



"It had me drawn in from page one."

BIBLIOTASTIC

PETRA

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PETRA
Book Four.
Letitia Coyne

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CHAPTER ONE.

Petra, Arabia Provincia, 120AD

“Aya!”

A high camp wail of protest and the sound of wooden soled sandals clacking over the atrium tiles brought a smile to Seth’s lips, and he dragged a *khameez* down over his damp skin. Only one man called him by his childhood name.

“Call them off, Sethos. Really, my darling. I’m away two months and already your staff don’t know me. Why weren’t they warned to be ready for me? Where is my welcome? Where are my drinks? Where are my lap dogs?”

Only one man would surge unbidden into his house and demand the household be at his beck and call. The babble of distraught servants rolled around his echoing footfalls, tracing an unerring journey toward the marble baths.

The *promus*, Zayed, rushed into the bath hall, waving his hands in extravagant gestures of horror, complaining violently about the lack of respect shown by this interloper.

“They do know you, Drusus.” Seth smiled. “That’s why they are so intent on keeping you out. I couldn’t warn them because I didn’t know you were coming,” he reached to embrace his caller, “and if you want dewy eyed youths to laze against you, my man, bring your own.”

Decimus Asinius Drusus was not a tall man, but there was an aura of power about him: the sort of light and scented air that surrounds only the obscenely wealthy, and it loaned him a stature nature hadn’t provided. His greying hair was immaculately coiled and coifed, hennaed into brilliant red and orange. His thick moustache remained a fine glossy black and its corners draped luxuriantly over full lips.

He took Seth’s face in his strong brown hands, and kissed each cheek fondly. “My, look at you. I swear you grow more beautiful every time I see you, but that’s my tragedy, I suppose, and not yours.”

Turning sharply enough to cause a minor whirlwind of rich fabric, he faced the now silent household staff, clapped his hands and made shooing gestures at them, demanding, “Drinks! Didn’t you hear me? Cold drinks and something sweet.”

Zayed stood his ground, his dark eyes shrieking silent abuse from under lowered lids, his hands clasped dutifully at his back. Tamir had refused to enter the room in the midst of the furor, and waited by the door like a sad eyed hound who’d long lost the will to fight.

“Refreshments,” Seth mouthed, nodding to acknowledge the insult to his *promus*. He smiled as Zayed remade his face, leaving only the tightness in his lips to suggest his displeasure. Turning his full attention back to Drusus, he asked, “How was your journey *mi Pater*? Let me guess. Hot. Dry. Uncomfortable. Successful?”

“All of that, and more. Successful so far, at least. But things are changing dearest boy. The world is growing bigger and we are too far away.”

“Too far from what? You’ve built your own paradise right here in the Arabian Desert. You made Petra bloom.” From time to time his benefactor was taken with a dream of new horizons or smitten with a certain town or city he had visited, but these whims were short lived and Seth knew to simply calm and reassure the older man. It was rare for him to return from a trade mission without a longing for greener pastures.

Drusus flagged a dismissive hand and twirled a finger through his curls. "I can't take all the credit for that," he purred, and Seth smiled fondly. "It is tranquil here, I know. But I'm getting too old for all this travel." He was silent a moment, then rushed on with a shameless plea for flattery. "Am I getting too old for this?"

"Never too old. Where is it you think you want to be?"

"Oh Rome darling, where else is there? Rome, where all the money and influence is. This place is a haven I know, but it's so provincial. So damn provincial."

"There's money here, Dec. You are testament to that. There always has been and there always will be. Egypt, Assyria, Persia; your endlessly beloved Greeks; now Rome. All the empires come and go, and Petra remains. While the empire builders need spices from across the desert and while you own the water..." The arguments made themselves and Seth had voiced them all before today.

"I hardly own the water. I only own some of the cisterns that hold it and the pipe works that channel it." Drusus looked petulant, but there was more to his discontent than usual; he was too full of theatrical zeal, and Seth began to feel some concern. He was tense, the frown that crossed and re-crossed his brow was deep and his lips, when he paused, were pale and turned down.

"And, and, and..." Seth rolled a hand over all Drusus' assets: the buildings, the businesses and the controlling interests that would remain unmentioned. "Here, take a seat. Have a drink. Tell me what you've seen or done that's made you feel unhappy with your lot."

He had quietly taken his patron's arm, turning him and leading him back through the cool deep shadows of the house to the new annex. It was bright with natural light; desert breezes filtered through dripping veils of muslin, moistening and cooling the parched air and making the room a small climatic wonder. Murals lined the plastered walls, and rich mosaics featuring Drusus' favourite azure tiles covered the floors.

Every item on which the eye could rest cast back colour. Glass and tiles, crusted gems, bottles, boxes, cages, and fabrics all warred in screaming discord and no single item stepped back modestly from the fray. Gold, silver and bronze shone everywhere, but rarely for the sake of its own beauty or value. Precious metals served only as frames and foils for the loudest, brightest and most unashamedly brilliant baubles.

Drusus allowed himself to be comforted, settling back into the soft cushions of a heavily carved cedar daybed.

Zayed appeared, as if by some silent miracle known only to butlers, and set a tray of rose water on the table between them. Each coloured goblet glistened with finely cut facets, and on a fretted silver saucer beside each drink lay a sweet jelly and a crisp hash cookie.

As Seth lay back, extending his legs comfortably into the airy weave of a hammock, he sighed theatrically and reached for his own beverage. "Would you really leave this behind? The Nabataeans are very particular about their secrets, Dec. While you live and prosper here among them you're welcome to enjoy the special little perks of controlling the spice trade. But do you think they'll let you take their ambrosial liquids and Elysian medicaments off to the wide world? Think again."

"My dearest, don't lecture me on what our wonderful hosts will or won't do for trade and wealth. I'm where I am today because, and only because, I understand so very well the Nabataean preoccupation with balancing secrecy and commerce."

He sipped his drink and Seth looked away, staring into a glittering corner of the room and into his memories. "You are where you are today because you made good choices in the flesh trade."

"Only in the beginning." Drusus set the goblet down, slamming it too heavily onto

the tray. "And such paltry wealth compared to what we have now. You more than anyone alive should be glad I prospered in the slave trade or you'd be dead in an arena somewhere." Wiping droplets from his hand, he muttered, "Only slaves hate slavers, Seth."

"They have the greatest cause, perhaps."

"Perhaps."

Drusus' irritation was starting to take shape, and an uncomfortable niggling intuition grew at the back of Seth's mind. If his patron's most recent foray to the capital had brought him back into the temptations of buying and selling men, it was likely to be a conversation that would not end well for either of them. Before he could loosen the clench of his jaw and sweeten the tone of his thoughts, Drusus continued.

"I've met someone, my darling. Someone very special. And although I'm certain you will rush to tell me I am nothing of the sort, I am getting too old to be alone. I'm looking at the end of my days as a lonely old man, and I don't like what I see."

Seth sat upright, balancing easily in the swing of the hammock, welcoming the change of subject. "And this someone is in Rome?"

"Yes, he's in Rome. Not at all what you will be picturing, either." Moisture glistened in the older man's eyes: tears of sadness, or of absence or regret. "He isn't young and tanned and draped in a filmy golden toga at the *thermae*. He is a respectable middle-aged physician, of all dreaded professions."

A thousand questions rushed through Seth's mind, tumbling over themselves and tangling on his tongue. He stammered a moment, then stopped trying to speak and smiled broadly. "That's wonderful news." Then the inherent dilemma struck him and he slowly lowered himself back into the comfort of his sling and waited for Drusus to go on.

He seemed reassured by the small details of the matter, the day to day, and avoided the hard questions he would have to answer. "He's done the wife and family thing. Marriage in Rome is a farce these days, you know. These horse-headed noble women, all pompous and inbred, still swill lead salts and bleed themselves to stay pale. They all end up looking like long dead corpses with their features painted on in red and black, and they sit about moaning over the fact that they can't bear children.

"Quintus married years ago, got hold of a fertile one thank Zeus, got himself some children on her and passed her along. It's an extraordinary thing, my boy. You should see them. All the rich old men getting at least one live child and then virtually auctioning off proven breeders like they were cattle. Women living in luxury as long as they can keep up their blended herd of offspring."

Seth laughed at the cynical, if accurate description of the fall of noble Roman bloodlines. "Quintus?" he asked, raising open palms for more information.

"Quintus Villius Cinna. You'd love him. I do. But he's nothing like you."

"That's a good thing, *Pater*."

"Oh don't. You call me that to make me feel like you love me a little, but all it does is make me feel even older."

"I love you a great deal, Dec. You are the only thing close to a father I've ever had. And I am deliriously happy for you to have found someone who can love you as you want to be loved. He does, doesn't he? This isn't an unrequited love?"

"No, no. We are agreed in our devotion. It's where we choose to live that is at issue, as you have probably guessed."

Reaching for his goblet, Seth let out a short sharp laugh. "I thought you were upset because you had to find a way to tell me you'd bought out a slave stall." He laughed again, turning to look at Decimus with relief glowing in his eyes. "Compared to that,

any problem you might have is easy to solve.”

Drusus didn't return the smile. Instead, he gathered his hands into his lap and turned his face down from the bright sunlight into shadows.

“Dec?” Seth waited through the guilty silence, the warm wash of relief slowly ebbing.

Drusus made no move to answer. He raised a hand briefly as though he was about to begin an oration, but thought better of it and reached instead for the hard brown biscuit.

“You have bought slaves to sell, haven't you?” All Seth's warmth receded. Cold and disgust were trickling along his nerves, moving to pool in his stomach and joints.

The silence continued and Seth found an outlet for the creeping cold. He let it spill from his lips. “Is it so bad you can't even speak of it?”

Drusus took a deep breath and raised his face. How long he'd debated the best place to start was irrelevant; he'd obviously had to rethink the whole story from beginning to end before he could bring it forward now. When he spoke he appeared to be trying to avoid the issue. For a time at least.

“It's bad and not so bad. Depending on whose eyes you are seeing the thing through.”

“Through my eyes, Dec.” Seth refused to give ground, but his tone spoke more of disappointment than anger. “Through my eyes and through yours. I thought you were finished with trading slaves.”

“I am. I haven't bought anyone. I came to own another man's dream, almost by accident,” he demurred. “It's a complex thing, Aya.”

Using his childhood name, the slave name he had been given by Bedouin traders, served to stir old angers and jab at old scars. But it also forced him to acknowledge that there were facts and mitigations intricately woven through the fabric of every life. Drusus was a clever man.

“Complex?” Seth echoed, his tone a little more tolerant, his posture a fraction more relaxed. He would listen, at least, before he passed judgment.

“I wanted to start with Quintus. I wanted to tell you my good news and share my painful decisions with you first. Then, when you understood how much I love you, how much I will depend upon you....”

Seth *hmp*ed suspiciously and waited.

“I always complain about the father thing, I know. But you are my son. Dearer than a son. I gave you my name. You have every right to inherit everything I own. You certainly must inherit over any of Quintus' brats. Pampered nobles with thin blood and military pretensions. No appreciation for the fine points of classical Hellenistic culture at all.”

“Their father is a physician,” Seth held his tone even and avoided the flattery, “I'm sure they have had more of Greek culture than any man needs. And you're not about to drop dead, so get back to the point.”

“Well, he won't come here. That's the point, isn't it? That's the obvious point. Quintus won't come here, so I have to leave Petra and go to live in quiet magnificence in Rome. That is my choice, and since it is the only option, I want to choose it.”

“What has that to do with slaves?”

“Nothing. It means I cannot continue my obligations to the city and the Nabataean Royal family if I live in Rome. It means that I have to close up and sell off everything I own here and across the Nabataean state. Or, it means I leave everything I have here to you. It means I bequeath all of my humble but very lucrative little empire to you just a little earlier than the gods might have otherwise decreed.”

It was a lot to digest, and not only because Drusus spoke so lightly about an enormous wealth. The offer reeked of a sweetener. If Seth was to take control of the whole of Drusus' Arabian estate, it would be, he suspected, as a manager rather than as an owner. It would fit with the legislation of the Nabataean client state, holding all the titles and privileges of the ownership within the boundaries of the Arabian provinces, while paying a healthy stipend back to Drusus in Rome. And somewhere here, the issue of Drusus' slaves became terribly important.

"And if I was controlling all of your humble little empire, *Pater*, how would I be directed to deal with the slaves you hold now?"

"Sethos, you wound me. If you want to free each and every bonded man and woman, you can do it. You have my blessing. Of course, they'll have nowhere to go, and nowhere to live, and nothing to eat, and your empire will fall down around your ears, but that is for you to judge. Pay each one a tradesman's wage, if that is what you feel you must do."

So, the problem didn't lie with Drusus' army of workers. Seth was getting impatient. "Just tell me Dec. Don't work your sales pitch on me. Tell me what it is you've done that's so bad."

"I told you, I've done nothing bad. On my journey home from Rome, when we docked in Alexandria - you know it's one of my favourite cities - I went to a gambling house.

"Fortunes come and go, as you know. It's the way of the dice. And I played against a man who wagered his life's work and his dream of untold wealth. I won." He held up his hands to show it was nothing. A roll of the dice. Something over which he had no control. Nothing, in fact, but the will of the gods.

"When all is said and done, it's as simple as that. But now I own his dream. And if I must go on to Rome and leave all I have to you, my dear, then you own his dream."

"His dream involved slaves?"

"Of a type."

"Will you just tell me what or who it is you own."

"I'd rather show you. I confess I had no idea just what I'd won until I had a chance to see the prize myself."

"Why won't you just tell me, Dec? This is ridiculous. There is nothing under the sun that is worth this kind of foolishness."

Drusus paused and rubbed his fingers carefully over his moustache, stroking its silky length down over his lips. "There are many things under the sun that are worth more than gold and silver. You yourself are proof of that. There are times when men trade in flesh for profit or pleasure, and there are times when only gold can save something precious and perfect and preserve it for the whole world to see."

"As you did for me? Is that what you're saying? That you are saving someone just as you saved me from the arena? Then, Decimus, do as you did for me. Give this person the freedom to be who they can be. Free them and let the world go to the dogs."

Drusus nodded and pulled himself stiffly upright, forcing the age out of tired bones. He walked to where Seth sat and reached to cradle his face in his hands. "Two things, my dear. If I go off to Rome to find love, even if it can only ever be second best, will you accept the responsibility of everything I have built and nurtured and grown here in my desert paradise?" He lightly kissed one cheek. "And if you do, will you agree to come with me in the morning and see what it is that is worth more than gold and silver?" A touch to the other cheek.

"If you are talking about slaves, Dec, why not just tell me you'll free them?"

"Because I'm asking you to come and see for yourself before you make a

judgment you cannot understand.”

“There is nothing to understand.”

“Aya please. For me. Say you will reserve judgment until you come to my warehouse tomorrow.”

Seth stood, hanging his hands from his hips and his face over dark misgivings. “Do I understand that if I refuse to keep this dream for you, all you own will be sold up and left to the winds? If I say I will see these souls before I consider their freedom or bondage, then everything you own will be mine to do with as I will?”

“That is what I’m saying.”

“And I can’t say one way or another until the morning?”

“That would be best.”

“Then *Pater*, I will see you at your warehouse in the morning. What else can I do?”

As the line of camels ambled to a halt and knelt, grunting out foul smelling protest, Jaida gathered the folds of her *abayah* in close to her waist and peered around at shadows. The wide sky was still bright above, fading slowly from deep blue into mauves and golds, but the sun cast its light in long reaching beams that skimmed the desert surface and left the wadi huddled in the shade of its cliffs.

Around her men rushed and chattered, hauling the beasts to the ground and hastening to unload bolts of cargo strapped along their backs. The donkeys smelled water close and set up screeching choruses that echoed from the rock face, while a patient line of bearer boys stood forward with a convoy of litters.

“Step down now, my dear.”

The voice called her attention to the side of the animal she rode, and she let her shawl slip down over her shoulders as she accepted the hand offered for her support. Beside her, her sister turned and grimaced comically as she slid stiffly to the pebbly sand below. Jaida had no smile to return for the moment.

They had reached their destination, it seemed, and they were at last free of the rolling discomfort of the camel train. Dust had worked its way in through the layers of her clothing and caked on her chest and back. Grit chafed on her thighs as she took her first few steps, and she took a moment to stretch her spine, to twist and open her arms, before she gathered the shawl up over her hair and moved dutifully toward the line of litters.

Darkness was gathering more quickly now, and she checked along the line of kneeling camels, swiftly counting off her sisters, ensuring everyone was accounted for. Ahead were four small *carpenta*, each with six boys: two girls to a litter, and each of the small vehicles glittered richly in the fading light. Their new patron had money, at least. How much he knew of temple service and the demands of the life she and her sisters had been raised into, she had yet to learn.

Jaida held back, watching as each of the girls hurried in behind their beaded curtains and the boys lifted their load. When all seven were ensconced, she too slipped into the richly cushioned comfort of her litter. Beside her, Ianthe murmured prayers and opened the curtains to watch as the bearers carried them forward through *al-Siq* and on into Rekeem: the rose stone city called by the Greeks and Romans, Petra.

Above them the evening sky made a bright slit, but the dark sandstone walls drank in the torchlight and crowded together claustrophobically. On and on they wove between the towering walls, soft sand on the paving stones crunching under the feet of

the bearers and the wooden frame of their litter creaking under the strain.

Jaida studied the walls in silence, waiting for each burning torch as they passed along the defile, where God blocks sprang from niches, and crevasses reached up into the darkness above. Her study was a device to calm the racing of her heart and mind. It had worked well enough to have her fascinated, and she jolted slightly when Ianthe spoke.

"It's done, then, isn't it? We're here. For better or worse, we're here."

"We're here," she agreed quietly.

The journey from Alexandria to Gaza, and from there to here, had been filled with nightly speculation on their fate, but no one had dared push that speculation beyond Petra. This was the home of Decimus Asinius, and he was their new benefactor. Surely that meant this would be their new home, for a time at least.

All their lives, as long as most of them could remember, they had been groomed and trained to take up their positions as priestesses and oracles of Isis. Their lives to date had been a long and tedious preparation, and now, with Babu and his faultless dedication gone, it seemed the time had come to move forward to the next stage. And with Babu gone, there were likely to be shadows just as dark and claustrophobic as the walls of the defile, all closing in around them.

"Will we go to a temple here, do you think?" Ianthe asked, her dark face unreadable in the shadows of their litter. "Don't answer. It's a stupid question, I know. We'll know by tonight, right? I'm just so scared I could puke."

"I know the feeling." Jaida snatched the curtain open again as the air around them brightened. "We'll know the answer any minute now, I think."

They had moved into a wider, more brightly lit space, and the crunch of sand gave way to the scuff of sandals over cobbled streets. The noise from Ianthe's throat sounded like a choke, or the stifled urge of nausea, and when Jaida turned to look through her sister's side curtain, wonder rose in her throat, too.

A vast colonnade and entablature towered above them, its deep rose red sandstone lit by braziers below and showered from above by flaring torches. Straining for a better view, both girls leaned precariously from the side of the litter, staring up the sheer cliff face at the awe-inspiring columns and facade.

They were already moving past and they leaned further trying to see more clearly to the upper levels of the building, but the dense foliage of street trees and advancing darkness stole the sight from them.

"Is that it? It's a temple, surely," Ianthe said, as she pulled herself back into the cushions.

"We're not stopping, are we? Whatever that is, we're going somewhere else." Jaida drew the curtains closed and pulled her shawl in close about her face. "It's getting crowded out there. I think we should keep our faces covered. I know we should. And keep the curtain closed," she added as she pulled it from Ianthe's fingers and closed out the scenes of the city outside.

"I want to see the city," Ianthe protested, pulling her shawl down over her hair, and re-opening the curtain a little.

"We'll see it in daylight."

"What if we don't, Jaida? What if we're given *privacy* again? Then we'll never get to see the sun, let alone the city." The way she articulated the word sent a shiver of dread over Jaida's skin. Babu had always had a way of describing their situation in positive terms, as if each new deprivation was somehow a gift from the goddess, and privacy had been his word for darkness and seclusion.

"Then we don't. We'll survive." Over the last two years of their novitiate, since the

rebellions had sacked most of Alexandria, they had seen their liberties vanish one by one and their small comforts with them. They had no access to the world outside their *aedicula*, but the feeling Jaida had was one of slow decline. Babu had supplied them with less, she believed, because his own means were failing, or because his responsibilities outside this vision had taken more than he could afford. And those outside responsibilities were moving around them still in the shadows that silently threatened.

The steady progress continued, while jostle and snippets of conversation around them spoke of gathering crowds. The evening air was heavy with the spices of cooking, and hawkers called from a distant market, their shrill cries echoing from the stone city's towering walls. Jaida too, longed to pull back the fabric and drink in every sight and sound of this new and exotic place. The people spoke in dialects vastly different to any she recognized, except for the occasional call in Latin, and their alien words sent a small thrill of excitement up her spine.

She spoke both formal Greek and Latin and the high language of the pharaohs, classical Egyptian, with its accompanying religious scripts and glyphs. She read in all three languages. Babu had educated them well, and they all had a smattering of local dialects, some from before their devotion, and some from the security guards that had protected them.

But fear was the greater factor in the trembling of her hands and knees.

While they travelled they had tried, within the obvious limits of their experience and knowledge, to guess what might happen to them next. It was impossible; there was no way to know how much they didn't know or understand about their circumstance.

She had seen Decimus Asinius Drusus once, from a distance, on the day he had taken the girls from their home. She conjured a picture of him now and forced her breathing to slow and her wildly spinning thoughts to focus down onto the single still image.

Sadness. That was what she felt when she focused on him. Sadness and loss. Warmth. Courage. It was fleeting, her grip on his features too tenuous. But she prayed her sense of the man was right; that they had not been through so much in this life, only to be flayed on the altar of wealthy perversions. Babu had warned them all repeatedly of the fate of unguarded virgins in the wide world outside their safe haven.

The litter was confining even if it was comfortable, and she rolled her shoulders and stretched her legs, hopeful that this transport too, would soon end.

With Ianthe's excited chatter and the occasional glimpse of light and colour that snuck past her sister's bobbing head, Jaida rode on through the city. Through streets where the light and the number of people lessened, and down long dark avenues of trees they moved, until at last the litter stopped and settled to the hard earth below.

Their journey was at last at an end.

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CHAPTER TWO.

Jaida stood beside her sisters, their line gathered tightly together and their faces downcast. Their journey had ended the night before at a public bathhouse that was closed to other customers for the hours they were there. From there they'd travelled back to a small *dormitorium*, an annex to some sort of storehouse, and they had been well fed and made comfortable for the night.

Even clean and fresh, with a full belly and a heavy guard, Jaida had been unable to sleep. Phantoms moved around her and doubts crowded her mind. She felt a fear in this place that had no basis in the way they had been treated. It lingered like the echoes of an old threat, like something that should have been dead and buried, but which refused to take itself away from their light.

Only Oseye stood upright, her long neck gracefully extended, her dark and lovely face held high. She had fire in her blood, Babu had said, liquid fire that lit her spirit and carried her prayers higher than the stars.

If it wasn't in her blood, there could be no doubt there was fire in her eyes.

They were blacker than obsidian, and her thick lashes dropped over them like brushwood about to catch. Her eyes smouldered; her glare could burn. There was, Jaida had long ago concluded, fire in her blood and in her bones and in her spirit itself.

Oseye was not the smartest of the girls, but she was certainly the strongest and most determined. She had struggled more, too, with their isolation, and she stood protectively by Eshe. Together they had found the will to carry the burden of their devotion to the goddess.

As their escort stepped up to inspect his charges, it was Oseye who finally dared to speak. "Where is it we are going?" she asked, her tone quiet but with a depth and resonance that required attention.

"Nowhere, just now." Juba smiled, waving a hand as if he were patting an anxious hound. "Drusus will be along here soon. Once he has come, he'll be able to tell you all what will happen next." From the time he had joined them in Alexandria, Juba's eyes had seemed permanently on the verge of filling with tears, but his manner was gentle and his smile as warm as it could be.

"Sit down girls; you aren't a rack of meat hanging in the market. Try to look like you've been well looked after, won't you." He looked about the dusty room, assessing the comfort and position of various boxes and sacks. "I wish he'd let us do this at the temple," he whined, then took Eshe by the hand and led her to a grain sack. Oseye followed as if on a tether and he started to object, then hushed, and motioned for her to sit beside the pale red-head.

