shadows. I was ready to share my glory with the world.

I ceased being afraid to embrace the pleasures of the world. The taste of an orange or the magic of the sunrise all enlivened me in a way that I had never known before. I could feel the blood pulsing through my veins. I felt a oneness in pleasure, and I was motivated to share my excitement to all who were open to its wonder.

After school, Rose challenged me, “You haven’t even started to live. You’re still stumbling around those cobwebs in your mind.”

I wanted to think that I wasn’t so vulnerable.

She added, “You respect sanity and stability too much. You need to shake up the mix.”

“Huh?”

I was afraid to imagine what she had in store for me. I could hear the barker edging me onto the carnival ride. I thought that I had already risked my immortal soul to go this far. Little did I know.

Rose had a way of making it all seem so irresistible. If she had other delicious flavors for me to taste, I was willing to open up my mouth wide. Even the poison apple might seem delectable at a moment like this.

“What are you thinking?”

“Want to come to a party?”

I had been to parties. I wanted to know what was the big deal.

She again toyed with me, “Are you sure that your mom is going to let you out of house?”

“I’m not a prisoner. I’ll find a way.”

I envisioned myself crawling through the basement window. I never had seen Bill and June as an impediment. If the motion detectors were on, I would enable them with my super-powers. *Take that, Mommy!*

I had seen mischief at parties. All this weirdness that was going on upstairs or in some dark corner. But I never went after that kind of thing. I always watched with a sense of separateness. I was making my own way.

Rose accustomed me to a different style of seeing the world and those around me. It was all involving, and I was getting caught up in its craziness. Formerly, I had observed others as a way of subtracting myself from the action. Now, these images were up close and part of me. I could touch this reality. My imagination had come to life.

I could have lost myself amidst the horror. Instead, I let it tantalize me. I needed more. I craved a fix. I wanted to feel the bite of infinite joy against my skin.

“Chloe, you’re thinking about it too much. Just have fun.”

“Fun?”

“Do what you like, not something that someone told you to do.”

She was holding out the magic mushroom for me.

“Take a bite!”

“How’s that?”

“Clay and I are going to a party.”

“Who’s Clay?”

“He doesn’t go to our school. He’s seventeen. He’s a cool dude.”

“OK,” I wasn’t so much agreeing to go to the party as I was trying to be part of her world. I didn’t want to let on about my misgivings.

That night, I got away from the house and sped over to Rose's. Clay picked us up, and we were off to the races.

The party was so much more grown up than anything that I had ever encountered. There was something so rude about the place. There was even the pretense of supervision—anything goes! I felt as if I was taking my life in my own hands. The only way to get out of here was to give up something that I treasured.

“Once you get this deep into the action, there is no way to say no.”

Rose got me a drink. It didn't take long before I was flying, the strange brew of fear and excitement. I looked around, and I was on my own. Everything was just too adult. Things were moving too fast. Some kid who seemed stoned brushed against me.

“Girl, you are so hot.”

I needed help. I needed a friend. Where was Rose? I kept wandering from room to room. People were looking at me funny. Some even tried to block my way. I pushed them all away.

I realized what was going on here. And it really made me frightened. Once you got deep into the action, there was no way to say no.

I went outside. I couldn't let myself become a victim to the insanity. I wanted to check if the car was still there. When I finally saw the yellow Mustang parked on the street, I didn't take it as a signal that Rose and Clay were still at the party, and I should look harder for them. Instead, I felt this urge to return to my home base. I could wait there, and they could find me.

As I got closer, I realized that they were in the car. I could see Rose's hand sliding down the window. It was obvious. They were having sex. That didn't stop my progress. I was curious. I had to see it all for myself. My whole night had come to this.

Rose was on top. I could see her naked ass. For a moment, I was sure that she was looking at me. She was almost asking me to join them. This was all wrong. But I felt the strangest kind of excitement. I seemed to lose all my inhibitions. That wasn't like me at all. It really freaked me out. And I seemed to lose all my inhibitions. This wasn't like me at all. It really freaked me out.

I thought that I knew about life. I thought that I knew about myself. And this was just throwing me for a loop. It wasn't so much that Rose knew something that I didn't know. She was getting into my head. I had never let this happen before. Not with anyone!

I could feel the tears coming to my eyes. I didn't want to be a baby. But this was like nothing that I had ever felt before. I could deal with Bill's and June's shenanigans. But this was way over my head.

On the car ride home, nothing was said. They had had their fun. And I had been introduced to a world that was too bizarre for me to deal with. I had so many questions. But I didn't know where to start.

Rose had done her best to convince me that she had unlocked some deep mystery of the universe. I wasn't buying it. It wasn't as if Bill and June weren't having sex. I really didn't want to dwell on this fact, but it hardly gave them some kind of special enlightenment. They both stumbled through the day in that wide-eyed stupor. If anyone had missed their metaphysical calling, it was certainly my parents.

At lunch, I felt uncomfortable sitting with Rose.

