

## **Terman – Chapter 16 (Rev)**

The first streaks of dawn were painting the sky pink when Virbius turned for home. As the sounds of the waterfall faded behind him, he could see another light through the trees, the flickering of a distant fire. He became alert once more, mindful of the violence of the previous night.

He knew it was unwise to approach a human habitation, even if it were only a simple village settlement, but his desire to avoid the journey home was still strong. He glided cautiously through the trees, until he came to a clearing, not far he guessed from the lake, which had impressed him with its foreboding gloom.

A few women in brightly coloured sarongs were moving about, carrying pots, sweeping in front of huts and tending fires, as human slaves were wont to do. A couple of men came out, stretched and yawned, and lay down on verandas, waiting to be fed. Virbius reflected on his own life of ease and its similarity to the tribal life of these woodland animals.

He sat down to rest awhile, content to observe the random movements of the figures in the clearing. How purposeful each single action seemed, drawing water, cutting wood, preparing food. But how futile the whole business was, leading to old age, disease and death. He was thankful to the Goddess that he was not subject to the ravages of human disease, and that a long and pampered life stretched before him.

Why then, he wondered was he so reluctant to return. He was not cowardly; the encounter with the tiger and the hunters had proved that. There were dangers to be faced in Parthenia but, with the help of his friends, these could be overcome. The journey of colonisation would be a great trial, but one he could look forward to as an adventure, rather than something to be shunned: the climax of his life, leading to the perfect fulfilment in the arms of his future queen. What came after he dared not think about.

He was startled from his reverie by the noisy chatter of birds. Two large herons in a tree above his head were fighting. One sat on a nest of twigs and the other fluttered above, covering its mate with its body and biting her with his beak. Suddenly, it rose among the branches and soared away, seemingly abandoning its partner. Virbius stared after it, wondering what it would be like to enjoy the freedom of flight.

The clatter of the birds had alarmed the villagers. Two men stood up and stared over to where he lay crouched in the underbrush. Their knowledge of the jungle told them that something had disturbed the birds, and danger may be close. One ran back to a hut and came out with a rifle, advancing a few paces across the clearing. Others shouted out in minangkabau, waving at the man, who sat down again, still staring suspiciously towards the trees where the birds had been disturbed.

A couple of young women carried food to the largest hut with a high, thatched roof. The eaves were elaborately decorated in blue and gold swirls. The women laid the food on a long bamboo table by the door, and backed respectfully away. A local chief, Virbius thought, and eased himself quietly to his feet, ready to leave.

A shadow in the doorway delayed him, and he stared intently as a tall young woman came out of the hut and gathered up the food. She too glanced over to where he stood, secreted in the bushes. She was very tall and slim, quite unlike the human figures of the village women. Her hair looked unnaturally light, its gleaming length too perfect for any human head. Before she turned and went inside again, he saw that she was beautiful, delicate and gracile, like his own people.

His curiosity was awakened now. He stood up boldly and walked into the clearing, heedless of the man squatting with his gun. These were only animals, after all, and should give way to the superior powers of his race. As the man rose, Virbius leaped forward and knocked him to the ground, tearing the rifle from his hands. With a violent blow he jammed the muzzle into the earth, packing it deep into the soil. The man lay on his back, half stunned, but shuffled backwards on his bottom, away from the menacing creature before him.

"Wait! Do no harm," a clear but measured voice spoke from the hut.

Virbius turned to see a figure taller than himself emerge. The facial markings were like his own, but silver rather than gold.

"Come forward, there's no need to be afraid. No one will attack you."

Obedient to his words, the villagers retreated rapidly from the clearing into the doorways of their huts.

Virbius felt inclined to flee, but pride prevented the slightest hesitation. He walked towards the terman as firmly as he could. He saw at once that he was of high rank. The face was noble and refined, much as he had imagined his father's would be. But the head and cheeks were covered with terrible scars, the kind made by gladiatorial talons. He wore a great cloak that covered most of his upper body; his feet were covered with sandals of the finest gold and silver filigree.

"You are surprised to see me here. My name is Nemor." The noble waited in the doorway, saying nothing more, letting this information sink in, carefully observing the emotions passing over Virbius's face.

"But you are Silvestri," Virbius said, looking more closely at the markings on Nemor's face. "How is that possible?"

"The Silvestri are a numerous clan, not only in Parthenia but in many terman cities," Nemor replied. "But you wished to see my daughter, come inside."

