

### “Fiddling on the Rooftops”

My name is Flamma, age 10,076. At the time of this tale, I lived in the city Rome under the reign of Nero, in late June of A.D. 64. I was almost 500 years old, close to my first burning.

“Come along, Flamma. There is a man with a snake-bite that you must heal.” That was my friend, the healer Iasonius Aurelius Angelus. “Angelus” was given to him by his many patients. And, of course, it always fell to me to heal the patients. Phoenix tears are very rare, prized in the world of medicine, as they can heal almost any wound. I also healed many patients with emotional wounds, because the song of the phoenix is guaranteed to uplift spirits.

“Flamma, I said *come!*” I launched myself into the air, startled out of my reverie. Iasonius held out his arm, and I fluttered down upon it. As we walked along the streets of the city to the patient’s house, I heard the usual whispers. “A *firebird!*” “Aren’t those illegal to own?” “Where did he get that? I thought they were supposed to live in the East!” That, at least, was true. My family had been left behind in a far away land when I was captured and taken here, to Rome. Oh, how I missed them! My sisters, my brothers, my parents; I even missed my crazy old uncle! I couldn’t ever visit them because my duty was here, with Iasonius. I ruffled my gold and red feathers, leaving my dark thoughts behind.

“Kindly watch your talons, my dear. I think you drew blood that time.” Iasonius winced. I ducked my head ashamedly and gently released my hold on his arm, only to tighten it again; the wind was very strong that day. Finally, Iasonius announced our arrival at the patient’s home. It was one of the larger and dirtier tenant houses in the city. As we proceeded to the third floor, I caught a glimpse of some of the rooms. There were more people shoved into those tiny boxes they called rooms than I had ever seen before; there were maybe even fifteen in one room! I was shocked out of my staring by Iasonius knocking on the door of the client. When we were invited into the room, I sank back into my staring. There were so many people in that room! The small area they had been assigned to was filthy, and stank of excrement and sweat.

“He’s over there, hot as fire and losing his stomach,” an old man with gapped teeth rasped. Indeed, the man was in the corner, beads of sweat running down his flushed face, and stomach contents on the floor around him. It was he who had summoned us here by way of his younger brother. He seemed to be twitching, and his leg was swollen beneath the toga, with black tissue surrounding the area. The doctor quickly moved over to him.

“Calm down. It will be all right,” Iasonius told him. The victim nodded his head weakly, then lay down on the bare floor. The healer nodded to me, and I obediently bowed my head to the wound and began tearing. Two white, shining pearls of water dropped into the bite and sizzled faintly as the wound closed. The man picked his head up and looked at me in bewilderment, as if he could not believe that a mere bird had healed a mortal wound.

Iasonius chuckled softly. “Yes, this bird did heal you.”

“But how?”

“Phoenix tears have healing powers. They can heal almost any wound, physical or emotional,” the healer replied.

“Tell him thank you.” The man seemed more than a bit astonished. I crooned happily and began to preen my feathers. The man paid my master and we left him staring stupidly at me, his jaw just about hitting the floor.

We walked along next to the Tiber River in the dusk. Iasonius began whistling softly, but the contents of a chamber pot, their container following soon after, came flying out of a window, narrowly missing us.

“It’s a very dangerous business, going about Rome at night without a torch, my dear Flamma. Would you be so kind as to provide some light?” Iasonius asked me. I immediately began singing a song of praise to the sun-god Apollo. Finally, he dragged the sun to a halt barely above the horizon to listen, as he usually did.

“Thank you. That is much better, not so dangerous.” And so it went until the eighteenth of July.

The night of July 18 was a pleasantly warm, clear night. Iasonius stroked me as I slowly and weakly dragged another couple of branches to my pyre. It was time for my first burning, and I had no idea what would happen. I was simply doing what instinct told me. After a short while, it was ready. I climbed onto the small pile and waited. Suddenly, through the warm flames that slowly consumed me, I saw the emperor Nero rush by in his litter, seemingly running from something nearby. Then there was nothing.

...I gradually realized that there was gray dust covering me. I shook it off and poked my tiny head out, only to be covered with choking, black ash from the building next door. I angrily swelled up to full-grown size and launched myself into the air.

People were screaming, throwing themselves, children, possessions, out of windows on the upper floors. The building started to collapse, and the screams of terror mingled with new yells of pain. Bystanders watched in horror as the structure finally caved in. Then silence, which was, perhaps, worse than the screaming, settled on all ears as the fire eagerly reached out to the next building. I wrenched myself away from this horrifying spectacle to look for Iasonius. I soared high above the rooftops, looking for any sign of the healer. At last I returned to my pile of ash that, despite the wind that spurred the fire, had stayed next to the heap of rubble. I sighed and peered again through the smoke for my master. I spotted an arm sticking out from underneath a rock. With a huge effort, I grasped the piece of building material with my talons and lifted it off of the person. But it was not a person. It was simply an arm, severed from someone’s body. I espied the woman nearby. I flew toward her, carrying the arm. Her eyes filled with fear, and she backed away. I lit on the ground not far from her and slowly walked to her feet, dragging the arm. Unexpectedly, her eyes went blank and she fainted, sprawled on her back on the cold earth. I hopped to the empty socket that once held the arm and carefully maneuvered it back into its resting place. I then began crying into the gaping hole. The tears sizzled and the wound closed over. The woman’s eyes opened hesitantly, then she sprang to her feet and ran from the fire without a backward glance.

I resumed my search for Iasonius. I swooped down near a likely figure, ignoring the people scattering in all directions. It was not the healer, although he looked very like him. I spied another figure that looked like Iasonius, but that was not him either. Finally, I spotted a figure walking away from the fire, weaving slightly and leaving a trail of blood behind. I fluttered down next to him and looked up at his face. It was my master. He collapsed on the ground beside me. I hopped to his head concernedly and looked into his eyes.

“Flamma, my dear, you have been the most wonderful pet a man could ever have. Thank you.” The healer drew a long, shaky breath. I could hear the death rattle sounding from deep within his lungs. I bent my head to the wound in his chest, a gaping one with a long, thick piece of wood sticking out of it, but he gently pushed me away. “Flamma, I am old. Let me die. Don’t torture an old man on his deathbed with that look. Don’t keep me here with you. It is time.” With that, his eyes dimmed and his hand fell limply from my head. Iasonius Aurelius Angelus was dead. With him, so many remedies died. So many patients were never healed by his kindly hands. I raised my beak and screamed as no bird had

ever screamed before, all my rage at the person who started the fire that took my beloved Iasonius and all my sorrow for the healer pouring out of me. I felt, rather than heard, someone come up behind me and grab me by the neck.

“Got you, you little devil! Was it you who started the fire” a burly man asked me, shaking my body. “Of course not,” he answered himself, “Nero did. I helped him start that fire so he could build his blasted ‘Golden House’.” I hung limply from his hand, the life rapidly draining from me. I no longer cared what happened to me. The man realized that he was killing me, and loosened his hold on me. Air rushed into my lungs. I summoned all my strength and let out such a squawk that he completely let go of me in surprise. I quickly dropped to the ground and, just as quickly, fired myself into the air, making for my homeland.

And Nero stood on the rooftop and fiddled.

### Epilogue

I returned to Rome once after the burning to see the house that Iasonius and I lived in, to walk the paths to the patients’ houses, to marvel at this Golden House that was the cause of this tragedy in my life. The Roman way of life had gone back to normal, in a way I knew my life could not.