“Do you really like him?”

“We were having fun. It gives me such a high. But if I try to hold on too hard, he’s only going to leave me.”

She talked as if he had some kind of power over her.

“You just let him do that to you. Can’t you say no?”

“Say no? I wanted it. What do you think was going on?”

“How old is he? What is he about?”

Rose had a surprised look on her face. “You’re not my mom. I’m doing what I want to do.”

Was that enough for me? I wasn’t sure if I was hearing what I needed from her. She was so nonchalant.

“This is why we’re friends, Chloe. You’ve got to let yourself open up.”

“What you’re asking is more than that. It’s having your insides cut out.”

You’re making a big deal about something that’s just fun. Sex lets me feel as if I’m close to someone, even if I’m not.”

“That sounds crazy. You’re only setting yourself up to be hurt.”

“I’m going to get hurt anyway. I just don’t invest that much of myself in the whole mess. Chloe, you’ve got to learn to live. That’s what we’re here for. To absorb as much pleasure as we possible can.”

Rose sounded as if she recounting the life of an amoeba. It would be a terribly cruel understatement to say that I didn’t feel like myself today. And Rose hadn’t done a lot to help. After school, I retreated home with the desire to hide away from the world.

After zipping through my home work, I needed some kind of release. I jettied over to the mall on my bike. I was going to get some ice cream. As I was leaving, Clay interrupted my path.

“Did you have a blast last night?”

I was honest: “I don’t think that I was ready for any of that.”

“You took it like a trooper.”

I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to say. He was treating me like a ten year old.

“You shouldn’t let things get you down. You know that you’re kind of cute.”

I took the complement in stride.

He gave me a hard gaze. It shook me up.

“We should get together.”

“I thought that you were with Rose.”

“I don’t think that she’ll mind.”

He was playing on my naivete: “It’s not as if she’s here to plead her case.”

“You know that you want to get with me.” He tried to kiss me.

“I’m not like that.”

Clay stared at me. It sent shivers all over me.

“I’d really like to get with you.”

He shook me up.

“I thought that you were with Rose.”

I had to admit that I felt a little flattered. But this seemed all wrong.

“That doesn’t mean that I can’t get with you. You like to have fun, don’t you?”

I protested, “Rose is my friend. I’m not like that.”

He gave me the weirdest grin, “There’s nothing between Rose and me. It’s casual.”

“That’s not how she tells it.”

He seemed relentless, “We’re young. You know how it is. No strings.”

I refused to give in, “If you and I got together, she’d be pissed. I’m not about to hurt her.”

“You’re not going to tell her, are you?” He was trying to make me an accomplice.

I knew what she would say already if I just told her that Clay was telling all this to me.

She’d blame me not him. That’s how it always was.

He moved close to me and tried to kiss me. I pushed him away.

“I really like you. We’d be good together.”

I felt confused. I could feel his heat. But I wasn’t about to mess things up with Rose. He made me feel all adult. I was tempted. He knew that he could take advantage of my uncertainty.

“You look like you’d be a good kisser. You know that you’re really hot.”

He was playing me.

“This isn’t working.”

I kept telling myself that. But he was getting under my skin. And I wasn’t walking away, just listening to his flattery. I wanted it all to be true.

He had a way of making me feel helpless. I started to believe that the only way to get over my insecurity was to hook up with him.

He touched my shoulder. His caress seemed safe. It didn’t say too much. This was all part of his game as he was trying to move in closer and closer. Most other girls would have already melted before his full court press. I did what I could to hold my ground.

He could tell that he was affecting me. He was a little overwhelming. He now positioned his body so that he had me cornered against the wall. I squirmed trying to slip away.

I didn’t want to make myself too obvious. It only made him feel more powerful. He got off on my weakness.

“You like this, don’t you.”

I blocked his hand as he ran it across my lip.

“You’re really stunning.”

I was feverish. I wanted this all to stop. I held up both my hands. Then I just let them drop.

He put both his hands on my hips. He tried to move his body with mine. I pushed him back.

“I’m not interested.”

He was afraid that his aggressiveness would chase me away. He now had me pinned between his outstretched arms. I smiled to help ease the tension.

“Clay, you’re with Rose. That’s how it has to be.”

“You’re going to regret this.”

“I only regret what I do, not what I don’t.”

“Daddy’s little girl!”

It would have been so easy to stay with him. But I took my cue when I could. Sure he was a little pissed off. I just knew that he wasn’t going to pursue it any further.

I got home from the mall, and my mother was staring at me.

“Someone’s been calling the house for you all evening. Where have you been?”

“I told you that I was heading to the mall for frozen yoghurt.”

“You were there all this time.”

“I saw some friends. We were hanging out. No big deal.”

It really wasn't. Why was someone trying to reach me at home? I looked at my cell again. No one had been trying call me directly. That was strange. Who had called the house? I looked at the caller ID. This was hardly a puzzle. But it read *unknown number*. Maybe someone was playing a game with me.