Virbius realised with embarrassment that Nemor must have been reading his thoughts all the time he had been in hiding, and possibly before he had even approached the village. He quickly closed his mind to further intrusions, realising too late that this might give offence.

The hut was dim inside, and boasted few of the luxuries that one might expect a high noble to possess. The young woman sat at a bamboo table, where she had placed the food, her eyes downcast. Virbius examined her discretely, not wishing to give offence to his host. He had heard tales of mixed unions, but had never seen a half-breed before. It was true what they said; the daughters of termen and humans were beautiful indeed.

"Please be seated and eat with us," Nemor said, indicating a stool, will you not remove your weapons, you are among friends."

Virbius removed his gauntlets and projection tube, and laid them on the table within easy reach. He took the humble place offered by the table. Nemor sat apart, in a great wooden chair, elaborately carved with strange animals and distorted human faces. Brocaded curtains of great age framed the chair on either side, perhaps a household relic of some long dead ruler of the Island. Beside the chair hung an old two-handed sword.

"Her name is Ingenua," the voice inside his head said. "Is she not fair?"

"Yes, she is fair," Virbius replied without speaking. He realised only a king would have the power to enter his mind with such ease."

"Fair enough for a Silvestri prince?" the voice asked again.

Virbius looked at the seated figure, which regarded him now with a penetrating gaze, a gaze of command, the regard of a king. Hearing a shuffling, scratching noise, he looked down at Nemor's feet, which rested on a step at the foot of his rustic throne. The drape beside the chair was pushed aside and a great saurian head emerged, moving from side to side as it tasted the air with a blue, forked tongue. Neither Nemor nor Ingenua seemed perturbed when the komodo sat down at the foot of the chair, and laid its head upon its tail.

"The world is full of strange creatures," Nemor said, "surely there is a place for every one."

Virbius tried to form a suitable reply but was interrupted by Ingenua, who had risen to carry food to her father. Nemor waved the food away and indicated that she should serve their guest first. When she brought the bowl to him, Virbius selected a piece of fruit, and was favoured with the flash of grey eyes. He felt a surge of desire, and was reminded of Silvana. He thought also of the other woman, who had shown such favour to Caelestis. Suddenly the world seemed open to him and full of promise.

"I think your coming here was no accident," Nemor said. "When you have eaten and rested, we will journey a little way together and talk of princely things. But first I will leave you alone with my daughter for a while, she will serve you as your rank deserves."

Nemor rose and went out onto the veranda, leaving Virbius alone to gaze furtively upon Ingenua. She waited until her father had left the hut before serving him a heady wine. He drank deeply but ate little, saying nothing, feeling embarrassed being alone with this Creole woman.

The silence between them became strained, and Virbius got up to take his leave, groping for a little speech of thanks, and reaching for his weapons.

Ingenua reached out, took his hand, and led him into the dark space behind the throne. The light from a hole in the roof threw a circle of sunlight on the ground where the fireplace would normally be, illuminating a theriomorphic harp, fit for the Parthenian Queen herself to play.

Ingenua seated him on a couch in the shadows and stood before the instrument, which had the body of a crouching terman and the head of a winged beast. The sunlight on her hair was dazzling in the gloom, as she formed her hands into the alphabetic symbols of their ancient tongue.

Her hands, made golden in the light, gestured over the body of the god, filling the air with the music of an old story. Each gesture formed a harmonious letter, and the letters blended together to form words, until her hands blurred the movements into a sinuous theme. Under the influence of the wine and the tropical heat within the hut, Virbius let the music wash over him and tell its story.

Before the beginning of time, a goddess danced alone, amid the endless darkness of chaos. She danced so furiously and with such passion that the sky was parted from the sea. A great wind arose, and wound itself tightly around her.

The wind took form, and became a great serpent, which pursued her as she fled and begged for her love. The serpent mated with her and she gave birth to an egg. The snake coiled seven coils around the egg, while the goddess escaped in the form of a dove. The egg hatched out and became the world of termen and beasts.