"You." He pointed to Ianthe. "Come and stand behind. Lean a little, drape yourself. No, no." He fluffed around them, intent on creating the scene as he wanted it, arranging the girls and their limbs and the drape of their robes. "You are all so very lovely. Not one I'd want to choose to take the centre, and all so very, very different."

Jaida sat where she was placed, on a sealed oil pot that balanced on coils of coarse rope. Her place in the *tableau vivant* was to the back, and she sat in silence, swallowing a wash of pointless tears.

Their clothes and their few possessions had been returned to them, along with a mass of jewellery and cosmetics, and they had been encouraged to dress richly. None of them needed to augment their beauty, they knew that. They lived this life, each one, because of the way she looked.

From infancy they'd been chosen by the goddess, or by Babu in her stead, to create the very scene that Juba instinctively directed. He was immediately aware of the contrast of their different skin tones and hair colours. Babu had once travelled all over the empire looking for children to flesh out his dream. These were the women, now, whom the goddess had led him to choose.

"That's lovely. Just lovely. I'd look for more light," Juba fussed, tugging at hessian nailed over the warehouse windows, "but I think this sort of soft shadowy air gives you all just a hint of mystery, don't you?"

No one answered. The moment was drawing nearer when they'd learn their fate,

then all their dreams and plans, and all they'd learned, would be made real or dashed to dust.

"Dec, I need to say a lot that I've never really tried to say aloud. Maybe it's better if I do that before we go off to reveal your great secret." Seth slipped his arms through the sleeves of a heavily embroidered *thoub*, standing patiently while Zayed adjusted the fall of the ankle length robe. "The fact that you are actually going to move away from here permanently makes me realize how important you are to me. If we end up arguing today over what-ever-it-is, I won't forgive myself."

Drusus sat uneasily on a soft hassock, his *ghutra* pulled across in a loose drape over his lower face, as though he expected a sudden sandstorm to howl through the room. His eyes were damp and had been forecasting tears since his arrival, but he'd managed so far to avoid the issues that brought this swell of emotion. "I don't want you to start with confessions of love now, my sweet. It's too late. I've found someone else."

"Don't make light of this Dec. I'm worried. I didn't sleep last night, thinking about the fact that since I met you I haven't had to work or act or even think for myself. If you leave now, I don't even know where I'll start learning to do those things again."

"I know." The tears rose closer, and Drusus coughed in annoyance and steadied his voice. "I've felt sick, absolutely nauseous, all night after what you said yesterday. I've been such a fool and I'm sorry Sethos. I am truly sorry."

"You're sorry for what?"

"For keeping you here like a pet."

Seth laughed and pulled a head cloth over his *thagiyah* and set the gold trimmed *agal* in place. His hair had for many years been cropped short and he used fragrant oils to sweep it back from his face. But he enjoyed the anonymity of wearing the *ghutra*, using it as Drusus had, to hide his features. "You're sorry for the luxuries you've given me? Don't be sorry *mi Pater*, I've loved every moment of it."

"I'm sorry for not setting you free. I never let you go."

Drusus seemed ready to pick up a *flagrum* and begin a ritual scourge and Seth frowned in consternation. "I am free, Drusus. I have the plaque to prove it. I have a full Roman name, as only the finest Roman citizen might have, the name you gave me. What are you talking about? I am free."

Drusus sighed and stood. "Are you ready? I swear you take longer to dress than I do. I want to walk to the warehouse, today. I want to enjoy my glorious city for as long as I can."

"I'm ready. Let's go."

"One moment. Did Kartikeya survive while I was away? I want to see the old boy, too."

"He survived." Seth smiled. "Can't you smell him? It's what most people ask as soon as they come in here. What's that smell?" He laughed and led Drusus down to the main house and through to the courtyard where the ancient feline slept through his retirement.

The old tiger was enjoying lying on a submerged rock, staring after imagined horizons. He did smell bad, and his magnificent striped coat had thinned with age. No teeth protruded from under his dark lips, but the spread of his belly across the wet rocks suggested he ate well enough with what he still had.

While they watched, a meal was carried into the courtyard. The man who dragged the gory sack showed no fear as he laughed and called for the tiger to approach. From across the yard, the attendant might have been Sethos himself, but the clothes he wore

were stained and worn and his words were guttural barks in Aramaic.

Drusus watched as the big cat stalked and smooched, taking fist sized balls of meat as if they were sweets, and asked, "What if you'd let him go instead of bringing him here with you? What would have become of him?"

"He'd be dead, Dec. You know that. They had his claws removed after this." Seth rubbed a thumb over his shoulder where his clothing hid a scar. "He couldn't have hunted for himself."

"So you kept him. And now he has no teeth."

"I should have given him goats when he was younger." Seth started to walk away. "He's too pampered. He has the same meat I have...."

He stopped and faced his patron, the cold dread that kept threatening his belly was beginning to creep through his flesh. "Is this some sort of metaphorical warning? If it is, just tell me, don't play games."

"You couldn't set him free, so you kept him and pampered him. Now he has no teeth. If you gave him a goat to eat now, he'd choke on it. Oh my darling boy. I am so sorry. But I will make it right. Come on, before the sun gets too hot."

The older man was Decimus Asinius Drusus; he was unmistakable. Bright titian tresses trailed over his shoulders and shone clearly through the sheer white cloth of his *ghutra*, and a thick black moustache and eyebrows left the matter in no doubt. He was more relaxed than he had been on the last occasion, but there was still an air of sadness about him. He smiled warmly as he approached, nodding his head deferentially to the group of women and reaching to embrace Juba.

"The girls look well, my friend. I knew you would take excellent care of such a precious cargo."

Cargo. They were reduced to cargo. From her place behind her sisters, Jaida watched the informal ease with which the men greeted each other. No matter how Babu had chosen to phrase the change in their circumstance, this man was their new owner. He might be called a patron or a benefactor, but in truth he was a master and he was, at least, not as harsh as some.

Their new owner conducted the brief courtesy of enquiry after Juba's health, and Jaida turned to watch as another man entered the room. As much as possible, with the exception of himself and his guards, Babu had isolated the girls from the company of men. Nothing was to be allowed to distract them from their studies, and he would not risk the greed or lust of any man putting their temple status in jeopardy.

Men, they had learned, were brutal creatures driven by animalistic passions, and something in that fear and knowledge drove her heartbeat faster and spread warmth through her body as she studied the man before them now.

The stark white linen of a *ghutra* covered most of his face, so her attention was drawn inevitably to his wide brown eyes. If there was an animal spirit in this man, it was that of a fawn or a doe-eyed calf. The black fringe of his lashes lay thick against his tanned skin, contrasting sharply with the white fabric and echoing the deep darkness of his irises. His attention was on the other men, and she leaned unconsciously forward as he slipped the corner of his headcloth free and reached to kiss Juba's cheek in greeting.

The face he revealed seemed drawn by the craftsmen who carved the gods from stone. His nose was long and straight, as were those favoured by the Greek sculptors, and his clean jaw was strong, but not too hard. The mouth that smiled welcome was soft and full, his top lip slightly squared over straight white teeth.

His features carried the open innocence of youth, strengthened by maturity but never lost, and the gentle smile stayed on his lips as he turned toward the girls. A small frown of confusion skimmed his brow as he glanced quickly from one face to another. Jaida caught a nervous breath and told herself to look away before his eyes found hers, but in an instant they had settled on her and she felt the heat of blood rushing into her cheeks.

“Girls!” Their master spoke and dragged her attention to his face. “I am Decimus Asinius Drusus, as you may know, and I have brought you here to our magnificent city to decide your future.”

Here it was, and Jaida clenched a trembling fist, closing her eyes for just a moment in fear of what she might hear. When she had the courage to face the reality of their situation, she stripped away all that was possible and all that they hoped, and recognized the brutal fact that they were slaves. They were owned. His property. And nothing in their past would matter if his vision of their future was different to theirs.

“Up until last night,” Drusus continued, “I would have done as I had planned and completed these last few steps to the fulfilment of your previous patron’s dream for you all. But last night I had a conversation which changed my mind on that.”

Jaida’s heart thumped about like it was caged, beating at her temples with frantic wings and stopping her breath in her throat. He had changed his mind? As she tried to calm herself and prepare to hear the worst, she raised her face and found herself questing back to the dark searching eyes of the man who stood behind her new master.

He was fixed on her, his face betraying uncertainty as clearly as her own, and she pulled her eyes away, seeking Drusus once again.

“I should introduce you all to this man.” He raised a hand to indicate the dark eyed stranger behind him. “He will, after all, be the one who will have the final say. He is...,” he paused to smile warmly at the young man who stepped up beside him, “my son, Sethos Asinius Drusus. He’s known as Aquila and you should probably learn to call him that; he’s not one to stand too much on ceremony.

“He knows nothing about your history, or your devotions, or Babu’s plan for your futures. Yet.

“It would be wise for you all to consider your own feelings about that plan and future, because I will give you all a chance to speak for yourselves before any decision is made. You will all be offered your freedom.”

Gasps went up from each of the girls, and the look of confusion set harder on the Aquila’s brow. He looked warily at Drusus, his breath shortening, but he held his peace and Jaida held her breath.

Drusus readied himself to speak again, amusement at their expense shining from his eyes, and Oseye dared to raise her concerns. She stood, letting her willowy height give her some small advantage. “What use is freedom?” she drawled, her deep voice pouring from her lips like a stream of honey. “We know nothing of the world but what we learned of the temple. Our homes are long away or long gone. We were slaves, we own nothing.”

“Points I made on your behalf last night, child.” Drusus nodded. “I will give you enough money to make a start. What I can do to help you move into the world, I am happy to do. If that is what you choose.

“But you cannot choose to abandon your training without first experiencing the final stage of your devotions. Everything you’ve done from childhood has moved you toward service as oracular priestesses in the temple of Isis. You should first consult your goddess, and test your faith in your vocation before you turn your back on this life.”

“They could be priestesses as free women, Drusus.” Aquila spoke and Jaida felt

herself nod in nervous agreement. Was it either, or? Could they not live out the lives they'd been trained for as free agents? She watched him, warm tension burning in her cheeks, waiting for another word or gesture.

"No. That isn't possible. True oracles, as Babu claims these ladies are -- a claim we shall soon verify for ourselves -- are very valuable and ultimately very powerful women. The priesthood rarely appreciates their existence, except for the money they bring into the temple in offerings. While they are bonded and only leased to a temple, they're guaranteed protection: first by their patron's guards, and then also by the priests who would owe a king's ransom for any damage done to the girls.

"The priests prefer to own the girls themselves or to take a free woman into the temple. That way they not only control the content of any readings she might give, but if her virtue should be compromised and her oracular powers lost, no one but they themselves need to know. And that is by the far the more usual outcome."

"What do you care, Dec?" Aquila shook his head, his words clipped with irritation as he looked from Drusus to the girls and back. "What is it to you if they never cast an oracle? Do you care if they work in a field, or if they marry and have children, or if they serve as whores down in the tavern? Their futures should be their own."

"Did you look at them Aya?" Temper flared in Drusus eyes and his full cheeks coloured. "Do you see the women who are standing here before you? They were bought as children. Four, five, six year old girls. Chosen for their striking appearance and raised to one life. One life only. They read and write in several languages, they've studied the classical history of the world, but that is all they know of the world.

"They were fed and dressed as nobility. Look at their hands." He seized Oseye's hand and gently turned it in his, stroking his fingers over hers. "Where will they work? They have no claws, Aya. They have no family. Do you know how long a girl will survive on these streets without a family to protect her? Here? Or in Rome? Or in Alexandria? Where will they survive alone?"

"Look at them! And then remember how your own beauty has been used."

The trembling that had settled in Jaida's joints turned into racking rigors, shaking her almost from her seat and filling her mouth with the hot spit of nausea. She looked from one man to the other, watching fury light the depths of eyes that had been so calm and childlike.

"When will we go to the temple?" Again it was Oseye who had the courage to speak for them, but even as her words broke the impasse she turned her face down and stepped back.

"Tonight," Drusus said too sharply. "Tonight we will see if your patron's faith in his dream has been worthwhile. And you will see if the life chosen for you is truly the one you want."

"And if we fail?" The words had come to her mouth so suddenly and left her lips so softly, Jaida hardly believed she had found the courage to speak. But with the question asked, she forced herself to meet the dark anger smouldering in Aquila's eyes. "If we can give no oracle?" she whispered. "What then? If freedom is too dangerous? What is our value as slaves? What will the world pay for a woman of twenty who remains untouched?"

Drusus looked away, studying his hands for a long time before he looked up at his son. "That is the question that broke Babu's heart," he said with quiet calm. "He couldn't bear to answer that because he needed money very badly, one way or another. And I don't believe that such a creature exists anywhere else in all the empire. Apart from the eight of you. You are priceless."

Aquila met his father's glare. "Their previous owner might have needed money.

You don't."

"The decision isn't mine. Tonight you can watch them and then you will have the final say." He stood to clap Aquila on the shoulder, his exasperation put aside. "Girls. Juba will see that you are made comfortable; all that's mine is at his disposal. You will have anything you want or need brought to you, and you will be taken, when you are ready, to the temple of Al-Uzza for the ritual tonight." He bowed gravely before he turned to leave. "Until then."

"Wrong goddess, Dec," Seth smiled as they walked from the dusty shadows of the warehouse out into the bright midmorning sun.

"No, that is one more aspect of the genius of Babu's plan. Isis is every goddess. Every name, every ritual, every devotion: she accepts them all. Goddess of Ten-Thousand Names, Queen of Heaven. Virgin, Mother, Hag and Whore. All one."

"Then why is she so choosy about her oracles? Twenty year old virgins?"

"Not twenty specifically, but somewhere over twelve years old could be reasonably expected. Except with girls marrying at twelve or fourteen, where do you find an adult virgin?" Drusus crossed the paved road to the dense shade of an avenue of trees. Fretted gutters ran along beside the road, overtly rushing clean fresh water to be wasted on the verdant street plantings. In the deserts of Arabia, only Petra could afford such opulence.

The sidewalks at this end of the precinct were sparsely used. Merchants made their bargains in the early hours of the day and sent their trade caravans away from the city at dawn. The journey in from the south and east always ended at *al-Siq* in the evening, so the warehouse district was not busy as they walked.

"I've decided," Seth announced, clapping his hands together. "I'll just keep every delicious one of them as my personal harem. Great gods afire where did he find them?"

"If that's what you want. But will you free them before you make them the offer? They could do worse than to accept." Drusus smiled indulgently. "I was reading their documents last night. He scoured the empires for them. One came from beyond the Rhinelands in Germania, the pale redhead. One is Teutonic. Two or three from the coast of Africa and from Numidia."

"And the one with green eyes?" Seth asked, his fingers reaching to stroke his lips as he pictured her face. "Pale green. Golden skin. Dark hair. The one who spoke last?"

"Armenia minor, I think. Did she catch your eye especially?"

Seth studied his memory of the girls, each so different, all so elegantly groomed and exquisitely understated. But there had been one face that had drawn his eye again and again. "Not especially," he lied. "But she made a good point. What if they have no future in the temple and don't want to be turned out? Can they just," he shrugged, "stay here, learning to be real people?"

"If you can afford it. I'm leaving everything to you, my dear, free and clear. What you do with them will no longer affect that. I need money for myself, so I'm taking all your working capital. Every bit of gold I own is already on its way to Rome. You'll have to decide very quickly which enterprises you want to keep afloat and which you want to sell off." He grinned at Seth and slipped an arm around his shoulders. "I'm feeding you a goat, my darling. At long last. Don't choke on it will you.

"I'll be here for a short time and I am at your disposal. After that, it's sink or swim. And the girls, if they are leased out to the temples of the southern empire," he grinned, "would be your biggest single source of income."

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CHAPTER THREE.

“We’re going to go.” Oseye left no room for compromise in the way she made the simple announcement. Neither she nor Eshe had begun the ritual bath, and neither had laid out or sanctified their temple robes, but she stood forward now and fastened the clasp on Jaida’s golden breastplate.

“Go where? That’s the point the older man is making,” Jaida said. If anyone could make a new life out there in the world, it was Oseye. She had the courage and the strength she would need, and if the old man was honest in his promise to give them money enough to begin, then Oseye would be the one to survive.

Eshe was another story. Her pale skin had burned even in the sun’s glare reflected from the pale stone of Alexandria. She was fragile, a delicate creature whose stomach was affected by changes in the water and the nervous upheavals of their journey so far. If Oseye was sure to survive alone, together they were certain to fail.

“Egypt,” Oseye answered. “At least, to begin with. There we know more of the language and the customs and the food. We might not have much experience to fall back on, but there things are more familiar than here.”

She had not had long to consider the question, but already a plan seemed fixed in her mind. “When we have a chance to speak, I’ll ask Drusus to tell me what I need to know.”

“He isn’t the one who will choose.” Ianthe turned, holding the hook and ring of her own breastplate at her nape, waiting for help with the clasp. “The young one, his son, he’s going to have the final say. It sounded to me like he hates the idea of slavery; what if he turns us all out on the street?”

“You want to stay a slave?” Oseye spat. She reached to fasten the hook then strode to where Eshe sat, pale and agitated.

“I’ve always been a slave,” Ianthe responded, her tension just as plain. “So have you. There are worse lives than the one we’ve had, and all of them start out there on the street. If we were all together, maybe as a group we could make our way.”

“If we stay in the temple we’ll be separated.” Jaida knew it instinctively. Study of the religious service of the deities had filled their every waking hour. No temple in the empire needed eight clairvoyants. Except for Rome itself, perhaps. “But we will have guardians, and a roof and food. I hope.” Where were the visions and assurances from their goddess?

Here at last was the opportunity for which they had been prepared. For the first time they would have a chance to be led by the goddess herself. Tonight there would be no more dress rehearsals. In the holiest shrine of the goddess Isis-Al Uzza, they would take the up sacraments and receive her visions and oracles. If she favoured them tonight, her will would be made known. And if she didn’t?

“We all have to decide,” she said quietly, looking from one girl to the next, reading fear and uncertainty in every lovely face.

Ianthe turned to face the group. “And when we’ve decided what will be best for us, then we should announce that decision to Aquila. That should be our oracle.”

Jaida dropped her mouth open until the initial shock had passed, then laughed. The girls, each now dressed in immaculately white, pleated linen robes, with golden pectoral plates and beaded mesh headdresses, moved closer. With the exception of Oseye and Eshe, they surrounded Ianthe and waited to hear the ideas she would put forward.

“You’re going to lie in the name of the goddess?” Rhea, the shortest of the sisters with clear olive skin and gold-flecked green eyes, arched an inquisitive eyebrow and began to smile, too.

“He told us today that’s what the priesthood does, writes its own script for the oracles. Why not us? Why not decide what we need and then have the goddess decree it on our behalf?”

Jaida tried to calm her racing heart with breaths pulled down into the bottom of her lungs. She stretched, straightening her spine and drawing up as much height as she could find. “Because it’s blasphemy for a start,” she breathed. “If you don’t have any faith in what we’re here to do, why aren’t you sitting over there with Oseye and Eshe?”

“It’s not that I don’t have faith; this is just too important to leave to chance. The gods are fickle. Babu told us to believe we had oracular powers, but how many of you can say for certain, for certain, with your blood on the line, that the goddess has given you a clear vision of the future?”

“We’ve never had the full ceremony before. Never.” A ripple of dissension and dark looks passed between the girls, doubts that made the difference between faith accepted and faith tested.

Ilanthe was right. Tonight the goddess could give them her direction. But if she didn’t, they were all as lost as children. “I’ll be the one to take the risk,” Jaida said as calmly as she could. A sharp pain at the base of her skull pounded in time with the pulse hammering in her chest and throat. “I’ll spend time in prayer. And if I’ve had no answer, and if none of you have had an answer, and if there’s no intervention from the goddess during the ceremony, then I’ll go to the son and tell him whatever we agree to as a divine ordinance.”

She breathed deep. That much was decided.

There was more to do in preparation for the ceremony, and Jaida turned her attention to cleansing the holy place and the altar.

Along each side wall of the small central cubicle, braziers were lit and the sweet perfume of frankincense rose into the shadows. In the middle of the altar, nestled into a depression in the stone, a laver of heated wine had been settled. Al Uzza’s squat *bétyle* stared benignly over the holy liquor and the long bound stems of the herbs that steeped in its ruby depths.

Jaida was unfamiliar with the plant. The herb, a single small tough leaf at the end of a long stem, crushed and bound together in tight posies, had been delivered with them to the temple that afternoon. With it came a silver incense casket filled to brimming with two kinds of exotic resinous block. Those too were unfamiliar, and Jaida lifted one small fragment to her lip and carefully sniffed its perfume.

She pinched a few pieces of each type into the braziers, waiting to watch them catch and smoulder, before moving on to the next. The smoke was sweet mixed with the frankincense, but not pleasant, and she didn’t linger long beside each one.

With the burners all lit and the sacred incense filling the air around them, Jaida accepted her chalice of herbed wine, and knelt with her sisters before the altar stone to pray in readiness for their oracle.

Seth stepped from the curtained interior of Drusus’ litter and delighted, as always, in the glory of the rose stone city. The fading sun reached over the high rock ridges above, and left the sandstone below to choose what colours it would from the darkening palette.

Magnificent golds waved and swirled through bands of silver. The same in every shade of red, and in the deeper shadows, blues and mauves. Above them, honeycombed through the cliffs and mesas, the older cities of the dead caught the last of the direct rays and opened their dark doorways to the sun.

Drawing himself out, wiping the threat of dust from his elaborately beaded black *bisht*, Drusus stamped his sandals on the white marble paving of the forecourt. “Yes,” he

assented to Seth's unspoken admiration. "I will miss this."

"Have you told our Nabataean hosts you're leaving their nest?" Seth asked, his mouth twisting into a lop-sided smile.

"I've alluded to the fact, shall we say. You know the Nabataean council doesn't like formalities stated too bluntly. There is always time for courtesy. Time for discussion. Time to ruminate over the costs and benefits to all parties." He took Seth's arm and they moved to the stairs leading up to the temple's first level. Walking in under its wide porticoes he leaned in conspiratorially and smiled. "I am very much in the good books, though. My renovations of the public pool and garden next to the *Curia* have proven very popular with the governing council: the Royals and the plebs."

"Yet another stroke of genius, Dec. I'll never match you." The truth in that was painful, and as with every time he thought about the responsibility he was going to inherit, Seth's heartbeat rose to near panic.

"No. Not at first, I suppose. But you were alive and thriving long before I met you. You lived longer on your wits than in my lap of luxury, and you'll remember all the tricks."

"Maybe. But I remember too much already and there is nothing I remember that fills me with joy."

As they stepped in past the massive, silent guards, Seth drew a sharp breath and coughed, laughing as he recognized the sweet attar of hashish on the air. "This is a private party, I thought. Have the ladies begun without us?"

"Very private, my dear. You and I, the priestess of Al Uzza from the temple here, and Juba's handpicked muscle boys. They'll be the ladies' escorts if they decide to stay in your service."

Seth whistled between his teeth. "I'm sparing no expense, then. I can understand you not choosing a militia guard off the streets, but why not just a team of eunuchs? They'd be cheaper by a long way than Juba's tribe of nasties."

Drusus chuckled. "You aren't thinking. Even Eunuchs have fingers. Juba's lads have no interest in breaking the seal on your merchandise. No heterosexual male should be trusted near this particular cargo. Whole or in part."

It was Seth's turn to smile as they stopped to wash their hands in the golden laver sitting high on its doorway pedestal. "Even the ladies have fingers, Decimus." He winked and laughed. "And so do I. Who is it, not thinking?"

Drusus said no more, but grinned when he raised his hand to motion Seth down between the columns and toward the holy place. A stark realization struck: regardless of the colour and theatre of Drusus' posturing and his innate vanity, he was shrewd beyond all comprehension. If Seth lived to be a hundred he would never match his patron for pure cunning.

"What do you smell?" Drusus whispered as they respectfully dropped to a knee and took a seat in the centre of the temple.

"Hash," Seth answered, but looking up to the dais and beyond into the holiest place and altar, it was plain that the auditorium was privy only to the waftings. Temple guards stood waving wide fans in long fluid strokes, bottling the priestesses' special incense up in the small room around the praying girls.

