

CHAPTER 1

Gloria Schmidt, AKA Electra Valkurie, prepared herself to go on stage for a performance she cared little about, but her audience did. “Remember, it’s their fantasy, not mine,” she told herself regarding the love starved men sitting at their tables in the strip club which had changed its name and owners at least twenty times, each of the new proprietors in the ‘association’ knowing how to stay one step ahead of the Cops, and the bankers. Still, working at what was now called the ‘Aspasia Emporium’ was a far more lucrative way to earn a living for herself and provide a home for her legally (but not morally) snatched away from her special needs kids than cleaning hotel rooms at the Hilton or even being a Nurse’s Aide at the hospital where ‘respectable’ people went when they got sick, particularly when they did what some would call ‘unrespectable’ things the night, or weekend before admission.

As the electric fusion rockabilly version of ‘Never on Sunday’ blasted over the loudspeaker, Gloria did a final check on her Woodstock vintage leather fringed Tibetan Goddess costume, noting that with her tired yet still vibrant and desirable 42 year old body that everything would hold during the lyrical Platonic lone dancing, and be flung behind the Biker guarded curtain behind her when the dancing got lustfully frenetic. The corner of her ever opened and, more than any other night that week, thickly masked tigress eyes caught a glimpse of the life-like painting of Aspasia on the sign above sign bearing her name. Aspasia’s oculars gazed back at, then into, Gloria’s, and Electra’s, appended with something incoherent uttered from the ancient Greek philosopher-whore’s succulent lips.

“Hey!” Gloria said back to Aspasia from behind the silk mask covering her face, required for her performance as well as the latest ‘health’ codes downstairs, and transmission of viruses upstairs. “I know you were the cortisan who taught Socrates philosophy in his younger days, and that when the mayor of Athens, Pericles, figured out that you had a great body as well as a super smart mind, he had to have you as his own,” Gloria sneered back at her. “And that you had to trick men into thinking, and acting right so that democracy and enlightenment could have a chance at making a go of it. And that after you entertained the men, and wrote them speeches that made them popular and, somehow, obliged to institute enlightened policies they would never have thought about themselves, you did what you could to educate ‘the woman folk’.”

“Yes, I did,” Aspasia seemed to answer. “And...your problem with me being up here now, above the ads for alcoholic refreshments that kill brain cells and photo-shopped images of exotic world travelled Latino dancers who still think that Spain borders on Mexico, is that---“

“----You are not Aspasia, but someone else,” Gloria whispered back the the illusion which once again became inescapable reality. “A photo-shopped chimera with the face of my new boss’s favorite daughter, the breasts of his second wife, and the eyes of his secret lover boyfriend. Who---”

“---Had to take on the form of some two dimensional image to get you, and everyone else, to notice me,” Aspasia seemed to say. With an Ancient voice that felt like it represented the most intense states of the present and future as well. “So, go out there and do your job!”

“And my job is?” Gloria inquired, noting that her voice was now audible in the world outside her ears as well as between them.

“To entertain the shitheads, assholes and idiots out there,” her boss reminded her in a British accent which oscillated between being ‘clawed me way up them dirty streets’ Cockney Liverpool and ‘one day I will be rightfully returned to my proper station and status when my legal situations get clarified’ Oxfordian London English. “These hard working or want to be working men came here because we offer an essential service,” ‘Lord George’ continued, wearing a cheap suit that he wore as if it was a Brooks Brothers tailor made designer outfit. “They come here for love they are denied at home which, perhaps they do deserve, but most certainly need.”

“I’m not going upstairs with them,” Gloria said as the music leading the last peeler out merged into the, this time anyway, specially-picked by her music one bringing her in. “All I’m doing is becoming absorbed into the dance, in my own way.’

“Yes, and where that way takes you, and others...that’s the magic of this profession, Electra,” Lord George reminded Gloria. “And tonight, it could lead you to...freedom for all of us. Particularly if you please that overdressed and no doubt under-laid gentleman in the front row. Between the trucker who is about to fall into his beer and the coked up Preacher who’s trying to convince Buddha, Jesus and Mohamed that he’s here tonight in their service and not his own.”

Gloria squinted as she tried to see who was between the trucker who, in the right light, looked like Arnold Schwarzeneger before he got into politics, and the town preacher who, in any light, could double for Jude Law or Hugh Grant in any ‘New and excitingly erotic Pope’ flick. The plain looking man between the two magnificent looking ones and NOT maintaining a six foot masked distance seemed familiar. Gloria searched her brain box for where she had seen him before. No, it was not in nightmares about high school teachers who knew nothing about life and tried to convey their lack of knowledge, and optimism, to their student. Nor did he resemble any of the respectable husbands who threw money at her to do a lap dance upstairs after peeling her clothes off on stage for them, an offer she refused each time out of pity for the men as well as empathy for their wives.

Finally, after the plain looking clerk-like nerd straightened his tie, then brushed off confetti from the last dancer that had landed on his crotch, Gloria recognized him. Her eyes opened up, with shock, bursting out of their sockets.

“Yes, it’s him,” Lord George proclaimed. “Professor Doctor and Minister of Health F. Simon Williams. “The man who every night, informs us on the tube with COVID news

that...”

“---I smell as bullshit,” Gloria shot back.

“And he probably, or maybe, believes is bullshit too,” Lord George said. “Bullshit that the government and the big corporations want us to believe so we’re scared into obedience, passivity, non-expressive introverted ‘existence’, and depression that---“

“—leads to killing ourselves and the spark of any life in anyone around us, with his hypnotic voice, soothing tone and assurance that---“

“---he and his colleagues are looking after our safety, and their own bank accounts of course.”

“And underfed egos, and attention-seeking empty lifeless lives, while they spread Dull Out Virus from themselves, to everyone else,” Gloria added, thinking somehow with the same life-PROMOTING mind as Lord George, for the first time since she cajoled her way to be hired on at ‘Aspasia’s Emporium.’

“Dull out virus that maybe you can cure him of, and...maybe...”

“Get him to cure his colleagues of?” Gloria replied. “Not so easy. No one ever fucked his or her way into creativity, or Bliss.”

“But you can open him up, Gloria,” Lord George said, addressing Electra by her real name for the first time. “Get the goods on him, or make him...spill the beans on what is really going on in those board rooms we only get into when we send one of you in as the entertainment.”

Gloria considered the proposition. Then looked to the photo-shopped Aspasia outside the window. She seemed to say ‘go for it’. As Gloria felt herself to finally be at a crossroad where she could not only turn around her own life, but the progressively downhill ‘safety the cost of vitality and humor’ lives of so many. Very much including her two special needs kids, and the ‘scared to death of covid’ siblings who were now taking care of them. And third ‘accident’ she brought into the world who, after too much self isolation, nearly killed himself, twice. And now as so depressed, that suicidal ideations was a step Upward.