“Rose, it was you. It had to be you.”

I could tell as I talked with her on my cell that she had that sly grin on the other end of the line.

“What of it?”

“June could have taken me to task.”

“She didn't, did she?”

“I thought quickly on my feet. But it could have been a massacre. What the hell is in your head?”

“I was testing you.”

“I don't like to be tested like that.”

She was being hard on me, “It's not like you can hide who you really are.”

I had always thought just the opposite. Who was she to think that she could break me down that easily? She thought herself a tough rival. But she was hardly a match for June. And I had played a successful game of attrition with June. Rose wasn't going to take me down that easily.”

“Girl, you always have to be on your toes. You are getting soft.”

“So I passed the test.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“If you're going to try to work your magic, I suggest that you be a little more discreet.”

“I didn't do anything.”

“That isn't what Amy Mathers would say.”

I had my answer, “You were the one who slept with Clay.”

Rose was trying to be coy, “Oh, really now.”

“Everyone saw you at that party.”

“A lot of everyones who don't even go to our school.”

I felt as if Rose wanted to rat me out.

“This is my way of staying one step ahead of me.”

“I suppose that you're the type to steal your best friend's french fries while she's going to the bathroom.”

“If those fries are going to go to her hips, it's up to me to intervene.”

“What about your hips, girlfriend?”

“I'm not the one with a weight problem. I can eat anything that I like.”

What made her so snotty? I felt as if she was trying to drag me down. I didn't dare look at a mirror. That was only part of her psychological warfare. If I could survive June, I knew that Rose would be easy fare.

“Just remember that I have the knife with your fingerprints on it.”

I had a swift comeback, “Who said that I used a knife?”

She was trying to get me thinking.

Rose had really done a number on me. And I welcomed her craft. Up to this point I had been in a daze. I had thought that I was making my own way, but I was only reacting to June. I could feel this incredible hollow take me over. This was all part of the process of becoming myself.

June never ceased her ceaseless watch. She continued to guard those values that she held so dear. There she was posing in front of the mirror all the while hoping that those infernal gods would bless her limitless vanity. Again and again, she confirmed that she was truly the fairest of them all. In that balance, I must have been the darkest creature in the universe. For once, I was able to accept my station and live joyously on my merits.

It wasn't enough for June to assume her title. She had to assure herself that there were no rivals for her crown. The very knowledge that I might be a threat to her infinite majesty was enough to send her in a tizzy. This made her more vigilant than ever about my actions. Formerly, I had been able to disguise my maneuvers. But I would need extra stealth if I was not going to get nailed by her surveillance.

I hated the feeling of being a sitting duck. I had never need to alibi my plans before. Now I had to create a convenient decoy that could attract her attention while I was off on my unique mischief. This was how things were meant to be all along. I was the sprightly rabbit to her watchful hound. I counted on an element of dim-wittedness in my favor. But I knew that my strategy couldn't last forever. Her wickedness would not remain in check. A couple of false move on my part, and June's wrath would flow in abundance.

If June was all the more ready to pounce, Rose wanted to make sure that I remained in jeopardy. She hoped my survival instincts would kick in to shake up my natural caution. Rose worked the circumstances in her favor to push me out of the comforting nest. That was not to say that June was a nurturing mother, far from it. More than that, my own defenses had left me vulnerable to the world. Just a whisper from the raucous crowd had been enough to shake my composure. I was trying to stave off the inevitability of the emotional roller coaster. For the time being, I held tight. But I could feel how I was slipping. And Rose was there ready to give me a little nudge.

I was inhabiting a world that I could have never contemplated in my hallowed philosophy. I was a brigand among the other cutthroats. And I had to use my wiles to stay upright. An untimely hit would send me tumbling among the brambles. And there I would be an easy victim for any of the bloodthirsty curs. I reached deep into my resources just so I could hold it together. This was how Rose was grooming me for her new company of swashbucklers. And I was prepared for the hearty adventures that awaited.

June remained my constant peril. She was never going to surrender her cause. If that meant her own practice of the dark arts so be it. She had already abandoned me to more sinister forces. What had once been a vague form of affection had been transformed into a more severe need to control me. Like an inquisitor, she had her arsenal of deadly techniques. And she knew how to carry her method to the point of my exhaustion. My own fear would do the rest in sealing my confession. Through it all, I was lucky not to succumb. What would follow would test my

mettle? It would also reveal her twisted intent. My own concerns verged on paranoia. I suspected that my meals were drugged. I wondered if she was vaporizing her poisons. I did my best to recognize subtle forms of mind control. But her most potent ally may have been a flirtation with the supernatural. What else could explain the blessings that seemed associated with her haughtiness. For her, that was reward in itself.

Rose offered me the secret to resist June. I could finally disappear from my mother's eagle eye. But there was a catch. For a brief moment, I actually believed that June and Rose were conspiring together. This seemed like the most absurd thing imaginable.