"What else?"

While they waited, torches were lit on sconces around the room, and four large urns, receptacles for sacrificial blood when required, were tonight piled high with tinder and set alight. Seth tested the air, frowning as he tried to isolate and identify the various perfumes on the air. "Ah, frankincense. Lamp oil. Wood smoke. I don't know. What else?"

“Opium.”

“And they’re in the middle of it?” He stared in stunned amazement at his patron. “I see their visions have less to do with goddesses and virginity than I had assumed. I hope the session isn’t overly long or they won’t be able to stand up, let alone speak.”

“There’s one more ingredient. Babu was taking no chances with the ability of his dream team to produce oracles on demand. They’ve been given khat. It’s been steeping in their altar wine.”

“And you agreed to follow through with this part of the plan?”

“Of course. Everything just as it was planned to be. I owe them no less.” He patted Seth’s hand to comfort the growing agitation he sensed. “And you should know every aspect of the decision before you. You have to provide a future for these women, one way or another.”

Jaida fixed her sight on a single patch of stone, forcing her spinning mind to still. Her mouth was dry and she raised unsteady hands, bringing the goblet of altar wine up to wet her lips. The words of her prayer - words she had repeated so many times they had become a mantra, a shortcut to the world of meditative calm - slipped from her mind.

Her senses were changing, opening like a flower to the vastness of the seen and unseen world. Although her eyelids were too heavy to re-open, she could see into possibilities she’d never dreamed. And past the rush of blood pulsing in her ears, she could hear her own thoughts spoken as clearly as if they were the chiming of a bell.

Her thoughts? Were they her words she heard? Sounds so melodic, in a moving haze where every syllable had form and colour, could only be words from the goddess herself.

A gong sounded and startled her, ripping her eyes open, the motion of her sisters beside her a reminder she should climb to her feet. In their faces as she looked around, she could see a reflection of her own delirium. The goddess had not forsaken them. Each of her sisters had the same inward focus, the same uncertain smile.

Pressing her wandering senses into action, she made herself follow the girl in front as the line of oracles passed from their small smoky cubicle and carried the divine consciousness with them out into the temple.

The clean air of the auditorium hit the girl’s blood with a fresh burst of inspiration and Ianthe turned, almost tripping over her own sandals, and giggled at the frown of concentration of Jaida’s face. With nothing more than the drill of practice to guide their steps, the priestesses took their positions in the line along the edge of the dais.

Beside her, several girls along, Rhea began a low chant, and one by one her sisters picked up the thread and carried on the prayer. There were protocols to follow, rituals drummed deeper into their minds than even this wondrous sense of enlightenment could blur. And Jaida let the calming familiarity of her steps carry her through this blissful state of being.

Seth sat shaking his head in silent wonder. If these women had been angelic wrapped in a fine linen *aba*’ and beaded headscarf, as they stood before him now they were divine.

Only six of the eight came forward for the ceremony, but those six were the light of the world. Their heads were covered, glittering in the firelight with the golden thread and jewel crusted weight of mesh veils. Their faces were open, and two of them had golden chains threaded from a nose ring, across their cheeks to their ears.

Their robes were startling white, the kind of perfect bleaching that made the garments worth at least twice their weight in gold, and they were held beneath the bust on ribbon as blue as lapis lazuli. Between the blue tie and the wide golden pectoral plate

clasped at their throats, the soft mounds of their bare breasts drew and held his attention.

One after another, his eyes moved slowly along the line, studying the variation in their form and finding each faultless. The murmur of their incantation passed him by without notice and Drusus leaned to whisper, "Are you impressed with their grasp of the ceremony?"

Seth smiled. "I was studying their presentation."

"There are ceremonies where they wear less. Most of them. Private oracles are often given robed only in firelight."

"These girls?" Seth tore his eyes from the entrancing performance and faced Drusus. "Stoned, naked, and alone in some cave or temple?"

"So you grasp the need for their personal security? And I think you get an idea of just why their service at a temple is so very lucrative. There aren't many men who won't feel a burning need to have the fates revealed."

Seth shook his head and turned back to watch the girls moving hypnotically over the stage. "This is bizarre. I'd like to see a reading done. When do we find out if they've had enough dope to see the future?" Second from the left, Seth settled his study on the green eyed girl he had watched that morning.

Her eyes were heavy with the strength of the incense, and her lips moved slowly, silently around the words of her prayer. She had moved a little forward of the line, and was kneeling at the edge of the dais, no more than a spit from where he sat. Her face was calm and reverent, the caramel tones of her skin fading down her throat into soft smooth cream of her bosom. Her nipples puckered, small dark beads on the perfect skin, and he felt the stirrings of interest pulsing warmly through his flesh.

"Patience, my boy," Drusus warned. "Watch and wait. Never rush to hear what a goddess has to say."

Jaida murmured the words of dedication, riding a warm wash of comfort, her thoughts adrift in an ocean of bliss. She was one with the goddess, her years of service had been noted and rewarded and she rose on the raptures of awoken awareness.

Her sister's prayers around her were seraphic songs; her flesh had blossomed into a new life, where every movement of the breeze was a kiss against her skin. Her eyelids were heavy and her lashes softened her view of the world, like the wisps of a veil between this world and the next.

The fire below her threw warm air up to lick at her cheeks and her throat and her naked breasts. It cast moving shadows that ducked between the pillars of the temple, like furtive devils seeking dark places to watch and work their mischief.

She flicked her face toward the shadowed movement, but it stayed always at the periphery of her vision. Fright jumped through her as it moved again, closer, and her head spun as she tried to keep her eyes on the elusive darkness. Her heartbeat rose in the echoing depths of her new conscious, reminding her of something. Reminding her to be afraid here. There were threats here, something that she hadn't placed, and her head kept spinning as she tried to find the reason for her fear.

She had to give an oracle to Aquila. That she could recall, but the words she was going to give him had gone, slipped away like puddles of silver light in the whirling greyness of her head. She brought her eyes back to the group of men who had come for the reading. Carefully, she moved her study from one to the next, to the next, searching for his face.

When she found his eyes, they were settled on hers and they seemed to be smiling. That smile touched her lips past the urgency of her fears and she returned it, all thought of the prayer and the ritual she was performing gone.

Leaning, using Ianthe's shoulder as leverage, she struggled to her feet and turned

at the edge of the stairway down to find his smiling eyes again. Her feet were hard to manage and she stumbled on the step, but she had her bearings set and slowly she moved across the floor and came to stand before him.

She had to speak, but her wide-open senses ached to examine the fine lines and shadows she could see so very clearly on his lips. Her eyes stroked the angled planes of his cheek, and counted the criss-crossed bunches of his eyelashes, as her nipples tightened painfully and warmth rolled slowly out from low in her belly. So close, his eyes were not as syrupy black as she had first thought, but still dark and soft and leading her closer at every beat of her heart. "Danger," she managed to whisper over her thick tongue, and she closed her eyes for a moment.

What was the danger? Why was the goddess tempting her with this vision, but hiding its core?

"Danger?" Aquila asked, and it gave her the spur to go on.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In the shadows. From behind us." She waved a vague hand toward the pillars and he turned to check the columns for signs of hidden menace.

His hair was oiled, short and swept back in neat lines that curved in waves over his ears. Two gold bars pierced his left earlobe and she dipped her face closer and narrowed her study to the soft glow of the gold.

"What is the danger?"

His words brought her eyes back to his mouth, to his eyes, and a scent caught on her tongue that made her pulse race harder and her bare nipples ache painfully. That was the danger; the clue was in the smell, in the scent of a man. Someone, somewhere behind them.

"He's coming," she said. But the goddess had no more insight to impart.

Jaida stood, swaying gently, and her hand reached up through the miles of space between them. Reaching slowly, reaching for something she couldn't quite see, she watched his hand come up to meet hers, saw her fingers slip over his and felt the warmth and strength in his grip. He was steady in the rushing elliptical void in her head.

"Who is coming?"

From somewhere behind her and above, a voice called, "Ishaq." It was Oseye; the richness of her voice had been amplified so it took on the textures of silk and fine oil.

A woman's cold hands were tugging at her shoulders, leading Jaida back toward the dais and her sisters waiting above, but she turned back once. Finding his eyes in the bright golden night, she whispered, "Ishaq." And allowed herself to be led away.

Seth let her soft fingers slip from his as the dour priestess of Al Uzza stepped between them and led the quiet beauty from his side.

"Ishaq?" he asked Drusus.

"Are you tempted to believe her?" Drusus laughed to himself and patted Seth's thigh.

"Is there an Ishaq? Maybe he is dangerous." He watched the girls being gathered, carefully lifted to their feet and shepherd back into the dark cubicle around the altar. "I can't think of a man with blood in his veins that wouldn't be a threat to them. And yes, I think I would believe anything she told me, smoke or no smoke."

Drusus stood, and around him the pews began to empty as the members of Juba's private army rose to their feet. "The hire for these lads doesn't look so extravagant to you now, does it? If you send these ladies off in a very, very secret convoy up the Via Nova Traiana to Damascus and Carchemish, would you want anyone else in command?"

“Wait, Dec; see what they have to say for themselves. Once they’ve slept off the dope, I mean.” He stood beside his patron. “They have to be freed from this, somehow. There will be a solution. Something better than milking the funds of lecherous hopefuls until their looks start to fade and their brains start to burnout from the poppy.”

“If there’s a solution, darling, you’ll find it. Now. Let’s go back to my house and enjoy the wine while it’s still mine to waste. Tomorrow will be soon enough to begin the hunt for the shadowy Ishaq.”

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CHAPTER FOUR.

Seth watched dawn lighten the sky. He had no desire to move, but lying in the softness of his bedding had proven fruitless. Sleep had eluded him through the night and so had any inspirational solution.

Rationally, he had only to wait a few more hours and he’d have a chance to work through all his questions with the girls themselves. But something in the paradoxes, in the harsh consequences of difficult choices, made it feel like disaster crouching at the door.

It was how he’d felt at the arena gate so many years ago. Knowing then, that when the gates flew wide he would face an enemy, man or beast, and his life would depend on the speed and skill with which he assessed his situation and made his defence.

For those with greater skill than his, the risks had been so much less. But he had never been a great fighter; he had no exceptional skill with the sword. For those who were truly good, who drew the crowd and were worshipped as heroes, death was an unlikely outcome. Gladiators were worth too much to their owners to be sacrificed for the crowd; their battles were pitched against comrades, their victories decided ahead of the match.

But in the beginning he’d fought in a lower echelon all together. He was down among those who were no more than blood and fodder. And all he’d ever had to save him was speed and luck, keeping out of the way until everyone else was dead.

And his face.

For reasons best known to themselves, the fine ladies who attended the games to scream and snarl their way to libidinous frenzies noticed him. And it was good fortune alone that let his owners recognize that fact and see how they could capitalize on it.

They had moved him from the bloodpits of the real, to the theatre of the main events. He went from dodging razor sharp swords and nets and maces, to wrestling Kartikeya, the moderately trustworthy Bengal tiger, and bedding the rich and lonely women of the empire’s major cities.

But in nightmares, the feelings that came when he stood behind those rough wooden doors, afraid and unknowing, rushed into his blood and brought history back to life with horrifying clarity. And that same horror pushed sleep from his eyes and thumped in his chest even now.

He rubbed his brow and scratched back over his scalp, looking down over his naked body in the growing light. There was some pride in what he saw. He had none of the rough-hewn bulk of the men he’d worked and fought beside in years gone by. His body had smooth lines, each muscle planned and sculpted, the skin silky-smooth, with none of the knotted veins and flesh tears that came from forced over-exertion.

He had scars and they paid. The ladies had always liked scars, especially the two

deep arcs near his left shoulder where Kartikeya had swiped too hard and opened his chest to the bone.

But in all that he was a forgery. None of his strength came from hard physical work. He now trained in his own private gymnasium with weights and bars. The little weapons training he still did was more like the choreography of a dancer. He was a fraud.

It was said now he worked for Dec, but that too was a lie. Decimus paid him extravagantly to 'manage' one or two of his less important import businesses. He sometimes travelled up to Gaza, or down to Leuce Come to ensure the safety of special commissions, but in reality Dec had his empire so tightly reined that Seth himself need do or say nothing and everything would have gone on just as always.

He no longer worked as a whore, although he did see several of his local ex-clients on occasion.

He was nothing. Empty.

He slipped his hand down over the fine dark hair on his chest and belly and scratched gently. He didn't know what he was for good reason; he had no external markers with which to define himself. But he didn't know either who he was. Not really.

Circumcision told him more about his heritage than anything he could remember. He had no recall of a family or a home. No fragments of language or flashes of a mother's face that might have come in dreams. No feeling of belonging or of being drawn to a place or time or people.

He was Aya, the little vulture. A filthy scavenger from the edges of a Bedouin caravan, crossing and re-crossing the sand in endless journeys that were filled with hunger and abuse. Stealing, trading what he could with brother urchins to survive and being traded by them to secure their own safety.

And he was Aquila, the Eagle, fast and smart and sharp in the arena. A lucrative property for anyone with enough money to own his life.

And he was Sethos Asinius Drusus, with Aquila still tacked onto the end, as if he needed that name to clearly separate him from his adopted father. Or to keep what little fame he'd garnered for himself.

If Dec left Petra, when he left, Seth would be alone again as he had been for so many years before.

Dec was the only man, the only person, he had ever known who had loved him freely and unconditionally. Dec had given him his freedom, wealth, security, and a name. But it wasn't the list of comforts that mattered most, not even manumission, although that rated high in the heart of anyone born to slavery. It was love. Dec had loved him and never asked anything of him in return.

It was a mystery he'd stopped trying to unravel or reduce. There was no ulterior motive and no falsity in his devotion.

Kicking the tangling silk from around his ankles, Seth sat up and swung his feet to the ground. Away from the eyes of the world, this room reflected more of him than any other in his home. It was bare, its stone walls unadorned except for one wide painted cloth from Kush. The floor had no mosaics, only smooth terracotta tiles and several small bright rugs.

He had to face the day.

And the knowledge that Dec was going to leave.

And the questions about himself that that fact left open.

Jaida woke with a parched throat, a head that felt waterlogged, and a heavy sadness that followed her from feverish dreams. Oseye was kneeling by her face, gently shaking her shoulder and urging her awake.

"Jaida. We have prayers of thanks to make to Isis-Al Uzza. Wake up." A soft saffron robe with wide sleeves and a scarlet silk binding was pushed into her hands and she sat, trying to rub the dull weight of sleep from her cheeks and eyes.

"Prayers of thanks?" she mumbled. "For last night?"

Dizziness slapped her sideways when she stood and she paused a moment, waiting for the tide of motion to recede. She pulled the robe over her bare skin and ambled to the fullers pot in the corner of their room. Emptying her bladder loosened the tensions in her belly and spine, and she took a single deep breath to clear her thoughts and looked around at her sisters.

Most were dressing; Rhea slept and Oseye had turned her attention to trying to wake her. Eshe sat, silent and alone, perched on a comfortable sofa as if she was balanced on a spike. Her pale face was ghostly and her lips were drawn and colourless.

"Eshe?" Jaida moved toward the girl, offering a hand in an attempt to reach past terrors she couldn't see. "Are you all right? What's happened?"

"We have to go, Jaida. We all have to flee. Not together, he'll find us all too easily while we are together. We have to fly to the winds and disappear, now, today, before he finds us here." She was trembling, but her voice had strength enough to make her words convincing. Her green eyes stared past Jaida at the terrors she had envisaged, and when she drew her hand back Jaida turned to face Oseye's approach.

"Don't you remember the oracle?" The honey rich voice flowed over Jaida's confusion like oil on broken water. "He is coming for us. We have to give thanks to the goddess for her warning and demand the old man make good his promise of freedom."

"No." Jaida shook her head. "No, Ishaq can't harm us while we have protection here." Distorted recollections from the night before carried images of gleaming oiled muscle and humourless faces. "The new master has an army to set around us; you saw them there. Babu had only his word as a father and that sufficed for fifteen years."

"Babu's family has lost everything, Jaida. And bitterness will push a man past fears any rational soul would avoid. He will come, and he'll bring such a hatred no army will make him step back."

"He's only a man, only flesh and blood, no matter how much resentment he has. A sword will stop him if the law and decency won't." She stood, bringing her determination up into her sister's face, trying to match the calm she saw there. "Was it him I saw? Are you even sure of who you are running from?"

"I saw him." Oseye's heavy lids lifted slightly in challenge. "So did you."

"You were not sanctified for the ritual. And I saw..." Jaida's memory carried with it the remnants of vertigo, but in the still centre was the image of a man. Captured in fine detail from the wisps of dark hair curling at his nape to the soft depths of his eyes, and a smile that he'd given to her alone. With it was the scent of sandalwood, sweet and soothing, rising to her on the warmth of his pulse. And the dream of lips that grazed her naked breasts and burned the soft skin of her thigh with a rash of blistered sweat.

The recollection stabbed her low in the belly, with a sharp heat that pulsed from her loins up over her chest and brought a blush of guilty pleasure to her cheeks. She turned her face down suddenly, before Oseye could see the dark desires that rippled through her. "I saw danger. Danger in the shadows. You gave him a name."

"We all saw him, sister." Rhea spoke from across the room, and Jaida threw her hands up in surrender.

"You named him too, Jaida." Ianthe added her thoughts to the mix and Jaida

walked away from the debate, down between the rows of cots toward the aperture.

Lacking any kind of window, their small room was thick with the stench of burnt tallow wicks. The dirty air dragged in her throat and the greasy light soaked into the undressed stone of the walls. It was an oppressive place. A temple ward it may have been, a place of honour, but the dull stone walls and hard pallets, with their rough spun linen and without a bevel at the head or foot, made it seem a cell.

In the narrow corridor outside, a guard blocked her way. Just standing he crowded the passage and he waited, still and silent, until all of the girls had appeared at her back. When he spoke, a claustrophobic sense of panic rose and she stared at him, understanding nothing of what he intended her to know.

He was not dressed as a temple guard. His hair was long in the Nabataean style, thick with curls that rushed down over his massive shoulders. There, hard-cured leather rose in a ridge behind his neck and reached to join with straps that crossed his bare chest between oiled pectoral muscles. A short leather *schenti* barely wrapped his hips and thighs, and decorated brass and leather greaves covered his shins.

"What's he want?" Ianthe hissed from close behind and Jaida shrugged and began to follow where the Nabataean led.

"I think he's one of the guards the new master had with him last night. I can't understand him."

The leather laminate they'd glimpsed from the front was the rolled top edge of a moulded guard. It covered his wide shoulders and back like a hard black skin. At his hips, two broad bladed scimitars hung in richly ornamented sheaths, and strapped inside his wrists were twin daggers.

Slipping under Jaida's arm, Ianthe reached a hand forward, miming the intent to touch the hard curve of his rolling buttocks, and Jaida spun a wide-eyed glare at her sister. A smile was too close for the threat to have purpose, and Ianthe pulled her hand back and giggled.

"My throat is sore and I'm hungry," Jaida whispered. "I hope that babble meant 'come and get breakfast'."

"What if it meant 'I'm an assassin sent by Ishaq. Follow me out to the light so I can see to stab you'?"

Jaida stopped dead and the line of girls following crowded up into each other.

"She's joking." From back down the line Shemei giggled, and Ianthe finished the thought.

"If he was a threat he'd have killed us there in private. And Ishaq will have to do his own dirty work; he has no money to hire an assassin."

The corridor had turned a corner and now opened to a side room where a portico overlooked the goddess' temple complex. In bright daylight, Petra bustled with a city's obligatory haste and self-absorption. Its people rushed ahead of the day's rising heat, intent on having their business done and their obligations to the gods they worshipped met before the sun rose higher in the sky.

Across the Wadi Musa, the multicoloured facade of Dushares' vast temple caught the morning sunlight in its smooth stone, offering the rushed masses the chance to worship on the run. Attendant novices cleared the outdoor altar, stoking the cleansing fires and dressing the stone in sacred oils, effectively keeping the great unwashed from any need to enter the confines of the sacred presence itself.

Breakfast had indeed been laid, on small round tables crammed with brightly jewelled glass and silverware. A number of couches had been forced into the small room, over-large and far too gaudy to belong in the austere manse, and the resident priestess eyed them with the same frank distaste she showed the girls.

She glared a silent dismissal at the guard, who appeared to ignore her completely, taking up a position beside the doorway opposite. "You don't have long." Her voice was as cold as her eyes and Jaida sensed animosity borne of displacement. The girls had somehow usurped her role as spiritual source, and not only her temple, but also her home had been requisitioned and violated by something she was powerless to prevent.

"Eat," she said. "You are to bathe and return homage to Al Uzza, divine consort of the great god, Dushares. Your Roman lords will collect you at noon."

She turned to leave the room and Rhea called after her, "Will you eat with us, Priestess?"

"No." The woman didn't turn. "I have a sacrifice to prepare."

"A sacrifice for Isis-Al Uzza?" Rhea turned to her sisters with a look of confusion, but the only reply from the priestess was a hard sound, spat from her mouth like it tasted of excrement. "Eeh-Shah," she hissed and walked from the room.

For all her forms, Isis, Queen of Heaven, was rarely referred to by this ancient name. Three thousand years ago, when the goddess was no more than a minor deity, a handmaiden in the temples of the old gods, it had been her only name. Now she ruled the heavens. From the Nile delta she had spread her arms and followed the empires, engaging and absorbing every goddess in the realms. To pronounce her slave-name with such disdain called her nothing. With one word the priestess had made her objections plain.

The guard stood motionless, apparently unaware of the tension or the slur, but the girls passed wary looks around the room until Eshe stepped forward and began to pile a platter with food. "Get some breakfast," she said softly over her shoulder. Her apparent fragility, the lucent skin and pale red gold curls, contrasted with the singular conviction of her words and the fulsome meal she loaded to her plate. "We should eat what we can and take what we can carry. We need to be ready to leave."

"I don't want to leave." Lailah's words, spoken quietly but with confidence, gave Jaida hope for the first time that her views on their safety had been heard. She was in no way a leading voice among the girls, that role almost always fell to Oseye or Zaliki, but Jaida's certainty on this matter demanded she make herself plain. If Lailah agreed, maybe there was hope yet to turn the sisters to her way of thought.

But her optimism was short-lived. Shemei, Oseye and Zaliki all moved to stand beside Eshe, filling a platter each with food, and making their stand on the subject clear.

She looked to Rhea, and to Ianthe, silently pleading for them to stand with her, but neither girl gave any indication of her thoughts. Jaida moved to the table, poured a long glass of cool water sweetened with rosehip from a silver ewer, and sipped to ease the raw drag in her throat.

"What if the offer is withdrawn," she asked. "Or what if the money he offers is not enough to get you safely back to Egypt? We have no skills to bargain for things we need. I don't think we even know what it is we do need, not out there alone."

"Then I will sell what I have that is of most value to the men of the world." Zaliki's dark eyes were cold with irrational or fanatical determination. "You can sit on your virtue, and give your mouth to the temple if that's what you want. But the goddess didn't choose me for this life, Babu did. And I didn't make this situation dangerous, Babu did. And I certainly didn't ever want to be Ishaq's enemy. My dreams of him leave me drenched in sweats that have nothing to do with visions of danger."

The words gave Jaida a guilty start and raised a wash of colour to her cheeks as she raised her glass and poured a long draught down her throat, dousing hidden fires. It wasn't Ishaq who'd set her dreams afire. Not his eyes, or his hands or his mouth, but she knew her sister's dreams.

“And they have nothing to do with Ishaq, either.” Lailah was direct, but her lips curled into a smile. “He’s a man and that’s all. He’s just the only man we’ve ever seen up close over a long period.”

Standing by the wall among a litter of ceremonial urns, a tall marble statue of Zeus peered down magisterially at the girls, displaced by the bevy of couches. The Romans, and the Greeks before them, named a nation’s gods for their own, incorporating every deity into their own pantheon without regard to the insult that presaged.

Al Uzza was the consort of divine Dushares and neither had a human form. Their rites were dedicated before the betyls; blocks of stone that represented the presence of the god, not the god himself. This Roman gift to the goddess, intended as an iconic image of her beloved husband, had been shunted to the back rooms and hidden away from sight.