Ingenua now began to play to him alone, speaking of personal things no woman should speak to a stranger. Masked in the language of her art, she protected herself from the declaration of her love; it was not addressed to him but to the world. Great strength and resolution rose within him, as his desire rose to match the soaring music of her caressing hands. In his mind he already possessed her when the imperious voice of Nemor rang out, calling Ingenua to attend upon him.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was late afternoon before they reached the foot of the mountain, and the star of the Goddess had risen in a turquoise sky by the time they had reached the summit. It had been a hard climb, but Nemor had hardly lagged behind his young companion. In the dying light, Virbius could see a great river winding down towards the sea, and the remnants of ruined towns at the water's edge.

Nemor cast off his cloak to reveal his kingship, a pair of iridescent wings, folded around his powerful shoulders. "Now you see me for what I am," he said, "A king without a kingdom. Is this the future that you wish for yourself, or will you return to the city to claim your throne?"

Virbius felt dumfounded at this direct questioning. "I don't know," he said, "I have so many questions, and no one to advise me."

"There are two paths you can take, but you must choose," Nemor said. "We are creatures of the Earth, building our great cities to keep us from the light. But this is not our true destiny. How can it be that these wings give us so little freedom: fleeting, ephemeral, of use only for a day?"

"But you are free," Virbius said, you have no city to hold you, no priests to tell you what to do, or royal guards to keep you imprisoned for all your adult life." He realised he was revealing his deepest fears, an insurmountable feeling of revolt against the cruelty of his fate. "Is there no other way?" he asked.

"It is not just a question of accepting the path of tradition. For you, it may be possible to return and mould your society in new ways. There are those who will resist you and those who will help you find your way. You must ask yourself whether your freedom is more important than your city."

"The human you mean, Zenon Eleutherios?" The names were in his mind, and he knew that Nemor was aware of them.

"All of them," Nemor replied, "Caelestis, and Valeria, and others too, they all have something to contribute to your future. I have had many years to think on my fate, and my failure to lead our people. Your father passively accepted his duty, and now lies buried alive in Parthenia. Is that the fate you wish for yourself?"

"How can you know of him; where you of his house?" Virbius asked.

Nemor pointed to the scars on his face. "He gave me these; he was my brother. The priests only hint at what must be done, but do not reveal the full mystery to their prince. I have lived through it, so I can tell you what I know."

"I was sent a drama by the priests," Virbius said, "but surely I do not have to kill my father."

"That is the test of kingship, but your father is too weak to meet you in the woods. He will appoint a champion in his stead."

"My brother, I suppose," Virbius said.

"That is something that you must work out for yourself," Nemor said, turning away to look at the dying rays of the sun.

Virbius caught a glimpse of something in the old king's mind, but found it quickly closed against his probing thoughts.

Nemor turned to him again and said, "The other way is the hidden path, a dangerous way which only the Goddess can open for you."

"Is that the path you chose?" Virbius asked.

"I did not choose it, it was forced on me by my weakness. Like you, I did not want to fight. I just drifted through the ceremonies and rights, with the carelessness of youth. Exiled from my people, I have lived the life of a lesser god, ministering to the human subjects who worship me through fear."

"What should I do," Virbius asked.

"I offer you my daughter, and my modest kingdom in the woods. You can live happily there, and I will teach you of the Goddess of the Wood. Your duties will be few, but when I die you will become her consort. This is no light task, but a great duty. To be her king is the greatest privilege you can aspire to, even greater than being consort to a terman queen."

Virbius felt suddenly disappointed. He had expected some sage political advice instead of fairy tales, and regretted all the trouble of climbing a mountain with this noble who claimed to be his uncle. Nevertheless, he felt tempted by the offer of Ingenua, and the mysterious idea that he would be a kind of king, free to roam the country, feared and respected by the humans of the forest.

"If you return to the city," Nemor said, "you will find great troubles there. Of all the cities in the world, Parthenia is marked out by fate. Great changes are coming, whether we will it or no. Like humans, we have our prophecies too, of a better world to come and an end to universal strife."

Unlike Caelestis, Virbius felt unqualified to comment on religious questions. "I revere the Goddess and the Queen," he said, but I don't see much purpose in prophecy. The city will remain the same whatever the priests might say."

The lesser eye had risen now, a larger crescent hanging from the smaller one of the bright star. Nemor was a looming shadow against the faint glow of the horizon. "I see you are determined to return, which is just as well," he said. "When we meet again, be well prepared."

Before Virbius could reply, the terman had launched himself into the air with a great crack of his wings. The dim shape remained visible for a while, until he fell out of sight against the darkness of the forest below.

\*\*\*\*\*