Lailah walked slowly to the cold stone god and trailed a finger gently down the length of his chest and stomach. Her expression changed to frank amusement as she stroked the unimpressive cluster of marble genitalia. “This is the choice you’re making, Zaliki. You can give your body to the goddess or to a man. You know you can’t have both, and it’s this,” she tapped her finger on the statue, “that you want more.”

“Perhaps.” Zaliki raised her chin defiantly. “What’s more important is to have the freedom to choose. Don’t you pretend you’ve never wanted a lover for yourself. Or you.” Zaliki turned to face Jaida and the flush of embarrassment rose into her cheeks again. “And children? Don’t try to tell me you never cried over the knowledge you would never be a mother.” She seemed satisfied she’d made her argument and moved to a couch, turning her attention to her food.

“Rhea?” Oseye demanded.

“It’s too soon.” The question pushed Rhea into action, and she moved to the table and began to choose herself a breakfast. “I don’t know why you are all so determined to say, *so be it*. We’ll see our owners today. The goddess has already given us her approval. We are oracles, just as Babu said we would be. We do have power, even as slaves. Wait. Just stay calm and wait to see what happens next.”

“We’re not staying,” Zaliki said plainly. “If you need time to consider the risks, then you have already decided to remain. Ianthe?”

“Staying.” She answered hesitantly, pulling the long twisted ropes of her hair into a bunch over her shoulder. “For the same reason. I want to see what is going to happen. I want to know what became of Babu and exactly why we’re here. And yes, the goddess has confirmed we are her oracles. After so many years as a prisoner of this man’s dream, I’m willing to give the goddess time to show me her rewards for all we’ve endured.”

Jaida slipped a silent sigh of relief and selected some fruit and bread. Four of eight. It was better than nothing, but there was almost no chance she would be able to change the minds the four who wanted to leave. If it was their absolute conviction, then perhaps the goddess herself would prevail on their behalf.

Even as hungry as she felt, she chose a lighter meal. There were sacrifices to make, and she couldn’t share Isis-Al Uzza’s taste for blood.

Seth sipped from his goblet of wine, and compared the map before him with the caravan schedule Drusus handed over. The desert wastes of Arabia were no mystery to him. The tiny oases, marked with deliberate vagueness on the face of the parchment, were the secret of Nabataean trade superiority for a thousand years, and their true locations were kept in the hearts of men and never on paper. As a child he’d tramped

those wastes and had learned the watering places, and their purpose on the maps served only to indicate each day's end.

"If you want to scale down the operation, Seth, consider handing this route back to the Nabataean hierarchy." Drusus tapped one dotted line and poured himself another drink. "It's only spice for the Memphis market, and they carry pitch back to Babylon. To Rome this might be a client state, but the Royals here still consider themselves kings. They've dealt honestly with me for thirty years and they know you, but they like to see solid gestures of good will."

Seth nodded. There was ample room for scaling down; Decimus' enterprises were vast. More than that, if Dec thought handing over a caravan and all its contracts was advisable, Seth would never challenge that wisdom. As it stood, the next two years could be swallowed up in travelling to meet with contacts and distant envoys, consolidating his place as owner of the trade licenses. If he used Dec's influence now to sell the most distant routes to local operators, he could bring in needed capital quickly, and immediately reduce the whole to a manageable size.

There were no obvious problems with the running of the estate. He knew the goods, he knew the routes and he knew most of the Bedouin carriers. Dec had created his empire with sound and simple concepts. But there was one venture Seth had been unable to consider so calmly.

"We see *The Dream* today," he said carefully, dropping the schedule down into a pile of documents and standing to pace. He used the term half in jest, but in truth, the faces he had seen at the temple were not lightly discarded. "I must have breathed in more than a little of their inspiration, they were in my head all night." Green eyes and golden skin; perfect breasts and a sleepy smile on full lips. "What are the alternatives you had planned for them?"

"They're your problem, dearest." Dec lay back onto a couch and closed his eyes, waving a feathered fan slowly at his face.

"Give it up, Dec. You didn't bring them here as a test of my decision making ability. You had something in mind the day you first laid eyes on them. Whether you wanted to complete their training and lease them out to temples or set them all free, you had no need to bring them here to do it."

Drusus peered over his fan, his dark eyes wide, and attempted to look ingenuous. The effect failed and Seth smiled. "You brought them here so I'd have to see them. They were a gift, weren't they?"

"No, not exactly. I told you, they are too precious to have been thrown out into this cruel old world. Things of such rare value should always be protected and secure."

"But..."

"But I want grand children to spoil. You stay here in my wonderful city, hidden away among the crypts and mausoleums. I've seen the women you have to choose from out here and most of them look like they might have crawled out of their tombs. Or, *like some*, they've ridden a thousand men to a painful death."

Seth laughed. "My choices suit me nicely, thank you. If they are older, then they're married and no burden to me. As for Agrippina, it's her husband's political sway you despise, and you insult her because you can't touch him. And if none of them want to share, I don't have to have their pasty daughters waved in my face. I'm not good blood for marriage, after all."

"No." Dec looked sullen. "I've tried sending you to Babylon, and to wonderful Alexandria, but you always come home alone. And lovely as they are, the Nabataean princesses are off limits."

"So you decided to offer me a selection of the world's most eligible virgins?"

"I'll admit it was an idea I considered. And yes, it is the reason I brought them all the way to Petra."

"You should know better than to believe freeing them from slavery will result in one or all of them falling into my arms with gratitude."

"You don't have to free them." Drusus pulled himself up and reached for his wine. "But as I said yesterday, they could do much worse."

Seth strolled to the breezeway and hooked his fingers through the cutwork in the stone. Past the covered walkway outside, Kartikeya raised his face and sniffed the air, grunting harshly at an unseen scent that caught his imagination.

"Do they have names?" he asked. Thinking of the kneeling line of priestesses brought a stab of guilt at speaking of the girls as if they were merchandise. And when a face came to mind, he wanted a name to put with it. A sound to match the picture. Music for the muse.

"If you free them, I'm sure they each have a name to tell you and a history to go with it."

"And while they are in service to the temple?"

"While they are in service? Priestess. Or oracle. If they stay with their goddess you'll never need to know more than that, they'll be out of your reach."

That was an oddly sobering thought, and Seth considered the questions he would choose to have answered. "Ishaq? You've never heard of him?"

"Nothing. And it'll be weeks before I can get word back from Alexandria if I send for information." Drusus shrugged. "They all seemed to know him, or the name at least, and that is very odd. They would never have had much to do with any man. Babu had a family; maybe this Ishaq is a relative."

"Why dig for information at Alexandria? Why not just ask Babu about the threat?"

"He's long dead. He spent all he had on the dream of riches he'd make on the lease of these girls. In the end he had no money for their security. He was ruined in the Cyrene uprisings. It is a miracle the girls survived at all. Then, without money he couldn't send them out unguarded, but he had nothing left for himself to live on. He could have sold one of the girls, but he wouldn't do it. Or couldn't do it. So he gambled everything against them instead, hoping to win enough to save them all. He lost."

"I can see where that might upset the family." Seth shook his head. "The girls will know who he is." It was a question easily answered. There were others more complex. "When they're freed it'll take some time for the paperwork to go through. I can give them letters of intent until they are granted manumission, but what about the capital you promised each of them?"

"Credit. I've already raised the funds. If we go in to the *Curia* tomorrow, I can start proceedings on the sale of some of the licenses. There'll be no holdup there as long as the buyers are approved by the Nabataean senate, and no delay on the repayment of the loans I've taken in your name."

"How much do I give them? What does a new life cost? Where will they stay until they've learned the things they need to know? How long will that take?" Once again, heavy lids over smiling pastel green eyes came to mind, and Seth's heartbeat quickened at the image. It was not hard to imagine watching such a Venus find her feet in the world, watching her open like a Damascus rose, her sweetness on the air like perfume.

"If they choose freedom."

"They will. No one would choose to stay a slave."

"But if they do?" Drusus moved to stand beside Seth, watching too as the ancient tiger gave up on his calls to the world outside his courtyard, and he sauntered into the belly deep pond for a sleep. "This is still the only life they've known, and now they've

proven to themselves that they really are oracular priestesses.”

“They proved to me that anyone can see a vision if they have the right incense.”

“And how scared are they of this man they’ve foreseen? They might want to stay safe in the temple.”

“Okay. What if?”

“Then you’ll need Juba’s muscle boys. They’re already on guard duty. You send them up the Via Nova Traiana with the girls as I planned; there are temples all the way to Carchemish. Or, I suppose I could take them back to Rome with me, with the security escort. Or somewhere in between.”

“And I contract with each temple, pay for their upkeep and security and keep the change?”

“That’s how it works. It is the only way a priestess is kept safe while she practices her arts.”

“If they want their freedom but need time to learn, can I keep them at your place? Yours is the biggest house in this quarter. Short of the royal residences, it’s the biggest house in Petra. Once you leave I’ll keep it staffed and sell it up for you after they’ve gone.”

Again Drusus shrugged. “What you do with it after I go is up to you. Why don’t you move over there too, it’s part of what I’m leaving with you anyway? You have no idea how much gold I’ve already sent on to Rome. I don’t care. I have more than enough.”

The noon desert air heated some of the chill from Jaida’s skin, but she pulled her *palla* up around her face. She looked furtively up and down the street as they moved into the waiting litters. Fears she could not reason away crawled over her shoulders and raised the fine hair on her nape. She had fears for herself and for her sisters, so intent on braving the outside world alone. Everywhere, there was movement and shadows. The sun stood high above the city, but along every street, dense shady trees and covered walkways made cool purple avenues, and there the population fussed.

Water moved throughout the city, too. From the glittering sprays of the *nymphaeum* and the clean flowing gutters, to the public pools and gardens next to the government buildings. Green growing things, perfumed blooms in pinks and reds, and rushing water everywhere called rumours of the desert outside the valley lies. White tiles and marble threw up glare that made her squint into the shadows.

The hand that held her shawl still smelled of blood, and Jaida moved it down to her chest. She’d washed and washed the scarlet life from her skin, but still the memory of its passing stayed. She couldn’t share Al Uzza’s taste for blood, but Isis was every goddess. Somewhere there was a temple where there was no demand for sacrifice, and if her sisters could bargain for money and freedom, she could argue for service that didn’t ask for blood.

In the litter, Ianthe dragged the curtain wide again, drinking in the sights of Petra: the vast roads and colonnades, a thousand buildings raised in stone, the cliffs, and the people.

“Close it up. Or at least cover your face,” Jaida warned. “I don’t know if he’s here somewhere or not, but there’s no sense in advertising yourself.”

“No.” Ianthe laughed. “I want to watch them.” Her tone was a conspiratorial hiss and she didn’t name the object of her fascination, but Jaida craned forward and followed her sister’s eyes to their goal.

“They’re eunuchs, aren’t they?” Jaida’s cheeks flushed hot and she smiled with embarrassment. The squad of leather bound guards had taken position around the litters, so one or more were visible through any curtain.

Ianthe laughed and shook her head dramatically. “I don’t think so. Their loin cloths don’t hide much.”

Jaida bobbed her head, trying to get a better view to assess her sister’s judgment and both girls laughed again as Ianthe whispered, “I wonder if Zaliki has chosen one and singled him out for attention yet. If she does I want to hear every single detail.”

“Half her luck.” The mention of their sister’s decision to pursue the carnal dropped the sense of enjoyment from the discussion. “They really are going to leave, aren’t they? I kept hoping I could convince them we should stay together.”

“They’re going. If the offer is genuine.” Ianthe pulled her *palla* forward, shading her face from a bright shaft of sunlight. “And I’m so tempted to go with them. And that’s why.” She nodded back toward the heavily muscled guards. “Not him or him or him. Like Zaliki said, the freedom to choose. The fact that if I do stay in the temple, with security and, I hope, blessings, then that whole half of my life as a woman is thrown away.”

Jaida watched the hard build of the guards, their moulded muscle moving under oiled skin, their thick wrists and strong hands, and her heartbeat raced. Nothing her sister put into words was a surprise. In each of the girls, whether cradled in silence or laughed aloud, that knowledge and that denial of desire burned long and hard and painful.

“Before now,” all the humour had gone from Ianthe’s voice and her dark eyes seemed near to filling with tears, “we were slaves, our futures sealed, there was no point in letting ourselves fantasize about what could be. Now all those dreams and longings have boiled right up under my skin. To touch and to be touched. Now I have a choice, and the fantasy is driving me crazy.”

In that too, she was not alone.

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CHAPTER FIVE.

Seth sniffed. Bunches of Oleander scented the air, and he tried again for traces of tiger musk, but his senses were too used to the smell. The studio was cool and well lit, not too crowded with furniture and not as gaudy as the annex.

“Zayed!” Rough fingers of uncertainty pulled up tight around his innards and Seth was irritated by his own reaction. He’d spoken twice before to the priestesses, and he was free to do as he saw fit. Dec would not interfere. Still his gut churned nervously at the thought of facing them, now. They would be here any moment and he wanted everything perfect.

“I don’t want hash in anything you bring to the table today. It’s important these ladies can think clearly about what they want to do.”

“Wine?”

“Yes. And rosewater. Fruit. Jellies. Anything they want, when they want it. I want them to feel like royalty.”

“They’re slaves, aren’t they?” Zayed raised an eyebrow, well aware that his status as a free man put him above service of lower classes.

“As I was. But not for long. To everyone in this household, everyone, they are

already equal to me. I expect to see that. Clear?”

“Perfectly.”

“Tamir.” Seth turned and the sad-eyed servant looked up from his study of the rugs. “Juba and his men will be here, too. Juba will be at the meeting, but take the muscle up to the *triclinium*. Give them anything they want, open the finest wines we’ve got in store and feed them up. If they look like settling in for the night, get more staff in and another menu ready. I don’t want to have to worry about them, understand?”

Tamir nodded, and his closest approximation of a smile set on his mouth. “I understand, sir.”

“Oh and Zayed, Dec will be back soon. He has just made me the richest Roman in the province. At very least, I think he deserves respect from my staff.”

The *promus* bowed too deeply, nodded his head too precisely, and Seth understood without doubt every word that was not spoken. Like all the men of his race, Zayed was able to say so much more with a turn of the eye or hand gesture, than any sentence he might choose to articulate.

When Juba called from the open foyer, Seth walked behind his staff toward the marbled atrium.

“Aquila,” Juba stepped up, his flushed face beaming, and reached to embrace his host. “Peace be on your household, my friend.”

As Seth returned the courtesy, his attention strayed out to the shaded portico where Juba’s wards and his security staff were gathering to enter.

Without conscious effort, he found one face in the many. Her *tunica* was bright against the gold of her skin, and from under the shading cowl of her silk *palla*, her pale eyes gleamed with stolen sunlight. She had a name, and today, with the promise of freedom, he would learn that name from her own lips.

Juba leaned in close under Seth’s shepherding arm. With a hand across his mouth and his eyes glittering devilishly he whispered, “Look at them, my boy. Aren’t they exquisite? Charm enough to turn the head and win the heart of any man.”

Seth laughed, stepping back to make way for the entourage to enter. “You’ve had too many years working with Drusus. He has you caught up in his plans, and conspiring willingly, too, I’ll bet. But don’t get ahead of yourselves; these are priestesses, not pieces of meat.”

As he whispered the last, he raised a hand, ushering the plainly nervous group of women past, bowing his head to each, his hand held over his heart. “Ladies, welcome. Zayed will take you through. My home is yours.”

Behind the girls came Juba’s elite. The sheer volume of leather and oiled muscle in the room made Seth step back. “Gentlemen.” He offered each man both of his hands in greeting as they filed into the wide atrium. “You have my thanks already, for bringing the priestesses this far safely. Today you are guests. Please, go with Tamir. You’ll find food and wine and entertainment. If I have neglected anything, please ask. When this business is done, we’ll join you.”

He took Juba’s elbow, following as the small army was led down through an echoing corridor, but the two moved instead toward the studio.

“They are certainly impressive, Juba,” Seth said as they walked.

“My own dream realized.” Juba nodded after the men, pride in the way he straightened his spine. “And very lucrative, too. Did you know it was Decimus who first gave me the idea?”

Seth laughed. “No, I didn’t know. But it doesn’t surprise me. If there was ever a need to meet and gold to be made, Dec would see it.”

“Twenty years ago he was holding one of his notoriously bacchanalian feasts, and

he saw it, indeed. On one hand, these boys with strength and potential and nothing to do but provide entertainment for rich noblemen and merchants. And on the other, under that same roof, rich men with every vice from gambling to gorgeous boys, but who didn't trust their wives to cross the city, or a country, unescorted. A match made in heaven. A little security training and here we have it, an elite army."

"And no end of rich men who want their women protected," Seth agreed, and as he stepped into the studio it struck him how important that might be.

Zayed had surpassed himself; boys stood at call around the walls with trays of fruits and sweetmeats and with jugs of refreshment that sparkled in the lamplight. But no jewel or artwork made by man shone as brightly as the women they served. A moment away from them worked like a palette cleanser, dulling the memory a little, so to see them again was, every time, to be startled by the flash of their beauty.

"Ladies." Words weren't so easy to find as he scanned the room, brushing over each lovely face, but settling as he spoke on the one. "Priestesses. Please, relax. You are all guests here. Anything you ask is yours."

Juba took a seat, and Seth moved past him to the far side of the room where his heavy desk groaned under the weight of stacked documents and scrolled parchment. "Drusus will be here soon. I have," he indicated the table, "most of the paperwork we'll need pertaining to your service. As soon as he arrives, we can get straight down to the decisions you've made on your future."

"Was he truthful when he promised us our freedom?" A tall girl stood, her dark eyes level with his and even from across the room, burning with the heat of purpose. He recognized her at once as both the speaker at their first meeting, and one of the women not partaking of the oracle.

"He was truthful. I'd go further. I'd say that freedom is what I want for all of you."

"And money?"

"Yes, and money." Seth returned the glare warily. "But we can do Drusus the courtesy of waiting before we discuss it. It'll take time, a week or two, for the paperwork to be processed, to receive your manumission plaques and to clear the funds you're going to need. Then there's the time it will take for you to learn..."

"No. We don't want to wait here. Do what you have to do, but give us the money you've promised now and let us go." Lamplight caught in her dark eyes and was cast back at him like sparks from a furnace.

He shook his head slightly and turned to search out the pale green eyes of his oracle, and he spoke as if directly to her. "That makes no sense. You're being offered everything you could want, and you're going to throw it away for the sake of impatience? I won't allow it." The oracle tore her eyes from his, curling her whole body down and away as if she needed to escape his study, and he looked back to the woman who was speaking for the group.

"Won't allow it?" she said. "Is it freedom we are discussing?"

"Yes, but..."

"But on your terms?"

Jaida felt her stomach ice over and her grip on the cool goblet in her hands grow shaky. From the moment he'd entered the room, she had found her focus centred on the man who held her future. Aquila, the name meant eagle, but there was nothing hawk-like about his features. His face was warm and open, and she held the memory of an unusual intimacy, of a study, close and captivating, where every line and pore of his skin was a fascination in itself. When he turned his eyes upon her, she was naked before him again, and she self-consciously pulled herself into a ball of embarrassment.

And there was nothing birdlike in his build or bearing. His shoulders were wide.

His chest and arms, though hidden by a loose linen *khameez*, were heavy. The muscles that clenched in anger in his neck and jaw were hard. He was not as heavily built as the guards who'd accompanied them; his movements were more fluid; his walk was less burdened by overgrown thighs.

But the scowl that stabbed at Oseye was as sharp and bright as a blade.

"Yes, on my terms," he snapped. "There's a world out there that you have never seen, dangers you can't guess at."

Even so, it was not enough to cow her.

"You don't know the dangers we face. If you did, you would see that we have to leave here now. Quietly, secretly. We have to slip away before our enemy has a chance to move against us."

Zaliki stood beside Oseye and he flung the cold glare at her. "And before you have a chance to change your mind," she said.

Aquila laughed, but the sharp light didn't leave his eyes. He nodded in recognition of their fear, dropping his face to watch the floor as he moved around the table and took a seat. "I won't change my mind," he smiled, resting back against bolsters and crossing his ankles, "so that isn't an issue. Tell me what the danger is. Who it is. Ishaq?"

From where he sat, he looked across the stacks of paperwork and caught Jaida in the flare of his eyes. "You had the vision, priestess," he said. "Tell me who you saw."

A hot rash covered Jaida's chest and crawled up her throat and cheeks, its progress stopping the words in her mouth. He held her fixed before him, and her senses wheeled in the chaos of panic.

"I saw," she stammered.

She couldn't name Ishaq, any more than she could on the night of the vision. She had sensed dangers all around them, fears that clustered in the shadows, but she'd had no name for them. Standing slowly before him now, as she pressed the creases from the lap of her *tunica* and forced her knees to straighten, she felt that same exhilarating terror. These were the eyes she had looked into then; these were the features that she had carried with her into dreams of fire and sweat.

"Danger," she repeated, as she had the night before. "I saw only danger."

He held his focus intently on hers and she couldn't pull her eyes away. As she stared his visage softened, warming and darkening and his breath came harder, flaring in his nostrils as he held her.

"Who is Ishaq?" he repeated, his tone betraying a slight impatience.

"Ishaq is Babu's son," Zaliki answered, but Aquila kept his eyes on Jaida.

His eyebrows rose, as if the fact had been confirmed and he asked, "Why is he a danger? How are you safer out there than here behind my walls?"

"His father gave everything to raise us to the temple. Now all he had hoped for has gone with us, and nothing Ishaq should have had will be left for him when Babu dies."

Again Zaliki answered, but Aquila never once took his eyes from Jaida. She hung before him like a sacrifice, exposed and barely breathing, with the dull heat of self-consciousness itching her skin, entirely unable to look away.

"Babu is dead."

The words freed Jaida suddenly, and she dropped like a sack as she spun to Shemei, watching tears flood into the girl's eyes. Shemei had come first to Babu's care, as an infant, and of the girls she most of all, thought of him as a father.

Aquila continued, "So I can see why his son would be angry. Vengeful. But it's ridiculous to think you are safer on the street than here. Whatever life you've lived, and a moment in your company makes it plain you've never lived as slaves, you have no concept of the sort of wealth Drusus has at his disposal. Or the sort of security that can

buy you.”

Never lived as slaves? Jaida turned back to him in astonishment and Oseye snorted in derision. They had lived as slaves, as prisoners, every day of their lives. They had lived in rooms with barred windows; they had known no more than a dozen faces in all their years of training; they had never once had the freedom to walk down a street, or to speak to a stranger, or to go where they chose. They had certainly lived as slaves.

“Security,” Oseye spat. “That was Babu’s word for isolation.”

“Not here. I have a house prepared for you. You can come and go as you like, but guards will be at your call.” He moved his study back to Oseye and freed Jaida to do the same.

“If we can get out, he can get in.” Zaliki spoke, and not only spoke but stepped forward, every moment giving her more fuel to fire her courage and determination. “The guards you set are like beacons, they draw every eye in the street. With them we would be no more than targets, brightly lit and waiting for an arrow from the shadows. Ishaq was a soldier, a man taught to kill.”

Through all that had been said, Juba had been silent, his fingers steepled before his lips, his eyes part closed in concentration. “I have men who are not so obvious,” he said. “The men who were your guard on the journey from Alexandria were mine. But it’s true. Staying here, or at Drusus’ house, the ladies would be talked about and watched by every gossip and bored harridan in Petra. An assassin would have an easy mark, and the only way my men could guarantee their safety would be to keep them under cover until the threat has been neutralized.”

“Go after the son, himself?” Aquila asked, a slow smile touching his lips as he nodded. “Find him, somewhere between here and Alexandria, positively identify him and.... He’s ex-army, so he’s a Roman citizen, too. Do we decide he’s guilty before he’s killed, or do we just remove the threat on the goddess’ word?”

“No.” Zaliki blurted, stepping back from her confident assault. “No,” she repeated more quietly. “If you want to give us our freedom, if you truly offer us the right to choose our life and our course, then free us, now, today, and let us go in secrecy.”

Zayed coughed, bowing ridiculously low to Zaliki in deference to interrupting, and said, “Your guest, sir.”

Seth stood, nodding himself in apology to the women as he left to welcome Drusus.

“Have him killed,” Oseye hissed. “That’s a better chance than anything else we have. We can still go. We can still return to Egypt. But with Ishaq gone, we have nothing else to fear.”

Zaliki made a fist. “No. When we go, I’ll find him. Whatever money we’re given I’ll take to him, my share at least. I can convince him to leave you all alone, I know I can.”

“We have everything to fear.” Jaida tried one last appeal. “Aren’t you listening to anything he says? You are free, if that’s what you want. Free to live here and learn. He won’t change his mind. Take what he offers you.”

“Do you think he got so rich giving slaves away?” Oseye turned her anger on Jaida. “Why? What does he gain from this? It’s a trick of some kind, Jaida. Somehow he is planning to gain from this, and we’ll carry that cost. No. We have to leave and leave now. And if he will kill Ishaq, so much the better.”

Juba’s face had pulled up into a mask of painful hauteur. “Girls,” he said airily. “He has nothing to gain. Aquila doesn’t trade slaves, or keep them or use them. If he says you have your freedom, he means it.” He dropped his feet to the floor and prepared to stand as footsteps approached from the atrium. “Drusus is a different matter. If you

intend to insult Aquila in his presence, then you take an awful risk with your own lives.”

Drusus stepped into the study ahead of Seth and moved immediately to embrace his old business partner, while a member of Juba’s small army discreetly laid two heavy leather satchels by the door. Seth stood in patient deference, wiping a hand over the nape of his neck where the sweats of irritation had gathered, while the older men exchanged pleasantries. When the way was cleared and a cool goblet had been set at Drusus’ elbow, he moved back to the couch behind his desk and searched the ladies’ faces for signs of resolve.

There were tensions still apparent and he turned from the fiery glare of the tall African woman to the shy, more deferential aspect of his oracle.

“Drusus has your papers,” he announced, and Drusus lifted his own leather satchel to his lap. From it he drew a number of rolls, some bound singly, others rolled together in a sheaf.

“Identity documents and your histories. Letters of intent for manumission.” Dec smiled. “Everything Babu held of your lives and origins and everything he has done for you, or to you, since your purchase. Also, gold.” He pointed to the separate bags, and then turned to the girls. “You are Oseye? I understand there is some dissent.”

“Not dissent,” Oseye said carefully, eyeing Juba. “Only the desire to have our freedom and to leave. Today.”

“No support. No protection. Only gold,” Seth added. “I calculate that at about four hundred Aureus each. Double their nominal open market value.”

Drusus whistled through his teeth and small gasps went up from among the girls. Even if they had no idea how much a life could cost, four hundred gold coins was a fortune in any hand. Although his thick eyebrows danced up his forehead, Drusus made no move to contradict.

“Ladies.” Seth stared pointedly at Oseye, her sudden lack of confidence fuelling his impatience. “If you are adamant this is your choice, then it’s all but done. For now, you are my guests.”

It was an insanity. Obscene. The grin that grew on Drusus’ face was only the beginning of a boiling wash of frustration that rose up from Seth’s stomach to hunch in his shoulders. If he turned the girls out onto the street tomorrow with their hands full of gold and their heads full of air, he would be wise to send a guard in their tracks to regather the gold when they were murdered in the street.

And still Drusus grinned.

There was no need for him to speak his thoughts, Seth knew the man as well as he knew himself, and his thoughts were laughing from his eyes. The contradictions in this situation threatened to gut Seth, but he couldn’t back down now. It was the first time he’d stood forward on an issue, and one so close to his heart.

He could refuse to free them. He could hear Dec say the words.

Even now, he could reclaim his promises. A slave had no rights, no recourse or reproach. He could hold them all, to live or die at his word, certainly to be able to survive long enough to know the risks they wanted to take.

“Go.” He forced a tight smile. “Enjoy my house. It’s your first taste of freedom. There are baths, food, wine, and entertainments if you want them. If you choose to leave immediately, Juba will help you make travelling arrangements. Accept that much of our courtesy, at least, when you have your papers and your gold.”

Juba stood, not sharing Decimus’ amusement at the outcome of the meeting, but concerned by the look of stark panic that had seized the lovely faces around him. “Girls,” he said, motioning with his hand to lead them out into the hallway. “Come and let me show you around the house. Zayed here will accompany us, and he will bring

anything you ask for.”

The girls shuffled uncertainly behind the man who had been their guide from the day they had stepped from Babu’s home in Alexandria. Led, Seth thought, more by the comfort of the familiar than by any desire to explore their new world.

Dec stepped forward, dropping his satchel of documents down onto the desk. “Did that not go as you had hoped, my darling?” He grinned and Seth shook his head in irritation.

“They don’t understand, Dec. And they won’t listen.” He snatched a goblet of red wine from the tray at his side and downed it in one, reaching without pause to pour another. “And don’t you dare say *I told you so* or *don’t free them* or any of the other solutions you have bubbling around behind your eyes.”

“I wouldn’t dream of saying such a thing. Who is Ishaq, did you learn?”

Seth laughed bitterly, lifting the satchel back to his lap as he reclined onto the couch. “Ishaq is Babu’s son. They think that if they’re out there alone in *Arabia Provincia*, looking like they do, an angry heir is going to be their biggest threat. Ha!”

“You could set a guard on them in secret,” Dec offered.

“I could.” Seth rubbed at tight lines that had pulled over his eyes and lifted a rolled sheaf of papers from the satchel. “I might. It might be the only way they’ll survive. No, I have to try again to convince them to wait.” He looked up at his patron. “I think even Kartikeya had a better head for survival.”

“I’m going to eat with our private army, darling. Are you coming?”

“Soon. I’ll read through this and sign their letters. I’ll join you, and the ladies, when I’ve calmed down enough to be civil.”

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CHAPTER SIX.

The house was vast and Jaida walked in line, her hands clutching nervously at the silk of her *tunica*, her breath short and her head light. The atrium opened into two corridors, and the one they followed led down through a suite of rooms as big as any house Jaida had ever seen. The ceiling was low, the walls of heavy stone, and Juba confirmed another storey hung above their heads.

As they moved toward one of the smaller dining halls, Juba’s intention that they should eat, then bathe, then join their host for the afternoon’s entertainment seemed as sane as any other plan. Ahead, where the corridor turned and widened, they came along a breezeway, its outer wall formed from ornately cut stonework. And beyond it, a tiger stretched out sleeping in the afternoon sun.

Jaida stumbled forward, hooking her fingers through the perforated stone, gazing in awe at the spectacular beast lying two steps from where she stood. She had heard of them. In a work about the campaigns of the great Macedonian general, Alexander, she’d seen etchings copied from the days when he’d lived among them, and elephants, lions and bears. But no scratchy image, flat on vellum and smaller than her hand, could express the magnificence of the living creature.

Her sisters turned and entered the door to the small *cenarium*, and Juba came to stand beside her, sharing the view of Kartikeya’s courtyard.

“How did he come to be here?” Jaida asked.

“Oh, there are thousands of beasts brought through for the games arena. Thousands. This old boy was just lucky enough to fight an opponent who valued his

life. He's not what he was, though." Juba twisted his nose in disgust, but he remained where he stood. "It almost seemed to me," he said, leaning in toward Jaida's ear, "that you didn't agree with your sister's views on freedom."

Jaida spun to look at him, her heart racing up into her throat, unsure of herself and what she could safely say. Juba had shown nothing but consideration and concern for their needs, but his warning about insulting their host was fresh in her mind.

The girls should stay together, she knew it, but it was lunacy to think they could survive on the streets as they were. They were oracles, trained and now proven. They belonged in the temple of the goddess, for a time at least. Now it appeared that Oseye's determination to be free had decided their fates, once and for all. Unless they could be kept together, here.

"I'm not certain I do," she said.

"And what will you do about that?" he asked, trying to draw words from her mouth. When she stared in silence, unable to utter a single sound in her own defence, he sighed and said, "I probably lost you in the maze of rooms and corridors, but we've covered a wide circle." Juba moved across the hallway behind them and patted the stone of the wall. "He's right in there; you just go back up to the top and turn left. Do you think you should maybe tell him your doubts before he has all the paperwork done?"

Again the words froze in her throat, and she felt her mouth moving over silence, opening and closing but making no sound.

Juba forced a patient smile. "Go on." He nodded. "Relax with him. Have some wine. Say all you want to say. I promise he'll listen."

"Not alone," Jaida said. "We're not ever supposed to be alone with a man."

"Go on." He pressed her shoulder, turning her back up the hallway toward the light of the atrium. "The goddess will be watching over you. If she isn't, you can be a free woman tomorrow and no one will mind who you saw alone."

Seth unrolled a sheaf, scanning the opening lines of each sheet first for nationality or place of purchase. Oseye he had already identified, and two of the other girls were African by birth. One Teutonic, one Germanic Gaul, two were Greek and one, he slipped the scroll from the collection, from Armenia minor.

He skimmed the facts on offer. Green eyes, born to slavery in a POW camp on the Eastern front, bought by Babu at five years old and that made her twenty-one now. Jaida.

There followed copious notes in Babu's cramped hand: comments on her temperament, her tastes in food, her abilities as a student. She was one of the more devoted to her faith, but she had not been one of his favourites.

Seth paused to wonder why. The image of her face was easily called and he could find no fault in any part. Recalling the smoky green of her eyes surrounded by thick dark lashes, her golden skin and the soft curve of her breasts, the gentle touch of her fingers on his, he looked up from the scroll.

In his memory, those eyes were heavily doped, barely open and smiling gently into his. Where she stood at the door, even from the distance across the studio, he could see her eyes were wide, fixed upon him, and bright with what might be terror.

Jaida pulled herself straight, shoving her neck up and her chin out. If nothing else it seemed to help her breathe, but her hands trembled and her stomach seethed as she waited in the doorway for her owner to speak. Her palms were wet and itchy from clutching at the fears she carried, and she forced them too, to straighten as she rubbed one palm across the other.

"Come in." He sounded amused, surprised but almost delighted, and that made it so much easier to take a single step forward. He had put his scrolls aside and was

standing, moving past the desk toward where she stood.

"I'm sorry," she said, the sound little more than a croak forcing itself from the dry depths of her throat. She coughed. "I know you're busy, and I'm..." There was nowhere to start. "Before, when we were..." Again the words failed and she looked up from her study of her hands, searching out his face, the eyes she knew were warm and kind and hinting at a smile. "Juba said I should come and speak to you."

A light broke over his face and turned his mouth into an understanding smile. "Did he? I see. He and Dec work in tandem." He grinned. "Sit. Can I pour you some wine?"

The first time she had seen his face, he had seemed as confused or concerned about the future of her sisters as she was. And here this afternoon he'd been tense, walking on a knife-edge of anger and frustration.

Now, with a few simple words, the stresses had run out of him and he was suddenly as calm and warmly welcoming as he'd been at the temple. Without waiting for an answer he had poured a large goblet of wine and he walked it to a daybed, deep with cushions and thrown fleeces. "Please." He smiled. "Sit down."

Jaida moved on stiff knees, trying desperately to reason away the heat of blood that rushed up under her skin. It was wrong to be alone with a man, especially one whose features blurred the line between memory and restless dreams. She took a deep breath, holding it until it stretched the cramping from her chest and the lights of hyperventilation eased.

She had come to speak for her sisters, and the goddess was with her now. She need only keep her mind clear and her thoughts from the clean smell of sandalwood that filled the room around her. But her heart raced and warmth churned in her belly as the smell woke images that lingered just behind reason.

When she sat, the uneven cushions seemed to jostle and unbalance her, leaving her to perch forward on the edge of the couch, or to lounge back into their softness, like a queen upon the Nile. She perched.

As he passed the goblet into her hand he sat, mirroring her position and smiling, his face close, his knee warm where it touched hers. She had never been so close to any man and her skin leapt up to every breeze and movement of the air. Her nerves hummed and the warmth of his touch seeped back along her thigh as she tried to find anything to study but his eyes.

"What did Juba suggest you speak about?" he asked. A grin moved one side of his mouth so a dimple formed in his cheek, and she found a timid smile reaching her own lips.

Holding the glass in both hands she raised the wine and sipped, then daring the dark depths of his eyes, she gathered confidence from his mood, faced him squarely and said, "Not all of us want to leave."

"No." He smiled. "In what capacity were you planning to stay? Did you discuss that with Juba?"

His attitude was confusing, and Jaida took another sip of sweet wine, carefully recalling her conversation with Juba in case she'd missed some secret intention in his words. "Capacity? No. He only said I should speak to you before you have the paperwork finalized."

He nodded knowingly, too knowingly, as though he and Juba shared a language that could be heard in silence and intimation, then turned his attention down. He drew one of her hands from the wine glass and stroked the back of his cool fingers down the inside of her wrist. The touch was lightning, contracting her shoulder and elbow so suddenly, she jerked her hand up hard against her chest. Her eyes flew wide and her breath caught. The ghost of the sensation lived on in the skin, and she rubbed the soft

cream flesh down her chest like she was pushing out a stain.

He took his hands back, frowning.

"Priestess," she said, drawing her leg away from his; but his touch was impressed on her knee, raising gooseflesh on her soft inner thigh. Forcing the importance of this one chance to speak over the fears and feeling of exposure, she clamped her legs together and said, "We want to stay in service to the goddess."

Shock took the smile and the colour from his cheeks, and he sat back. "No you don't."

"We do. At least, I can speak for myself, and yes, I do." His sudden withdrawal left a void and Jaida took the opportunity to move forward with her case. "And the others, Oseye and Eshe, Zaliki and Shemei, you have to convince them they're wrong. I've tried. They won't listen to me."

She put the glass of wine to one side, her trembling hand stretching out to touch his forearm, as though she could command his attention and compel him to see her need, if she could only keep him close enough. "Tell them again. Explain to them that we can't survive in a world where we are no more than children. Tell them again what Decimus Asinius said about the priesthood manipulating free women in the temple. The rituals are all we know. The money can't last forever and then we will have to work. This service is the only work we know."

"You can learn another life," he answered flatly. "I told you, there's a house here, finer than this one, where you can live like royalty while you learn about the world outside your door."

"I am a priestess of Isis," she said. "We are her oracles. This is the service we were born to." It was service that forbade such intimacy, and she drew her hand away. A service where privilege and comfort might be expected, but in the safety of the temple, not in the fine home of a man.

"You were born to freedom," he said, his patience wearing thin. He stood abruptly and strode across the room. "That freedom was stolen from you and I want to give it back. Take this gift. Take it, it's your birthright."

"The goddess has chosen us." Jaida felt the warmth of pride, if not certainty, welling in her chest. And gratitude to a stranger who would offer so much, but who couldn't understand. "I did have doubts, but the ceremony proved it. This is where I belong. It may be where my sisters belong, too. But what matters now is that you cannot let them leave here as they choose."

"I should force them? Keep them as slaves?"

"We've never known any different. What's a few more days to let them hear reason?"

"Everything." He walked closer, a mantle of forced calm resting uneasily over anger or resentment. "Not just for them. Not just for you. It does something to the spirit of a man when he owns another person. He spends his days, forever after, trying to repay a debt that he can't quite define."

"And if they perish?" she asked, turning in her seat to follow his heavy tread as he strode between couches. "What sort of debt do you accrue if you let them die for their ignorance?"

"They know as much as you do, they're no more or less ignorant than you. And there are things I can do." He stopped the circuit, wiped a hand down over his mouth and stood staring into the future. "I can send some sort of security with them. Not much, maybe, but someone who can watch their backs."

"The goddess showed us the danger. Ishaq will be able to pick them off one by one. Beginning with Zaliki. She intends to go straight to him."

His unexpected laugh broke the tension in the air, and Jaida turned away, found her wine and reached a shaky hand to lift it. It wasn't levity she heard when he said, "I don't understand your certainty that this man is the biggest threat you all face. In Petra we're lucky. It's a merchant city and a mausoleum. Very few people live here who are not wealthy enough to live well and keep their staff in comfort. The rest are already dead.

"But away from here? Everywhere, people kick or they are kicked. They take or they have taken from them. You all fear Ishaq, but every single face you see is a threat you haven't weighed."

"Ishaq is the threat," she asserted. "Great enough for the goddess herself to tell us all. But if you see these other dangers everywhere around, all the more reason you should use your power to keep my sisters here where they are safe."

"The goddess told you nothing you didn't already know for yourselves. You knew this man would be angry. As for the others..." He paused and blew a hard breath, letting go of annoyances, and walked slowly back to sit beside her on the deep couch. "I can talk to them. No more. I won't force them. And I won't keep them as slaves. Tonight when they have the gold, I will give them their freedom, here or away. Each girl has to choose her own path."

Her fists clenched, digging nails deep into the skin of her palm and her mouth set in a grim line, but she'd argued as well as she could. Jaida searched his face for a hope he'd change his mind, but she found none.

A fine sheen of sweat damped his hairline, and the warm smell of perfumed oil rose all around him like a warning. She pulled her face down and kept herself from studying the smooth lines of his cheek and jaw. When he sat so close, when she could see every crease on his fingers, every silky hair on the back of his hand, and she could catch the red and blue lights glinting from the gems in rings he wore, a yearning rose into her chest and rushed her breathing.

The double bars of gold in his earlobe caught the light, calling her focus slowly upward, and she felt the dark intensity of his gaze on her cheeks. Gently he took her hand, raising it to soft lips, and pressed the warmth of his mouth against the back of her fingers.

"Each of you should taste the freedom you were born to, Jaida," he said. "Don't throw away a gift you've never opened."

Zayed stepped into the room, and would have stepped back but the movement broke Seth's spell of fascination with the goddess at his fingertips.

"Zayed, food, thank you. You haven't had time to eat, priestess," he said.

"No." She could barely form the word, and she slipped her trembling fingers from his and pulled her hands together. Her pupils had grown wide and dark, and her hard breath flared in her nostrils. "I have to go. I should go back to the *cenarium* with my sisters. I want to tell them what you've said."

All the while she spoke, she kept her eyes averted and tremors ran along the moist line of her lips. Zayed placed an ornate tray, heavy with spiced fowl and candied fruit onto the wide arm of the couch they shared.

"You've just argued that I should hold you all in bondage," Seth answered. These girls had no concept of what it was to live in slavery, to have their flesh, their time, and their very thoughts owned by another. If they had lived as prisoners of their patron's fantastic vision of the future, it had been a prison with soft bars and warm beds. "Now you think you'll tell me where you have to go and what you have to do? That's for me to say."

"I want to stay in service to the goddess. That service forbids me to be in the company of any man, alone."

"Until now." He smiled some reassurance as the recognition of her vulnerability broke over her face, but he didn't relent. "Babu had a dream for you, and it drove him to keep you safe from the worst of the world. But once you are out there, even as an oracle with all the pomp that goes with it, your status is still that of a slave."

She raised her eyes to meet his, and her moist lips parted over unasked questions.

"You can't look directly at a free man." He reached and touched her lightly on the forehead, tilting her head down. "You can't speak unless you're told to." The tip of his finger brushed the softness of her lip. "You can't move or stay or go without someone's leave to do it. You don't have an opinion. You don't have any rights, no call on justice or protection. Don't be angry or curious or hopeful. Be afraid."

Fear rushed all over her skin, he could see it in the tremble of her lips and the fractured twitching of her brow. "You have no right to save or protect yourself from violence. You can't fight back. Any free man, not only me, can do as he wants with you. Your body is no longer yours."

She shook her head in denial, the movement so sharp and rapid it might have been the quivering of distress. "But, you said we would be safe in the temple."

"No. Drusus said you would have a guard, and the priesthood would be reluctant to allow harm to come to you if they had to repay your value to an owner." Tensions pulled hard at the skin of his brow and he sat back from the debate. The future for these women, being free but alone and unprotected would amount to much the same story.

"We aren't safe to leave as free women. Now you tell me we would not be safe as slaves, even in the temple as proven oracles. Where are we safe? What can we do?"

Seth laughed abruptly and threw his hands up. Lifting the tray of food to the space between them, he broke a piece of game fowl free. "I thought I had offered you all the best solution. Eat." He nudged the tray closer.

"No." She stood, and pressed her creased tunic down the smooth lines of her body. The light fabric clung against her thighs and its gathers hugged in close around the curve of her breasts, the small swell of her nipples testament to her awareness of his gaze. "I'll eat with my sisters as the goddess decrees. If we flee, you say we face certain death. If we stay here as your guests, we have freedom, so long as we live hidden under your protection. For how long? Months? Years? And will you hunt down Ishaq? When he's dead you say the dangers are no less. How long will we live then as your prisoners?"

She moved away, adjusting the drape of her *palla* over her shoulders and down to cover her chest. "I will do as the goddess decrees. At least that's a life I know. I'll put my trust in her. She's proven that we are chosen."

Proven? Seth smiled, but it didn't wipe the stresses from around his mouth. He dragged a wad of meat through fragrant sauce. "All right. As you wish. I'll join you all soon. In fact, I have two parties at the house today. We should merge the two and give you all that taste of freedom I promised."

"As you wish," she echoed coldly. Fear and uncertainty, perhaps frustration at what seemed impossible problems, shone from her face and she turned away, moving stiffly toward the door. As she left, she turned the misted green of her eyes to him and said, "What do you know of slavery?"

Outside, Jaida slipped a hand against the cool stone of the corridor wall and pressed the other over her heart. The pressure there only emphasized its pounding. She had dared to challenge him, even when she knew he held her future in his hand. But his words had hurt. For him to peer from his life of privilege, to watch like the eagle from his home in the heights and judge her suffering as nothing, hurt like the burn of a blade.

He could not judge them. If he'd lived as a child, staring through barred windows

at a world that passed them by while they studied their devotions, he would know what it was to be owned. To wake and eat and sleep when they were told. To wear what they were given, to go where and when they were ordered. To live a lifetime in isolation. To know there was a life outside their window they could never hope to live. She knew what it was to be a slave. To be owned. To live without rights.

So many years of suffering, but they had survived. Everything they'd endured had finally borne fruit and he wanted to make it nothing, to dismiss it as a madman's dream. He had no right to call their pain trifling.

And his touch stayed on her skin. It burned on her brow like a flaring coal, hot on the lips she licked and bit, and on her fingers, even as she tried to rub the marks away. Tears rushed up and she pushed those too, away.

There was nowhere safe to turn. Every option she half considered blared at her with threats she couldn't hope to meet. For the first time she began to understand Oseye's frantic urge to run. Fears rose up so dense and dark at their backs, it seemed the only hope was a nightmare dash, running screaming into the unknown, to escape from dangers none of them could see. Dangers everywhere, just as the goddess had said. Dangers in the shadows.

Dragging desperate sobs back down into her chest and wiping angrily at tears that tried to pool, Jaida made herself move quickly down the corridor toward the carved stone breezeway and the dining hall beyond. Every scuffed footstep sounded in the wide hallway, echoing a life spent inside stone walls. Echoing the known.

There was still a sense of safety and the familiar in the rituals of her service, and that was all she had to cling to in this time of shifting sand and shadow.

At the breezeway, the tiger pressed his length along the cut stone, dragging his gold and black fur across the harsh edges of the wall, scratching at small irritations. "Why were you never given your freedom, old tiger?" she asked him. "Do you prefer your pool here, or your jungles in faraway lands?"

Kartikeya paid no heed to the girl or her questions. Turning back into the warming sunshine, he lifted his tail and sprayed a jet of musty urine at the wall near where she stood. Jaida jumped back, catching at the hem of her *tunica* and dodging overspray. She pulled a deep breath reluctantly back to clear her head, and turned toward the *cenarium* to make what arguments she could for her sisters.

Seth stared at the document he held, but its characters were no more than blurred lines. He held her past in his fingers, each milestone carefully filed into her record, detailing her faith, her intelligence, her tenacity. But it was what was not written on the page that he noticed. Whole species of experience from any normal life were missing from the story.

His own life was crowded full of sights he'd not have chosen to witness, and memories too painful to recall, but nowhere in the shades of grey between extremes were there any of the experiences Jaida had been denied.

Babu's record shared no glimpses of her hopes or fears. Nowhere in the cramped text were retellings of her failures or her overcoming. Nowhere was there evidence of the chances she had taken, or the growth that came from stepping out into the unknown. Every day was set in routine, food was measured, exercise and study and devotion, but nowhere was there joy or the excitement of new social experiences.

He flicked another scroll from the sheaf and forced his attention onto the words that crawled over the parchment. It took no more than a moment to find the same truths

unwritten on this sheet, or the next or the next. If Seth had seen too much of what mankind was capable of, these women had not seen enough. They were naive beyond belief.

They were not even children, granted the freedom to feel out the dangers of the world from the safety of their mother's skirts. They were adults, intelligent, articulate and, it seemed, opinionated, but without the least notion of what lay outside their walls. They knew more of the gods than they did of their fellow mortals, and that imbalance left them prey to a belief in a kind of divine intervention that he himself had never witnessed.

Never once in his history of horror and violence had any god petitioned by the terrified, the dying or the consumed, answered with a saving grace. He had no cause to believe Jaida's goddess would be an exception.

Well, the outside world had its lures as well as its terrors. If the girls had seen nothing of the threats, then neither had they seen anything of the attractions and temptations. And those were things Decimus held in abundance.

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CHAPTER SEVEN.

Rich food had gone some way to fill the clawing emptiness that plagued Jaida, and the cooling waters of their host's baths had soothed the anxious sweat and the afternoon's heat from her skin. The debate over their luncheon was heated, but there was no movement on either side. None of the girls had been willing to give ground, and Jaida frowned as she followed their lines down shaded colonnades past the walls of the tiger's courtyard and into another ward of the sprawling residence.

Somewhere ahead, at the end of a curved and rising walkway, raucous male laughter rolled under the rapid pulse of drums, strings and reeds. The music itself was as threatening as the overt machismo, its primitive rhythm rushing in her blood and tingling in her fingertips, a heady mix of terror and exhilaration. So, this was the first taste of the freedom she was born to?

She had no memory of freedom, only flashes of the lives others lived and she had longed for. Now, with that life held out to her in strong gentle hands, it was her past that flashed before her. The warmth and safety of familiarity warred with the pure rush of adrenaline, responding heatedly to all the unfurling day revealed.

Again loud calls erupted over the beat of the music, and, although the language obscured the joke, peals of laughter followed. Even Oseye's confident stride was broken. Eshe crowded up against her back, one hand gripping her sister's hand, the other caught in the fabric of her *tunica*. Juba smiled indulgently and stepped to the side of the walkway, gently encouraging the women to pass him through the door.

This was not a brightly decorated luncheon hall as had been set for their meal.

Lying as it did along the low slopes of a cliff-face, cut back into the stone, the *triclinium* opened before them: from the cool late-afternoon shadows of the path they'd followed, to a wide, sunlit banquet hall. Without her notice, Jaida and her sisters had passed from the hand-hewn stone blocks of the main house, into a vast room carved from the gutrock of the valley wall itself.

The outside wall was no more than a rock-carved balustrade, edging the full-length patio, and through it the sun streamed, thick and golden. The warmth of the air washed against the girls where they stood in the cool grey entrance, carrying sweet smoke from

hookas and the perfume of strewn blossoms.

Tables and trestles, heavily laden with spiced food, rich lavers and ewers of wine, were tended by armies of scantily clad servants. In two separate alcoves far across the space, musicians persevered over the uproar of the reclining guests. The noise and smells and chaos of the scene crashed about in Jaida's chest like nervous laughter. Her eyes widened in an attempt to take in every nuance and her mouth fell open in growing astonishment. Stumbling blindly as Juba encouraged them forward, she scanned the mural covered walls, the heavy rugs and tapestries and the smoke screened shine of oiled skin and muscle.

The voice at her ear startled her from her raptures and she turned, the awed smile frozen on her mouth. "Don't be concerned for your safety, here," Juba assured her. "My boys don't represent any harm to you or any of your sisters, as you can see."

Jaida could see nothing that indicated either threats or reassurance in the relaxed bonhomie of the off-duty guards. She'd noticed little more than a passing interest from any of them. Only Decimus Asinius Drusus, smiling warmly still, had watched them with unreserved welcome as they made their way tentatively into the party.

Juba had taken Ianthe's arm, linking his through hers proprietarily, slowly shepherding Jaida and her sister forward toward an open couch.

"You've eaten," he said, slipping his arm free as the girls sat together. "That's probably just as well. Most of the snacks and tidbits here are not what they seem."

Jaida turned in confusion, eyeing the contents of a tray carried past by a servant. The girl's hair had been cropped short against her skull, and a thick chain of gold hung loosely at her bare brown hips; it was all she wore.

"And the servants?" Jaida asked. "Are they all they seem?"

Juba widened his eyes and stepped back, raising a questioning hand.

"Are these slaves?"

"Until recently. Almost as recently as your sisters, but yes; until they came to belong to Sethos they were slaves." Some of the kindness had slipped from his tone as he added, "His taste doesn't usually run to the exotic. These people are on loan tonight from Drusus' household."

A prettily androgynous youth, his eyes kohled and his bare chest gilded, leaned to offer the sisters chalices brimming with honeyed wine. Long hair curled down over his shoulders, his soft dark eyes fixed on hers as he smiled a warm invitation. Jaida lifted the glass away too quickly, spilling blood-dark wine over her fingers, and she rushed to face Ianthe.

The waiter had turned his attention there as well, and Ianthe's hand trembled as she reached for her wine. Her graceful throat worked nervously, and her eyes were dark and heavy with recognition. Slowly she brought the glass to her dry lips, and sipped. The youth remained, the solicitous smile growing stronger as he straightened, slouching his weight forward onto one leg so the carelessly tied linen cloth at his hips thrust nearer.

"Ianthe!" Jaida hissed.

Juba stepped to the far side of the *lectus* and sat, flicking a hand to dismiss the lad. "Relax, ladies. Lie back here and enjoy the afternoon." His smile was tight as the girls stretched stiffly across the couch. "I told you, you have nothing to fear in this house, today."

Jaida looked over the noisy gathering, and through the veils of smoke to where her sisters were taking up couches. There was harm here. If not in carefully planned ambush, then openly on offer. Not far to her right, Drusus looked up from his conversation and nodded, smiling as if to acknowledge her suspicions. How had Sethos put it? Juba and Drusus worked in tandem? And him with them, to offer a taste of the

freedom he wanted her to choose.

"And where is the master of the house?" She scanned the crowd, her voice lending her more confidence than she felt. "Has he left his exotic beauties to do his will even in his absence?"

Juba's reply was less gentle still, and Jaida felt the restless worms of fear climbing up inside her spine. "Freedom is a valuable gift," he said. "One rarely offered. I think most of the staff here would do anything he asked of them, some from gratitude and others from devotion."

"Not so valuable if the gift means trading one bondage for another." Ianthe turned cold eyes up to their guide. If she was tempted by the kind of freedom Sethos offered, it was a temptation she remained willing to forgo. For now, at least.

But there was little left of the charming and placatory Juba they had come to know. All the warmth and matronly generosity had soured into stiff and narrow eyed antipathy. "I have suggested it is unwise to insult your host. Freedom is freedom. Survival is another matter entirely. You cannot judge the choices these people have made until you've begun to understand just how much you do not know."

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, huffed irritably and turned back with a more conciliatory tone. "This is a harsh world and experience is a cruel teacher. If you won't listen..."

"Juba." The word stopped his oration. "You're browbeating the wrong guests, my friend."

A jolt of surprise hiccupped in Jaida's throat as she twisted to see her master standing at her feet. Involuntary contractions drew her knees up, pulling her sandaled feet onto the couch and away from his thigh. He had remade himself.

He was no longer the richly robed Bedouin, darling of the local Nabataean rulers. He presented himself now as a reminder to the girls of his true power and influence, as *gens togata*. A toga fell gracefully over his wide shoulders, the narrow stripe of equestrian class vivid purple against the snowy white cloth. This was the dress of a man whose influence stretched far beyond the borders of Arabia, of Egypt and Cyrenaica. His blood, his family name, she tore her glance across to where Drusus lay, was the blood of the Roman Empire.

When he spoke again, he'd moved, and her attention was drawn to him as a moth to the burn of a flame. Her heart had climbed to the base of her throat and it laboured there, every beat throbbing heat up into her cheeks, and rushing trembling terrors through her flesh.

Seth fixed Jaida in the dark heat of his stare. "This priestess alone, or perhaps with her sister here," although he mentioned Ianthe, his eyes did not leave hers, "has elected to stay in Petra. It's only my hospitality she is reluctant to accept. She considers slavery, for herself and her sisters, a lesser evil than any moral obligation to me."

Anger and fear churned into a sickening wash in Jaida's stomach, and the tears that had been building since the day they left Alexandria, burned in her eyes. If his intention was to ridicule her for her choices when the lives of everyone she held dear were at stake, she had nothing to say to him. There was nothing she could say.

At the far end of the wide room, musicians went again to war with the loud rabble and she clawed her study up through the solid shafts of misty sunlight. The wine was sweet, and the air around her sweeter with smoke, and she sipped and sipped again, hearing his words without wanting too.

"It's her sisters down there," she sensed the movement of his hand, "who need to hear what we've been trying to tell them. Now's your chance. While they're relaxed, while they have some insight into the terrible drudgery of the life we've offered them,

go and convince them to take the middle road.”

“You find this situation so amusing?” Ianthe scrunched cushions under her chest and arm, raising her shoulders higher in a futile attempt to level the imbalance and feel less vulnerable.

Juba groaned and walked away, while Seth sat carefully onto the end of their couch, and rolled to stretch his full length across it. Heat rode out from his skin, washing over Jaida’s side and down along her leg. Resting on his left elbow, his free hand brushed her ribs with ice and fire as he gathered cushions and bolsters comfortably under his chest.

“Amusing? No. Tragic. Terrible beyond words.”

The couches here, like most, were made for three to comfortably recline. But stuck between Ianthe and this man, Jaida felt the space contracting, crushing air from her and stifling her with waves of heat and perfume. To raise her face meant bringing her eyes up to his; to speak meant her breath would break over his lips and his on hers. Even to breathe meant filling her cramping lungs with the smooth perfume of essential oils that fluttered in her chest like panic.

“I don’t see tears.” Ianthe was not so moved by his immediacy. The same frustrations Jaida felt were caught up in her tight fist, and behind the heat of anger the same tears threatened. “Do you think we haven’t agonized over the choices we have?”

“Tears would be wasted,” he answered. “I only laugh because I don’t know what words there are to convince you. You all need to see, you need to experience the world you’re agonizing over, and none of you will stand still long enough to let me show it to you.”

“And so we’re here this afternoon. This is a display for our benefit?” Ianthe spoke for both of them, while Jaida stilled the trembling of her wineglass against her lip, and stared unseeing into the colour and movement around her. “Four hundred gold coins won’t buy this life for long. This is nothing but a temptation to move from the safety of the temple. You think you are better able to protect us than our goddess.”

Seth laughed, a short sound full of condescension. “I know I am.”

Jaida shook her head in silent denial. Hot tears rose again, and her chin twitched as she washed away a lump of bitterness. The goddess was their only hope. She had given them her blessing, given them her vision, and only fear and foolishness could drive the girls away from her protection. But foolishness would do just that, and she was powerless to stop them.

Servants knelt with brimming trays and Jaida turned her face away from the choice, as others rushed to light the thousand glittering wicks planted in urns of foliage that ringed the room. From where she lay, she watched the shadows spread, filling up the hall as the sun dropped steadily below the cliff-tops of their valley, sliding the vast banquet hall into premature twilight.

When their glances met, Ianthe’s eyes had cooled and focused in on their shared sadness, and Jaida reached to take her hand. Faith was faith, and their arguments were better kept for their sisters. If there was time to convince them all they should stay together in her service, it was time wasted in arguments with a man who did not understand.

He picked a wedge of candied fruit from the nearest platter, and Jaida asked without turning, “What’s wrong with the food?”

“Wrong?”

“Juba said the food was not what it seemed.”

He nodded. “Most of the baking has hashish in it somewhere. The biscuits there, the pastries.” He lifted the frame of a tiny bird. “In this. In some of the sauces.”

“What is it?” Her voice was not strong, and Jaida cleared her throat, her gaze fixed on his hands.

“A secret. One of many that we keep for our Nabataean friends.” He raised a small jelly to his mouth and Jaida almost followed it with her eyes. “It’s the resin from an herb they import. It’s calming. You can smell it in the smoke from the hookas.”

“It’s in the temple incense, too.” She raised her face and sniffed the air again, tasting the familiar smoke and the heart stopping dangers of sandalwood.

“It *is* the temple incense,” he said. “But you knew that.”

She turned her face up to his, her reaction too swift to check. “No.”

“You’ve used it before; you know what it does? And opium?”

“No.” She should have turned her face down, but his eyes held hers and they were soft and welcoming. His cheeks were smooth, his lips close and smiling half in disbelief. A dimple tried to form, and small muscles moved the soft skin near his ear. “Only during the reading we did for you. That was the first time I ever smelled that incense.” Gold glinted on his earlobe, and spots of firelight caught in his eyes.

The smile dropped out of his features and a mix of sadness and concern took its place. He studied her face, his gaze intently focused on her, and she could not pull her eyes away. He was so near. The warmth of his body seemed to wrap around her and draw her closer, and fear that only began with his unspoken concerns bloomed into her chest. He didn’t need to speak, the soft wash of his breath moved silently over her lips like a touch.

“I shouldn’t be here,” she managed, but it was a whisper. “None of us. We should go back to the manse.”

He nodded. “Soon. I promised you I would speak to your sisters again. I will.”

A gong sounded, sharp in her ears, and she jumped. The noise of the surrounding revellers was swallowed by the rapid pounding beat of drums. Tympanies crashed and chains of bells rang out like crystal chimes on every step, as dancers filed in loud procession from a preparation room out into the open centre of the hall.

There was no hope now that the music might be drowned by rowdy guests. The crowd was silent and the rhythm echoed from the smooth stone walls. The cries of the dancers, timed to crash with every heavy beat, filled the hall. Against the far wall, braziers were set alight, and their rising flames threw the dozen dancers into sharp relief. Jewels glittered at their throats, their painted skin shone in opalescent smears, and bells and beads sparkled in the reams of sheer silk they spun about themselves.

With every step, between the clash of drums and soulful cries, the dancers spun and wove their sinuous gyrations closer. Jaida drew her arms in close to her body and let herself sink down into her cushions. The beat was irresistible and the movement of the dance hypnotic, drawing her out of her private apprehension while she watched the dancers spin across the floor. Every graceful dip and turn extended into filmy arcs as their veils fluttered out and dragged back, sweeping over their faces and bodies.

They were naked, male and female, but for tiny beaded fringes strung about their hips. The music rose tortuously, twisting through air grown solid with the misty coils of smoke. The dancers rode on waves of sound that ebbed and flowed, moving them against each other in simulated couplings. Mouths and fingers traced circuitous paths over bare breasts and naked chests; couples became trios only to suck apart again and reform on the surge of the music.

Jaida’s heartbeat rose in racking time to the beat of the drum, and her shallow breath stuttered and cramped from her lips. A pulse was throbbing hot and wet in her groin and her hand had frozen, the soothing wine held inches from her open mouth. She was shocked, and that shock rippled from her burning core out to her skin, lifting

steaming rashes on her chest and throat.

Her fixed stare fastened on the nearest dancer, a woman, the silk she'd carried draping back to veil her face and shoulders. That was her only claim to modesty.

Arching back, she held her hands high, picking notes from the smoky air as the soft curves of her belly and hips rolled and hollowed only a few feet from where they lay. Her beaded fringe flicked and fell with each convulsion, and fellow dancers knelt beside her, their faces veiled, their hands slipping over the flesh of her thighs and stomach.

Jaida ached to look away, but let her fevered stare follow the sliding hands. The pounding rhythms mesmerized her, the simulated sex acts, here so close and loud and explicit, set fires raging over her skin. Her breath was ragged, and her pelvis rocked imperceptibly with the beat, in silent affinity with the dancers. Years of desire flooded up from deep inside and the longings she'd denied erupted in muscle and bone with the heat and weight of liquid lead.

Seth had no interest in the dance.

The beat was loud enough to echo in his chest, and his heartbeat raced as he studied the bloom of pleasure in Jaida's face. Her pale eyes had darkened, the pupils wide with aphrodisia, the lids heavy; her mouth was open, the rough pant of her breathing drying her lips. She swallowed convulsively, her tongue sliding out to wet them, so a shimmer of moisture clung to the soft plum curves. Desire rippled through him, firming in his flesh at the tiny movement. She was exquisite.

He watched her. Close. The heat growing in her body was a wash of sensual longing that skimmed his skin. The hand at his hip flexed and clenched, longing to move over her body, to raise her face to his and to drink in the heat of her breath on a kiss. He yearned to have the dark passion in her eyes fixed on his, to feel her softness and to watch desire rise in her as she responded to his touch.

Her focus shifted sharply, and he followed her eyes to another febrile mélange. There, the dancers had configured their group differently. The principal was male, and the dance had moved a step beyond stylized eroticism. Secondary dancers pumped against each other, hips grinding to the rising beat, while they spun to the centre, turn about, to suck and stroke his very real and impressive erection.

Seth skipped his attention back to the oracle beside him, noting the shake in the hand that held her goblet of wine and the painful rasp in her breath.

He leaned closer, his lips drawn to the soft golden skin of her cheek, and whispered against her ear. "You're enjoying the dance?" Her scent was warm and clenched his gut in a tight spasm of pleasure, as she jumped away, shoving herself back from him in fright.

"No," she said. "No." She fumbled gracelessly, her hands tangling in soft cushions as she tried to push herself to her feet. Panic glittered in her eyes and she glared at him like he was some monstrous evil bound in flesh.

"Jaida," he called, rolling to his feet as she stood and backed away from the couch. Beside her Ianthe wiped spilled wine from her arms, as she too struggled to stand and stop her sister's retreat.

He tried again to calm her terror. "Jaida. Stop." But she'd turned into the anteroom, and was running down along the dim hallway and away from the noise of the dance.

Juba appeared at his side. "I can send a boy after her."

"No," Seth had already moved to the doorframe and paused only a moment. He raised a hand to hold Ianthe back as she moved to pass him. "Stay with the priestess, here. I'll find her."

Her footsteps echoed in the cool passages ahead, and servants had lit torches, their

light marking the broad arc back to the rear of the main house. He didn't want to call again. If it was him she was running from, better he was silent and let her slow to a walk, than have her run blindly through the maze of rooms. He could still hear her moving and he lightened his own tread, as a hunter might, and that image rushed a new wave of heat up under his skin.

Jaida jogged uncertainly, forcing her weak knees to move her through the blue shadows of unfamiliar rooms. She'd turned aside at some point; the sparsely lit corridor she'd followed was now somewhere to her right, and panic and frustration rose to tighten in her throat.

It could not be too hard.

Common sense told her that she'd entered a suite, probably a guest wing. The furnishings were rich and comfortable, but did not look much used. The lay-out of rooms would surely be the same sensible order as in other homes, with small rooms and utilities running off each main space. If she retraced her steps, she would find the atrium skylight, and from there, the main door and the corridor beyond.

But she wanted to drop to the floor. Or fall into one of the massive draped beds she had passed. Her legs were weak with fear, and the restless burn of woken desire still throbbed in her belly and thighs. She groaned as memories of the dance flashed behind her closed eyelids and left the heat of passion beating in her crotch.

Her mouth was parched and she felt vaguely dizzy. She wiped a shaky hand over her eyes, and dragged it down her mouth and chin. She couldn't stop. She needed to take herself out of this house and away from the temptations here. She needed to be back in the stark greasy air of the manse where she was safe.

So. If she turned right... she walked the length of the small dark room. Then right again...

A footfall stopped her and shocked a small sound from her throat. Her follower had heard her, he was silent too.

Jaida waited, the only sound her own breath dragging on the air and the distant thump of drums. A wisp of cold ran up her spine, lifting the fine hairs on her neck like the tickle of a feather. It would be a servant, sent to find her and return her to the party. But why then didn't he call?

She took two hesitant steps, and held her breath as she peered around another jamb into the space beyond. The air was brighter there. Her follower had a torch or lamp and its light spilled from the next room. Or was that the corridor she'd been seeking?

She looked up, searching the ceiling above for the open sky of the *compluvium*. Nowhere on the floor nearby was there any pond or depression for drainage.

The light was still, the next room silent, and she moved slowly toward the door. No servant sent on an errand would care for games like this. Holding the jamb in nervous fingers, she leaned to peer into the lit room. A torch like those that lit the corridor, rested in a wall sconce, throwing light into what was plainly the atrium she'd been searching for. Gaudy mosaics stained the floor and frescoes leapt from the plastered walls, but nobody stood by the flame.

Jaida moved another step forward, her heart thumping in her chest and fear beading in itchy droplets in her scalp.

She smelled him before the movement at her side squeezed a frightened sob from her mouth, and she spun to face him. Shadows covered all but the ghost of stark white fabric, and only when he moved did the torchlight find a touch of gold on his fingers and ear.

"Once again," he said, a teasing smile evident in the words. "It would have been so much easier if you'd just held still and listened."

“Don’t touch me,” Jaida whispered, breathing in the warm scent of his skin and holding it to keep her breath from sawing in her ears.

Seth stepped closer, but his arms stayed loosely folded over his chest. “Touch you?” Soft light slid over the smooth planes of his face, and the darkness in his eyes held both threats and promises that made her step back. “I’m assuming you don’t want to stay here. I can take you back to the study. Your papers and your money are waiting for you there.”

He stepped forward again and Jaida gasped as the cold stone of the doorway pressed into her hip. “I don’t want them,” she said. “I told you that. I want you to hold the offer of freedom until I can make my sisters see sense.”

“Make up your mind, priestess.” The words were a low murmur that clutched at her heart. “Either you accept your freedom and the rights that go with it, now, or you avert your eyes, close your mouth and do exactly as I say.”

Jaida’s eyes fell to the floor with a jolt of mortification. The rhythms of the dance still pounded in her chest, and in the darkness, memories of hands sliding over fevered flesh, of shining sweat and hoarse cries of pleasure, resounded. Whimpers of pure terror crowded in the back of her throat as she recognized her peril.

Survival rushed adrenaline through weak legs and into fists that clamped the fabric of her skirt. “Do you think of nothing but sex?” She could not bring herself to face him, but she made her stand as bravely as her flesh allowed. “Can’t you find someone more willing at the orgy upstairs?”

His laughter broke over her jagged nerves and snatched another gasp from her lips. It grew from chuckles into rounded peals that echoed in the empty darkness of the room. Jaida chewed the soft skin inside her lip, confusion churning terror into anger as she waited.

At last he said, “After you,” and held a hand open to the atrium beyond.

She walked half turned toward him, fearful of turning her back.

“Pick up the torch,” he said. “Take a closer look at the murals.”

Fearfully Jaida did as she was told, moving first to lift the short cone of the torch from its bracket, then stepping closer to the nearest wall.

A couple lay in foliage, their eyes half closed, unaware of those who stood by flickering light to see. Her flesh was ghostly white, his darker, golden, and she’d turned her face back to his, where he lay behind her. Her arm was raised above her head; her hand curved back to touch his cheek as his lips settled onto her shoulder. His hands were large, his fingers long and dark against her paleness, and with one he cupped a rounded breast, the other slid low onto her naked belly.

The work was masterful, and Jaida felt the same surge of damp heat that had left the subject’s eyelids so heavy with desire. She studied the contrasts, his fingers spreading over the mound of her flesh, and lines of gooseflesh rose on her own belly and breast with the phantoms of his touch.

From close behind her shoulder, a warm voice moved against her cheek and she startled, as Seth said, “And this one.”

Nursing the rising flood of dread, she stepped slowly past a small still fountain, to better see another fresco set deep in an arched recess.

Figures in tans and ochres, with wide black almond eyes and smiling mouths, formed a rough circle watched by trumpeting elephants and snarling tigers. The women, sparkling with jewelled navels, lips and noses, wrapped themselves around their menfolk, arms and legs entwined and faces radiant with bliss.

Wearing nothing more than cuffs of gold and strings of ankle bells, the ladies drew their knees and their secret flesh apart, and straddled engorged, recumbent lovers. Men

with desperately reverent eyes, reached to touch sacred mounds, their partners smiling in hooded-eyed invitation.

And Jaida knew the urge that drove them all. “Why?” she hissed, swallowing to wet her dry throat.

“Persia,” Seth answered cryptically, raising his hand to the first of the murals she’d studied. “The Hindu Kush.” The painting in front of them. He pointed to his right, near the entryway, where even from the shadows stark blue and white lines hinted at more sexual congress. “Greece.” Every wall in the room.

He lifted the torch from her fingers and moved to the fountain, carefully lifting a small figure from amid the foliage and holding it out to her. It was a marble miniature of Venus, her downcast face set in a demure smile, her fingers trailing lightly over her own bare breast. “Rome.”

Jaida pulled her eyes from the small figure, fear and hunger warring in her stomach as she watched Seth place the goddess back among her leafy screens. “The world, priestess. The entire world and everybody in it. Thinking about it, dreaming about it, pursuing it. And why not? What greater gift could the gods have given us?”

He looked up grinning. “But in the end we all keep looking for something more, don’t we?”

Turning his back, he walked the torch across to its scone and set it in place. Jaida took the moment to raise a trembling hand to her face, and to scrub the flush of heat from her lips. The doorway out and into the corridor was no more than a few steps to her left, and if she could make her legs carry her, she could be out the door and away in a moment. But her legs had frozen, her eyes fixed on the curls of hair at his nape, knowing from memory the details hidden in shadow.

When he walked toward her again, his tread was slow, measured, and she marked time by the throb of her own hot pulse.

He leaned closer, dipping his face to hers. “You want more.” Again he trailed a hand about them, indicating the paintings and all they suggested. “You want none of this; you’ve already decided.” The fingertips that moved beside her rose to rush fire over her shoulder and down the soft skin of her arm. Without intention, her back straightened, moving the tense ache of her breasts closer to the touch.

“This gift of touch, of comfort, of divine peace, you don’t want it. You want something of much greater value.” The breath of his whisper was hot and it brushed her skin, licking at the warm pool of restless longing growing in her hips.

A whine of air escaped her nose, as her chest cramped tighter with the images his words and the heavy scent of him stirred. Her eyes were closed, but she knew how close his mouth was to hers, that she only need raise her face, to lean into the touch he offered.

“So do I,” he whispered. And he stepped away.

Cool air rushed against her skin, swirling into the space he left and she looked up to see him standing by the door, an open hand ushering her into the walkway beyond.

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CHAPTER EIGHT.

A tight hot ball of tension rolled itself around Seth’s gut, pressing on his diaphragm and making breathing difficult. Every instinct he had warred against restraint, and yet he kept his hands loosely clasped behind his back and his eyes on the

floor at his feet. He could read the longing glowing in her face. In each tiny sound and movement she betrayed it, and the sight of her arousal tugged at cords that tripped his heartbeat into a rush.

He could answer her desire with his own. He could carry her past her fears of the unknown. Then she could better choose between the cold stone of the temple and the warmth of a lover's arms. But not while she clung to the certainty that she belonged in another world.

Even the whisper of her sandals on the stone floor as they walked rubbed at irritations, reminding him that nothing he could offer her tonight would keep her from leaving. As they came to the serviceway that ran toward his suite, he stopped, holding back the curtain. "Down here," he said.

Jaida stopped, staring on along the lit walkway they followed, apparently reluctant to follow him into the dark corridor.

"It's a shortcut. I'll get a torch if you like, but the rooms will be lit once we go through here."

Frowns flicked and trembled over her brow, but she moved ahead of him into the narrow chute.

"Why do you need such a huge house?" Her voice was fragile, the question asked as much to break the silence as for want of an answer.

"I don't. I don't see some of it from one year to the next. In Rome they have sprawling country villas to showcase their wealth. In Petra we have mansions."

She let those facts make their own statement, taking small uneven steps as she pressed herself as close to the stone of the wall as she could. Don't touch me, she had said. Her actions showed reluctance enough to share the same room.

The hall came to an end at his private *peristylum*, the walled garden opening from his rooms, and the warm clean evening swept against them. Water tinkled, and honeysuckle cast its fragrance onto the air as he led her over crunching gravel. He had reached the doorway in before he realized she'd stopped, and was resting against a pillar, peering between hanging blossoms at the fountain and shrubs surrounding it.

"It's at its best in moonlight," he said. The calm blue dusk demanded quiet, and he spoke softly, resting back against the wall to watch her. There was light enough to see, the sky above held onto silver streaks of fading sunlight, but in Petra's extraordinary shadows, she was no more than a silhouette reaching for a flower. "You're under my balcony. When I can't sleep, I stand up there and watch the water moving."

"I've never had a garden," she said, turning. It sounded like a challenge, not quite an accusation. At her age, neither had he. Nor a home, nor sisters. But that was as it was, and arguing the point would achieve nothing.

"There's a lot of the world that you never got to see. Now's your chance, if you'd only take it."

"Your party?"

He smiled at her scorn. "Yes. It's a shame you left early, there was so much more than the dance."

"But the dancers came first. To set the mood."

"To capture your attention."

"It didn't work."

"I don't see your sisters trying to leave."

That stopped her for a moment, and she pulled her arms in tight across her chest. Her face was hidden as she walked to the fountain and dipped her hand, but he heard the agitation in her tread. "You've thrown them to the lions. They have to look at this rationally. The choices they make here will seal their fates."

“And might convince them to stay.” Turning to open the door beside him, Seth let lamplight spill down the garden path, and out to where she stood. “They won’t listen to rational arguments. They’re ignorant and afraid.”

“And you think because we’re ignorant, we’re stupid. And because we’re afraid we can be manipulated. I am afraid. I’m terrified. But everything I love is at stake here, and you are playing these games with them. You are gambling with the decisions my sisters make about our faith and our service. You’re gambling with their lives.”

In the soft light she was more beautiful still, and the passion in her blood, be it anger or desire, raised fire into her eyes that consumed him. “No,” he said sadly. “Babu gambled with lives that he owned, and that’s something I will not do. I don’t think any of you are stupid, you least of all. And I’d rather try to manipulate them than to deny their humanity and force them as slaves.”

“We have always been slaves,” she argued, streaming back along the light toward him.

Her fiery eyes sparked hot frustration and irritation that burst from his mouth. “You have never been slaves! And for that alone you should thank your goddess. She’s given you nothing else, and if you stay in that temple she will take a good deal more from you than you realize.

“Her incense? Hash and opium. Her visions? Just a stupor from the herbs. I’ve seen grown men, huge, strong men, who live on opium for pain. They end up without sense. They lose themselves. How long do you think you will last in her service?”

“Don’t lie to me.”

She stood before him, her eyes full of fear and doubt, anger and confusion. She was clinging desperately to the few real truths her life had given her and the cold of shame bled over his skin, but her truths were lies wrapped up in superstition. Her life had been, when all was said, no more than a quest for massive profit.

“The herb they gave you,” he continued slowly, walking a line between the cruelties of truth and the hopelessness of pursuing her lies, “it was khat, an hallucinogenic. People in the ports along the coast to the west have green teeth, stained from chewing the leaves. It causes visions.”

“You’re lying,” she said again, less confidently.

“I have no reason to lie to you. Nothing to gain.”

“You want to keep us from the temple.”

“No. I want you to know the truth. I want you to wait, and to learn, and to make decisions based on truth. If you choose to go back to the temple, I won’t try to stop you. But I won’t stand by and watch you waste this chance just because you’re afraid.”

The softness of her features, cast in golden light, put any goddess he had ever seen to shame. There was no form in marble or alabaster that came near to the creamy gold perfection of her skin. For a moment he considered the whole truth.

Could he tell her, in truth, why she was here? Why she and her sisters had been carried so far across the deserts? There was something cruelly ironic in their presence here, as Drusus’ gift to him. If he was given his choice of these women, one or all, then the choice was an easy one to make. If only owning someone’s flesh could guarantee their affection.

“I want you to wait, in the temple if you choose, but in a few days Drusus is leaving the province and going back to Rome. His house will be yours for as long as you need it. It’s bigger still than this place. Is there a stretch of imagination that could make it a prison?”

She was silent, looking up at him, her eyes lined with unshed tears. Her teeth were vivid white, biting gently onto her trembling lip and her small hands tugged uneasily at

her *palla*. Slowly she moved her head, gently shaking it in confusion.

She was lost. Thrown into a world of dangers and contradictions where she had no solid place to stand and no power with which to bargain for the certainty she needed.

“Or you can stay here.”

It was as close as he dared go to helping her understand the powers that had pulled the strings of her fate. She should not have to know the reality, or feel the shame and powerlessness, of being owned. Her breath was erratic, stifled sobs or moans rose from her sinus, forced past bitten lips. Regardless of his motives, good or bad, Dec had brought her here to him, and he longed to fold his arms around her anguish and hold her.

The lamplight picked dewy moisture from her soft lips and he stepped forward, slowly lifting a hand to her cheek. His fingertips slipped loose curls from her cheek and his thumb gently stroked a single tear from the softness beneath her eye.

“You will always be safe here.”

That was a promise that rose from deeper than he knew. But once the words were spoken, the truth in them swelled around his heart, pushing the air from his chest and a frown deep into his brow. Aware of nothing but the truth of this devotion, the pledge that in a moment had put her life above everything he had or knew, he touched his lips to hers.

Jaida closed her eyes, choking on the screaming needs that rose together in her blood. First among them was terror. It froze on her skin like a crust of ice, paralysing her, and her warm flesh steamed beneath it in itchy sweats of dread. Against hers, his lips were heat that drove away the cold. A flume of molten pleasure burned up into her chest, her throat, her cheeks, and rose toward him, pressing her weight with it onto his mouth.

Waves of intense heat and cold rose up over her skin, until her head was light with exhilaration and her groin hot and heavy with the throb of desire. Her fists came up against his chest, white knuckled with the strain of gripping her *palla*, and his tongue tickled and teased at her lips. Lights flared behind her eyelids, she needed to breathe, and she drew in the warm soothing smell of his skin, the taste of his mouth.

Through the thin fabric of her *tunica*, and the stiff linen folds of his toga, his body was hard and hot where it pressed on hers. His hands slipped lower, tracing fire over her back and down to draw her hips in closer to his.

Hot pleasure welled again in her chest as she melted against him. For a moment there seemed only one flesh, one breath, and the promise of a peace that she had never known. She opened her eyes.

There was no tension in his features, no violence or greed. His soft eyes were closed, his lashes thick and black, and he freed her mouth, moving his kiss over her cheek. Sighs slipped from her lips as they dragged over the roughness of his jaw, as his mouth touched her throat, and the heat of his breath moved over her shoulder.

The flash of gold in his earlobe and the soft smell of him stabbed a raw nerve deep inside, and she leapt from the sting like a hare from a tussock. Memories flared into hard focus, carrying with them rank terror and rebuke.

Her arms straightened instinctively, throwing her backwards and out of his embrace.

“No,” she whimpered, her stare too wide and stark to allow for tears as she stumbled back. Her heart hammered her chest and blood thrashed against her eardrums; panic darkened her vision and sucked hard on the air. There was pain in his dark gaze, but there was no way to tame her wheeling senses. She had to move away.

This was the danger she’d seen and she’d known.

Here was a threat greater even than Ishaq and all of his distant malice. The goddess

had warned her, and she had been too tempted by the low burn of the flesh to hear her words. Here he stood in the shadows, waves of heat rising up from his body like the ripples of promise in the desert sand, and she had to move away. Now.

He raised his hands toward her in an appeal, but before he could speak, she shook her head. "No. I shouldn't be here."

"All right." He made a gesture intended to calm or placate, and she stopped moving away from him. "Don't run. I'll take you through to the study."

He stepped back from the lit doorway beside him, as if he thought her afraid to pass too close. It was a good call. Her skin was trying to crawl into a tight ball around her heart, and she felt like dropping into a squat and wrapping her arms around her knees in defence. Her hand came up to her cheek, where it seemed his lips still moved over her skin, and she pushed the heat of temptation away from her mouth.

"I promise you," he said in a whisper, pulling his hands in hard against his sides. "You are safe here, Jaida. You and your sisters. I will do what I can to keep them here. If they'll stay."

She shook her head, afraid to listen, afraid to believe anything he might say. Too much of her blood rose toward him. It unbalanced her, made it hard to think, and what didn't ache to wrap itself around him, howled in fear and urged her to run away into the darkness.

She sidestepped through the door, unable even to raise her face to his.

From the lamp-lit confines of the narrow *tablinum*, she crossed down into the vast atrium of the main residence. The room was well lit, and after a moment's orientation, she recognized the hallway to her right, and just beside it, the open door of the study. Without waiting for her host, she moved quickly over the smooth marble tiles and into the room. Here her future had been decided, despite her best efforts.

When Seth did enter, she kept her face turned down, afraid to look too closely at his hurt. His tread was slow and heavy, confusing, at a time when nothing made sense but the need to rush to a place of safety.

"Do you want wine?" he asked.

"No."

"Your papers are here." He moved toward the desk and she glanced up at his back, noting the stiff clench of his shoulders and the corded resolve in the muscle of his neck. "And the gold I promised."

"I told you." It was hard to force the words out, and Jaida dredged up the last of her courage. "I don't want it."

"It makes no difference. It's only a letter of intent. The application for manumission goes ahead to the Governor of *Arabia Petraea*, in Bostra. The letter is only a formality for your safety. And the money?" He shrugged. "It's here when you need it."

"I need a litter. I want to go back to the temple."

"Alone?"

Zayed coughed, and lowered his eyes discreetly, having appeared at the door as if by silent summons.

No, she didn't want to be alone. There was not a time she could recall when she'd been completely alone, and never when she'd felt so very vulnerable and confused. What she wanted was her sisters, here together, calm and willing to see reason. But the temptations in this house were greater than any argument she could make. There was a weight in her own belly, an uncomfortable tension that made her knees weak and her fingers shaky as she tried to see a clearer way to resolution. The pulse in her temple was growing steadily sharper and more painful, and she raised her face, looking to Seth and

all the threats he represented for inspiration.

"I'll go," he said. "Maybe I can persuade your sisters to leave with you." His frown stayed fixed, and his hands hung loosely, his palms turned out in a silent plea. From the desk, he lifted a single scroll, slipping his thumb down the curve to unroll it enough to read. "Sit, at least."

He moved toward her, holding the scroll forward, and she stepped away, dropping heavily onto a couch. Her throat had closed, a lump of disappointment aching there with every breath, and she shook her head.

"Zayed, wait with the priestess. Bring her food, a drink. Something. Anything." Seth tossed the scroll back at the desk and moved out through the door. "I'll be back soon."

Jaida looked quickly at the servant and away. There was coldness in his bearing that spoke more of superiority than actual dislike, but it left her feeling more isolated than if she'd been alone among the trappings of supreme wealth. Was she truly then, so worthless? Studying the skin of her forearm, tracing her touch over her own long fingers and down around the moon of her fingernails, she considered the dreadful paradox of her situation.

Priceless, Decimus Asinius had said. Without equal anywhere in the world. And yet, in the eyes of everybody except Seth, she was a slave. And in that too, their understandings differed. The notion of being owned was not so painful. The promise of freedom held its charm, but there was no deep resentment hidden in the fact itself. Not when it was no more than a technicality. It represented bondage that had no bearing on the exercise of their temple duties. It was an expression of Seth's right to command her sisters to stay, just as the letters of intent expressed his right to set them free. It was a matter of days and no more.

She raised her face to look around the room.

What man, what family, came to such wealth without the use of slaves? The goddess herself had armies of temple slaves to work her will. How many men had laboured over the construction of this mansion? Even Drusus had hinted at reluctance to free her sisters, so there was tension between father and son over this issue.

Still, what did he have to gain?

Pain had become a sharp hot blade that jabbed behind her eye, and the questions she could answer for herself were pitifully few.

Any free man, not only me, he'd said, can do as he wants with you. Your body is no longer yours. She raised her fingertips again to her lips, pressing gently against her mouth where his lips had moved over hers.

The fears she had for her virtue were contradictory. If he wanted to take his pleasure from her he had no need to free her from bondage. He had no reason to do it. If that had been his intention, he could have ensconced the whole group of them there in his fine house and done with them all as he wished.

So what did he gain? It was Oseye's question, and Jaida had no answer. He would pay out a fortune in gold, and more for their security, and give away a freedom that was worth a pharaoh's ransom for nothing? Expecting nothing? She shook her head in silence. It made no sense that she could see. No man had so much wealth he could throw it daily to the wind.

He cared more for a debt to the gods, than men. Or so he said. Could a man be harmed by owning another? No. It had always been so and always would be so. Kings had slaves. Priests had slaves. Pharaohs, who were gods themselves, had slaves.

Juba strode in and Jaida looked up, startled by Zayed's sudden appearance at her side with a goblet of wine and tray. He bowed deferentially as Ianthe walked uncertainly

into the room. Jaida watched the door, her heart rising with the knowledge that Seth must soon appear behind them.

"Priestess," Juba said, drawing the syllables out into an unmusical drone. His tone was apologetic; he was so sorry they'd been offended by the entertainments, but his movements were clipped with irritation and he rattled off commands at Zayed in Aramaic. "A litter is coming for you both and I'll send guards with you, but I wish you would both reconsider." He pointed through the open door, offering wide-ranging freedoms. "There are rooms here you could take for the night. Guaranteed privacy."

"No. Thank you." Jaida pressed fingers against her temple as she stood. "Where are the others?"

Ianthe looked drained. "They're not coming. I've been trying to convince them all since you left. But they won't even listen. They want to stay at the party. They want to stay here tonight. And they want to leave in the morning." There was no evidence of tears, but she looked wrung out.

None of them were immune to the fantasies that could be realized in this house. Ianthe sat, all but falling onto the couch behind her, and Jaida wondered what she'd seen and done in the time they'd been apart.

"Should I see them? Should I try?" She turned and searched Ianthe's fatigue. "If I went back up there, is there any chance I could make them listen to me?"

"You could see them in the morning," Juba assured her. "They're drinking wine, they're laughing. None of them are in the mood to hear you talking sense. Tomorrow when they're, shall I say, more subdued, then you can speak to them again. For now, let me show you to a suite and you can rest and plan the best way to convince them all to stay in our city."

Jaida gave his thoughts a single glance, but waited on her sister for an answer.

She shook her head and wiped over heavy eyelids. "No, Jaida. Believe me. They don't want to hear it. Not tonight. He's right."

"I'll talk to them again." That voice snatched her attention and she spun, fear and elation bound together in her breast. The look of pained constraint still caught his lovely features in knots and he still moved slowly when he approached, as if he was afraid to startle her. "I'll do what I can to keep them here."

Standing before her again, so close, the sense of anticipation, of waiting for his hand to rise toward her cheek, worked her heartbeat up to punch at the pain behind her eyes. Nervous tremors moved into her knees and she tried to find enough determination to step back.

"Stay here." His words were too quiet to be meant for anyone else, his eyes too tightly focused on hers.

She could do no more than shake her head, her body would not move.

This last refusal seemed enough at last and he looked down with a sigh and walked back to his desk. The scrolls he'd held earlier were there and he found the two he needed. He didn't try to hand the papers to Jaida, but offered both to Ianthe, smiling gently.

"These are your letters. As I explained to Jaida, they're no more than a formality. But take them. As long as you're away from this house and our protection, they're the next best thing to having my authorization."

In the quiet of their litter, when distance loaned her a tenuous sense of privacy, Jaida wrapped her arms tightly around herself and whispered to her sister, "He kissed me."

“Did you want him to?”

She should have answered ‘No’, but the truth burned inside her and she felt again the warm surge of longing rising in her blood. “Yes,” she whispered.

“You shouldn’t have been alone.” Spoken without inflection, the words carried neither surprise nor blame. “Not if we’re going to serve the goddess.”

“No,” Jaida agreed sadly. “Tomorrow,” she whispered, afraid to ask the question, “will they listen? Will we be able to talk them into staying? Will he?”

Ianthe shook her head, no more than the rustle of her hair and a movement in the shadows. “They’ve already asked for passage with a caravan moving to Gaza at daybreak.” Her words were cold and certain.

And two days later, six cots were removed from their cramped room at the manse.

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CHAPTER NINE.

The light was fading and the clouds above the valley forecast unlikely summer rains, but the evening air was cooler and Seth had no concern the outdoor feast might be washed out. From above them, where the temple of Al Uzza sparkled by the light of torches and braziers, a murmured chant and an occasional rounded note of the temple gong sounded on the air. Hidden from the curious eyes of Petra’s assembled menfolk, the women of the city shared a solemn, if unfamiliar, ritual for Isis-Mut, the Mother of all, Lady of Heaven.

Tonight, below Al Uzza’s shrine, the priestesses wooed their congregation with a new and very generous exotic festival. As mother of the gods, Isis-Mut had brought her cornucopia. At the close of rites forbidden to the men, the women would emerge and the entire city could enjoy the best in food and drink until they fell stupefied. In that state, with the goddess’ blessing, they could share an intimate understanding of the realms of the dead.

Seth eyed the assembled masses. They had all discovered a rare reverence for the goddess of Egypt when they learned of her generous support for feasting to excess.

The general impiety was of no concern to him, but he found himself irritable and unable to relax. Conversations waxed and waned around him and a number of local merchants approached, angling to draw him into disclosures about Drusus’ forward plans.

Drusus himself had declined the chance to attend, begging off on the grounds of fatigue, and Seth paced agitated circles, keeping his own company when he could and glancing every second moment at the building above.

It was four days since he’d seen her. Four long days where he’d forced himself to attend to details of commerce, and long nights when he’d lain sleepless, watching the stars pass between the pillars until the sky lightened into another day.

As most men who had seen the worst his fellow man could do, Seth was mostly godless. He was tempted to credit forces outside his own control sometimes: when the unknown crept up his spine on icy feet or when night-time terrors moved in darkness just outside his vision. But that smattering of superstitious dread was not enough; his lack of faith removed any good reason to attend the goddess’ temple.

Pride forbade him the hypocrisy of pretended devotion, and frustration left him feeling antisocial when he considered the choices Jaida made in the name of her belief.

The memory of fear and longing glowing from her eyes, remembering the sweet

warmth of her lips on his, had balled frustration into fists when movement from the temple door snagged his attention. The female congregation was emerging from their rites, streaming down the steps and over the upper forecourt like a nest of many-coloured ants. At this signal that the feast would soon begin, the men were surging forward, anxious not to miss the start of proceedings. But Seth remained focused on the fire lit entrance to the auditorium itself. If the priestesses were going to join them, they'd emerge from that place and he dared not take his eyes from the doorstep. If their duty was finished for the night, he had no desire to linger any longer in the crowd.

Ianthe stepped out, following the wash of women down to the lower court as musicians in one of the festival marquees began a celebratory paean. Behind her there was stillness, and by the time she'd walked down to the level where the feast was set, two of Juba's guard had taken position at the temple door and effectively sealed the entrance.

The crowd rushed up around Ianthe, their hands already filled with sacred wine and food as she smiled her goddess' blessing and bade them feast from the hands of the great mother.

There was no point trying to get closer to Ianthe. She was radiant in a plain white linen shift, engrossed in her role as provider of sustenance to the children of god, and Seth turned instead to the stairway up.

Night was closing in, but the temple complex glowed with warm firelight and he ignored the curious stares that followed him away from the crowd. He was at the door when the guards stepped forward, barring access with grim determination.

"No one can enter." One guard spoke without so much as turning.

"I can. Let me through."

"We're here for the protection of the priestess. No one can enter."

"You're here while I pay your hire, now step aside."

The conflict of interests seemed to confuse the men briefly and Seth pushed his argument. "And what about her?" He flicked his head back indicating Ianthe, where ever she was below, and the guard shook his head. He, too, nodded downward and Seth turned to look over his shoulder. Standing silently at the far side of the lower court, two sentries marked the line between light and darkness.

"Okay," he conceded. "Excellent work. Let me through and I'll double your night's wage."

At this, a smile broke over the guard's face. "You already pay us too much to make a bribe from anyone tempting. Even you." But a glance, passed back and forth, said a decision had been made. "Go on. Don't tell the boss." The giant winked and took a half-step sideways.

Compared to the bright exterior, the auditorium itself was dim, but striding up the central aisle, Seth could just make out the kneeling figure of a girl, half hidden in deep shadows before the altar. He slowed as he approached, suddenly unsure of what it was he'd come to say or how he could best say it.

For the moment she was bowed in prayer and he respectfully deferred, stopping at the foot of the dais and taking a seat. What had he come to say? Forgive me? There was no point asking for forgiveness when he'd had no choice but to let them go. He'd explained that. More than once.

I need to see you? I can't sleep, can't eat, I can't think of anything but you. You're in my head and it's driving me insane. How could he even say it when she'd made it clear she wanted him as far from her as she could keep him? His pain was nothing to her.

You're not safe here? Come away from the temple. Come away from this life,

these choices, this sacrifice. Come to me, instead. This was the life she'd chosen over all he could offer; it seemed pointless to try offering it all again. But what else could he do?

In the dark cubicle above, she stood, and he slid to the edge of his seat, impatient to see her face. She turned and walked forward, her eyes down and a frown of concentration set on her brow. When she neared the step he stood, and she looked up suddenly, a sharp breath catching in her throat.

A short black wig of heavily beaded braids covered her hair, and thick kohl drew an exaggerated line around her eyes and down her golden cheeks. Her brows were heavily drawn and the skin beneath was painted azure blue; her soft lips were coloured dark as bruises.

But all the artwork of Egypt could not hold his eyes on her face.

The robe she wore was golden, woven it seemed from the finest gold thread, as stiff and transparent as the aureate wings of a dragonfly. It fell from the centre to the sides in heavy folds, caught up somewhere behind so it opened from below bare breasts to reveal the perfect contours of her naked body. Jewels glittered at her throat and navel; she was lightly oiled and she sparkled in the soft light of candles. Every strand of hair had been smoothed from her skin and his eyes drank in every curve and shadow as a furnace of desire burst up from his gut. Heat rose across his back and painful longing throbbed at his groin.

A sobbed breath called his attention back to her face. On the dais before him she dropped to her knees, wrapping her arms across her chest and huddling over her nakedness.

"Why have you come here?" she demanded hoarsely. Her eyes had filled with tears of helplessness, and he raised a hand, silently offering something he couldn't name.

"I had to see you. I needed to see that you were safe."

"We're safe. I have my letter; soon enough I'll have my freedom and I'll no longer be your concern. Just as my sisters were not your concern."

"Jaida..." The words he wanted to form were fading from him, as his eyes spread down again over the glistening cream and gold of her bare shoulders. "Don't stay here. Don't..."

He was stammering like an idiot, and he forced himself to focus on her eyes. They burned.

"I won't," she said. "I have no taste for the sacrifices. When I have my freedom, I'll try to find a temple less bloodthirsty."

"No. That's not what I meant."

Jaida knew exactly what he meant and the knowledge howled inside her like a fire. It had burned, low and constant, so her dreams were sweat and her waking hours were torment. In the days since she'd seen him she had thought of little else. When she knelt to pray she felt his hard body pressed against her. When she sanctified the altar stone she felt his lips on hers. Now, when he stood before her, heat flared low in her belly, pulsing down her thighs in warm waves and sharpened in her bare breasts, drawing her nipples up tight.

Naked here under his gaze, her febrile senses ached for his touch and she looked into dark eyes, heavy with desire. It could never be. She could not give in to these temptations. She had to walk away. Hot and cold needled her skin and she almost cried out, curving tighter over the ache that throbbed through her flesh. Humiliation pounded in her chest and temple, pumping heated blood up through her ears, so his words were hard to hear.

"Why do you want to cover yourself?" he asked. "This is the role you've chosen. You stand naked before the whole world." He reached to the neckline of his *thoub*, gripping the placket at either side and tearing the centre seam from top to bottom. "But not before me." Dark blood coloured the skin under his eyes as the intricately embroidered robe slipped from his shoulders and he held it forward. "Me," he said, "you turn away."

Jaida held what she could catch of her trembling breath and took her hands from her chest, pretending courage as she reached to take the soft fabric from his hand. Her nipples burned as she felt his eyes slide over her exposed flesh, awareness of him pulsing through her, shaking through her hips and up her spine.

"I sometimes serve the goddess robed in light." She raised her eyes as bravely as she could as she stretched to pull the overly large sleeves up her arms. "But you don't come here in the name of faith."

Safe within the rituals she practiced, her body and her mind were fixed on routines etched as deep as drawing breath. But when she stood before this man, the words she knew by heart slipped from her tongue; the confidence she had to speak the rites of her goddess vanished in a heated rush of blood.

"Then you come to me," he said simply. "Come to my house and talk to me. Robe yourself in woven wool from neck to ankle if you want to, but help me find a better solution for you. I can't sleep at night for worrying about where you are."

"I'm safer here," she whispered, as her mind raced through the catalogue of dangers wrapped so tightly in his flesh. Pulling the edges of his robe tightly together, she accepted his hand and prepared to stand. "There is no better solution for me."

His grip stayed on her fingers and her eyes stayed low as she stepped down to the floor beside him. Loose linen trousers were gathered low on his hips, the hard lines of his belly drew a nervous sideways glance, and she rushed to raise her face. Standing close, warm perfumes clung to the whirls of soft hair that shaded his bare chest, and she tried to find enough spit to swallow.

"There has to be." His fingertips brushed her chin, their slightest touch enough to turn her eyes up to meet his. "You don't know the life you're choosing. You can't guess at what you're going to lose."

Beside her cheek two pale arcs marked his skin. The light was low and moving flames made shadows dance, reminding her again of danger, of dangerous men. And in the wash of his perfume her heartbeat surged at the thought of just how dangerous this man might be. In her dreams his lips touched hers, and his fingers slipped over her skin.

Commotion at the door spun her attention from his chest.

Running feet and sobbing broke clearly over the sounds of feasting coming from the courtyard below. The two guards set on Jaida rushed into the room and closed swiftly on their ward, as Ianthe and a single guard burst inward from the light outside.

"Jaida," she wailed. "He's here. He's there. Outside." Ianthe's face was grey with fear, her eyes wide, her breath sobbing as she reached to cling to her sister.

Jaida said one word, "Ishaq," and Seth felt frustration and fury punch into his gut. A grunt burst from his lips as he surged toward the door, grabbing the leather cross straps of the nearest guard as he moved. "Leave them," he ordered. "Where was he seen?"

"Out there. Outside," Ianthe cried.

To the man he held, Seth said, "Get back out there; comb the city. If you can't see him find footprints, witnesses, anything you can use to tell me which way he went."

From the doorway he called back, "I'll get word to Juba to double the guard. I want the city turned upside down. No one moves in the street from now on unless you

know who they are and why they're there."

He turned then, slipping down the temple steps and out to where the crowd of city people feasted on, oblivious to the drama.

The guards set on the girls moved them from the central aisle, shepherding them back past the holiest place and to a small utility room. Safe within the solid stone of the walls, and with twin colossi standing guard, Ianthe clung to Jaida's arm and forced herself to calm.

"What did you see?" Jaida asked, lifting the ropes of her sister's hair back past her shoulder and hugging her close.

"He was just there. Standing at the edge of the light," she sobbed, catching her breath and wiping at the tears that smeared makeup over her cheeks. "He didn't move. He just stood in the shadows smiling straight at me. It's like he just wanted me to know he knew where to find me."

"What happened?"

"I ran. I saw him and I ran as fast as I could up to the temple. The guards might not even have seen him. I didn't stop to point him out and there is a huge crowd out there."

"You're sure it was him? I mean, in the crowd, in the darkness? There's no doubt in your mind it was Ishaq?"

"Oh no. None. It was him. What do we do now? He's right here. Right in the city."

"But he hasn't done any harm, has he? He's here, but he might only just have followed, and that means the others are safely away. He'll never find them if they separated." Jaida pushed her hands against her forehead and tried to clear her thoughts. He'd come. There could be no more doubting the goddess or her vision. Ishaq had come just as the vision had warned he would. And the warning was of danger, so there could be no doubt his reasons for being in Petra were cruel.

"If he's here in the city," said Jaida with as much conviction as she could muster, "then Aquila and the guards will find him. Won't they? How big is this city?"

"It's big enough. Fifteen thousand people, maybe more, all in this one small valley."

That made the task of finding one man seem a lot more complex, but she had to hope it would be done. "They'll find him," she prayed.

Sitting huddled together on a dusty storage crate, Jaida rested her head down onto her sister's shoulder and closed her eyes against visions of hopelessness. Aquila had already made his reservations clear. He'd come tonight to voice concerns about their safety while they served in the temple. But their choices were so poor; there was no safety for them anywhere. Here they lived under guard, they rarely travelled in public, and most of all, here, while in service, they had the protection of the goddess. She had acknowledged their devotion. She had given them her words and visions.

Service to the temple was the only way to ensure Isis' blessing.

"What's this?" Ianthe sniffled, plucking at the cloth of Aquila's robe.

Jaida looked down over the rich fabric, rubbing a fingertip along a line of scarlet stitching. "He came in while I was giving thanks," she said quietly. "I couldn't just stand there naked and talk to him like no one noticed." She slipped the heavy wig from her head and scratched at itches on her scalp, loosening her own hair. "He gave me this to wear."

"You should have walked away," her sister reminded her.

"I know."

"So now he's out in the street, near naked himself." Ianthe laughed, but her tear soaked sinuses made the sound a snort. "I don't think men as rich as him go about without their finery." She sat back to see the robe better. "He's bigger than I thought,"

she said, tugging at the shoulder and sleeve, and ducked her face closer to the cloth. "And he smells good, too."

"He has scars on his chest," Jaida said, her eyes fixed on images of wide smooth arcs inscribed deep in the flesh of his shoulder. "Where does someone who lives in such luxury get so badly wounded, do you think?"

"War?" Ianthe shrugged. "Maybe he was a soldier. Like Ishaq."

The name brought back a wash of dread and Jaida took a deep breath in to stretch the tightness from her chest. "What can we do?"

"Same as we've been doing. We keep up our prayers. Keep up our devotions. The goddess will tell us what she wants us to do. We have to trust her."

"Yes." It was the conclusion Jaida had reached herself and it was reassuring to hear it repeated. But that much trust was hard to hold onto now, with Ishaq in the city. "Aquila said our incense is hashish and opium. Just a drug. He said our visions are only hallucinations."

"Is that true?"

Jaida shrugged. "They were smoking hashish at his house. I could smell it."

"That doesn't mean the goddess didn't speak. She warned us Ishaq would come. Now he's here."

"Yes." Jaida paused a moment, weighing the benefit of speaking her thoughts aloud. "But he said that was nothing we didn't already know."

Ianthe considered those implications, searching her own memories of their reading and all that had happened since. "He doesn't share our faith in the goddess, that's plain. Why?"

That was the question Jaida had asked herself repeatedly. Why? What did he know? What did he gain from any of this? "He said she'd given us nothing and would only take from us." He didn't want them to serve the temple. He'd said as much. "He wants us to trust him, instead."

Ianthe shook her head doubtfully. "We're here to serve the goddess. That's why we stayed, isn't it? We're here, in this city, hiding from our greatest fear, because we trust our goddess. Aren't we?"

"Yes. That's why we stayed." But it was hard to remember the conviction they'd felt when their whole bodies shook with fear. On one side, two huge men stood by the door. On the other, the cold stone walls of the temple. Between them, the girls sat in contemplative silence. Aquila and the protection he offered, or the cold hard priestess of Al Uzza, who barely tolerated their presence.

"They'll be gone soon." Ianthe nodded toward the guards, her thoughts travelling the same impossible rounds as Jaida's. "We'll be free. And he won't have to keep those men on our behalf. What then?"

Jaida tried, "We have our gold pieces. How long will his gold pay men like these? If the temples do pay well for an oracular priestess, maybe we can bargain for them to stay with us until we can contract to another temple. That way we could pay them ourselves." Temples where? And how did they make contracts?

"Sometimes," Ianthe breathed, her words wavering on the brink of tears again. "Sometimes I'm terrified when I realize just how much we don't know."

"Me too." Jaida rested her head back down onto Ianthe's shoulder.

"We have to trust our goddess. We have to."

"Yes," she agreed again. And tried to believe she could be that brave.

Seth rolled from the litter before the boys had set it to the ground, and the doors of Drusus' house sprang back before him, opened as if by magic by the vigilance of servants.

“Dec,” he called, striding down the atrium, looking into lighted rooms for a hint of where his patron might be. It was only early evening and he made his way confidently toward the small *cenarium*. Servants rushed like foam billowing in his wake, not daring to speak or try to stop this invasion, but neither game to let him leave their sight.

When he turned into the riotous *cenarium*, a million splashes of coloured light struck over his face and bare chest from the glass of festive lanterns.

“Here, my darling.” Drusus struggled to his feet, pushing trays of food away and wiping a Persian serving boy back to a distance with an outstretched arm. “What brings you here naked, Aya?” He was beginning to smile, speculating on a ribald comment called to mind, but the look on Seth’s face stopped all levity.

“The son is here in Petra, Dec. He just turned up at the feast they’re having for their goddess.”

“And did we catch him?”

Seth strode in and took a carved silver goblet of water from the table, tipping a cool draft back and stopping to regain his breath. He shook his head. “Didn’t even see him. But the priestess did. Ianthe.”

“But not you? What were you doing that you missed the sighting?” Drusus raised a finger in the general direction of Seth’s chest.

“I was in the temple,” he answered bluntly.

“Visiting the goddess, dear?” He’d jibed enough to salve his curiosity and turned a sharp eye on Seth. “Well. What do you want to do next?”

“I told Juba to double the guard. He’s sent riders out along the Roman forts after word of the caravan to Alexandria. If they made it safe to Gaza, we’ll have heard back within three days.”

Finding an appetite he’d not noticed before, Seth picked food from the table, chewing at irritation and swallowing the spiced meat in hard lumps.

Drusus said, “He has you worried, hasn’t he? I’m sure Juba’s boys can find him if he’s in the city somewhere. But then, there are ten ways to leave the city and four villages within easy reach.”

“They don’t know who they’re looking for. No one knows what he looks like. I want the girls to come back to the house, to stay out of the public eye until he’s found.” Seth tossed a small bone back to the table and picked up a golden pastry, eating without conscious thought.

“No you don’t. You want them where he can see them, and you want Juba’s watchers watching out for who’s trying to see them from the shadows.”

“Dangle them like bait? I don’t think so. I should have chased him down right from the start.”

“You have the same problem now that you had then, though. He hadn’t done anything wrong. He still hasn’t. Have you decided to kill an innocent man just so you sleep easier at night?”

A row began at the entrance hall, and before Drusus could call for calm and find the problem, Zayed was ushered into the dining room, his face ashen.

“Sir.” He nodded to Seth, and bowed with grave deference to Drusus. “You must come to the house. A body has been dumped on our steps.”

Seth stepped up, placing a calming hand on his *promus*’ shoulder. “A body? A corpse?”

Zayed nodded and Seth reached for a goblet of wine, passing it into the man’s trembling hand. His dark eyes were forecasting a horror Seth was dreading, and when he’d sipped enough to speak again, there was good cause. “It’s one of the women, sir. One of the slaves. Priestesses,” he corrected himself, and sipped again. “She’s been

beaten to death. It's awful. You must come back to the house."

Seth was past him and striding for the door when Drusus called after him, "I'll follow, Aya. Keep this quiet. We can't afford to have the Third Legion crawling all over the house."

Seth's last concern was the political implications of the murder. He threw himself into his litter, signalling abruptly for Zayed to join him. "Who is she, Zayed?" he demanded. Jaida and Ianthe were safe under guard. He'd left them with at least two of Juba's best standing right beside them. She was safe, he told himself.

The servant had regained a little of his poise but it was shaky at best, and he covered his eyes with a weak hand as if he could shut out the image he held there. "One of the ladies who left hurriedly, sir. A lady with golden hair."

Lailah. Jaida was safe for the present, at least. Seth let hard air escape on a groan of relief. But the six who'd left were not. If her murderer had found her, then he'd more than likely found her sisters, too.

Where? And how long ago?

In the heat of a desert summer, no one was going to carry a corpse very far or keep it very long. Gaza was more than thirty leagues across the Arabian province. A hundred miles in a caravan that would cover twenty miles a day. Either the girls had just moved safely into Gaza city tonight, or they'd been met outside the cliffs of Petra by the nightmare they were fleeing.

No word had come back from Juba's men that they'd had any kind of trouble. So, either the guards were dead, or Lailah had, for unfathomable reasons, left the caravan in the middle of the desert, alone.

With the weight of two men the bearers struggled over the cobbled streets, and impatience surged in Seth's blood. He was ready to launch himself into the street, to run ahead rather than suffer the delay of comfort. Breathing deep, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the facts he had. Soon enough, he'd know more. Soon enough, he'd know the worst.

To say she had been beaten spoke too kindly of the crime. Coarse ropes remained around her wrists, her face was unrecognizable, and the bloody evidence of rape stained her belly and thighs.

Seth pulled a cover up over her body, and dragged a hand down his face. "Bathe her," he instructed Tamir, resting a hand on the silent man's shoulder. "Find her some robes, and lay her in the annex. It's coolest there."

All the old servant's profoundest grief seemed to flood his eyes and he nodded patiently.

Drusus stood back, not wanting to see more of the crime than was necessary. "She has to be cremated discretely, Aya." He spoke with calm conviction, and Seth nodded. "Our killer is Roman, ex-army. The Third Legion won't be any help anyway, asked to find one of their own who killed an Egyptian slave. A woman. Pointless. But moreover, you cannot have them through this house. If the Nabataeans find out common soldiers have had access to our trade details, they'll shut you down before you can blink."

"You have no doubt it was him?" Seth walked slowly to the table and took a long sip of cool water.

"I don't believe in coincidences, Sethos. I've lived on my instincts too long to doubt this."

Again Seth nodded. "We have to wait now for Juba's riders to get back with word from Gaza. There's fresh blood on the step, Dec. She didn't die five days ago. He's kept her alive. Somewhere between here and Gaza."

"On the road, perhaps," Drusus offered.

Zayed stepped forward, a clean *khameez* gathered on his arms, and Seth thanked him. "I'll bathe again, first," he said. "I feel like I have old blood on my hands." Guilt stained his skin in sticky patches, itching over his back and down his chest and stomach. Even if he scoured himself with oil and strigil, he would carry that guilt with him when he went to face Jaida with the news.

"If he had one girl," Drusus spoke so quietly the words were little more than fears moving on the night air, but Seth heard him as clearly as if he was shouting, "he may still have the others." He paused a moment. "Where is Juba now?"

"At the temple, would be my guess. Questioning the girls." Seth tipped back the cup of water and moved toward the baths. "If Ishaq is in this city with the women, he can hardly hide them for long. It will make it easier for Juba to find him."

"My thoughts exactly," Dec nodded. "He showed his face at the temple to frighten the girls. He brought the corpse to your door, presumably to do the same for you. Has he?"

"No," Seth hissed as he stepped out of his trousers and down into the tepid water. Fury and frustration boiled together in his gut, and the concerns he had for Jaida's safety burned at the back of his throat, but he wasn't afraid of this man.

"You should consider how much he knows about our position here with the Nabataean rulers. If he does draw us into a scandal, he may be more of a financial threat than physical."

"I'm not afraid of what he can do. I have nothing here that wasn't given to me. If it's taken away, I still have enough to meet him. I will find him." When he closed his eyes, the arena doors stood rattling on rusted hinges again. But now there was no fear for himself or his own safety rushing through his veins. An image of Lailah's injuries lay amid the older horrors of his life, and the thought of that same cruelty rising toward Jaida froze the blood in his heart.

This man was a vicious coward, working his malice out on the precious and fragile goddesses his father had created. "I will find him," he repeated.

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CHAPTER TEN.

It was easier to face him from behind the comforting layers of her clothes. With her face scrubbed clean and her hair pulled up in a loose knot, Jaida found a tight smile for her sister and took her hand as they sat to wait for Aquila's word.

Juba had overseen the short walk from the temple to the manse, and his men now stood outside their home, as well as the four who waited inside by their doors and windows. But when Aquila and Drusus arrived, the guards stepped discretely from the room.

He had dressed, but not in the bright finery Jaida had become accustomed to. He wore only the bleached fine linen of a loose *khameez*, without beading or embroidery and with none of the stiff ostentation of gold and precious thread. The sheer garment hung loosely over the muscle of his chest and shoulders, the ivory cloth darkening with the shadows of the flesh that lay beneath. He'd rolled the wide sleeves back, and golden lamplight caught in fine hair that glistened on his forearms. Wide leather cuffs buckled over his wrists, and her eyes stroked the length of his strong brown fingers.

"Well?" He raised those hands in apparent irritation, demanding details from Juba before the courtesies of welcome could be enacted. Gold shone from his fingers, and

when he closed his fist in agitation, gems winked dully, like small flashes of violence. It was easier to watch his hands. Her awareness of him heated her skin and she pulled her *aba* tighter at her waist.

“Well, we have nothing yet.” Juba seemed unfazed by the lack of formality, deferring to the obvious tension in his employer’s mood. “I’ve doubled the guard, I’ve sent relay riders up the route to Gaza as you suggested, and I have men covertly watching the temple grounds. I have a small team combing the open mausoleums tonight, looking for any sign of camping or vagrant dwelling. In the morning I will run a check over all the inns and hostels in this quarter, looking for strangers that may have come here in the last day or two.” He raised his hands in imitation of Aquila. “It’s as much as I can do for now.”

Aquila wrapped his arms defensively across his chest, pacing around the small room. From time to time he lifted a hand to wipe over his chin, and when he raised his gaze to meet hers, Jaida caught the sense of dread that burned deep in the shadows of his eyes. He turned away sharply, but not quickly enough to hide the knots of anxiety in the soft skin under his brow, and he chewed at his bottom lip, glancing up once more to meet her and flinching away again.

Her body responded to the wordless contagion, raising gooseflesh on her arms and spindling in the fine hair of her nape. She caught her hands together, gripping them to keep from reaching to hold him still, to catch his restless tread and demand that he share whatever knowledge it was that drove him across the floor.

“There’s more,” he said, his voice gravelled with emotion, and he turned his face into the corner, seeming to gather strength or the words he needed to explain. When he turned the full force of his attention back, her hand slipped out to find the comfort of her sister’s touch.

“Lailah is dead,” he said, dropping to his haunches in front of the girls so his eyes were level with theirs. “While I was here at the feast her body was left at the door of my house.”

Beside her Ianthe sobbed and clenched the fingers of Jaida’s hand until they throbbed, but she didn’t try to pull them back. His words were solid gusts of cold that struck her cheeks and fanned their icy shock back over her face and down to fill her body. Dead? Lailah? The sounds were ridiculous, they made no sense.

The dark eyes that shone so close before her were filled to brimming with raw emotion and they offered her a plea. He knelt before her looking for forgiveness. It was guilt that stained his cheeks. It crushed him down before them and he wanted her to free him from its weight. Lailah was dead?

If her sister had been murdered, then his guilt was well deserved, and as the full horror of his revelation rose, it carried with it anger. “Dead,” she whispered. “How did she die? Why is she here?”

He shrugged and wiped a hand across his eyes, pulling his face down, and left his fingers cupped around his mouth as though that would excuse him from the need to answer.

Tears rose up into her eyes and towed a lump into her throat, but she forced her words around it. “You believe it was Ishaq who killed her? Are you sure?”

Again he shrugged, “I can see no other reason she’d be left at my door. And it’s too timely that he was seen tonight.”

“You mean, if she had simply been murdered for the gold you gave her, or if she had died of one of the many dangers you yourself named, she would have been dumped out in the wastes, unmourned?”

Ianthe’s sobs grew louder and she dropped Jaida’s hand, covering her eyes with

her fingertips and folding down against her own knees.

Aquila pleaded, "There were guards set on the caravan. They should have been safe. Safer."

"They?" She drew herself up and her voice strained hoarse. "Do you think the others are dead too? Where is she? I want to see her."

"That wouldn't be wise," Drusus cut in. "And, because we suspect a Roman, we won't report her murder. She'll be cremated discretely."

"Was her death so brutal?" Jaida held her glare steadily on Aquila. Every detail of the horror should be held up to his face. He should answer for the choice he made to send her sisters out to fend for themselves. This was the result of all his high moral posturing. The goddess had given her warning and it could not have been clearer. "Didn't their freedom even buy them a chance for justice?"

"She died a slave." Drusus words were sharp with annoyance and Aquila stood to face him, but he didn't stop. "Slaves have no justice. Egyptian slaves are nothing to the Romans or the Nabataeans. Slaves are nothing to anyone but property. And these women refused to wait until they had the freedom of their patron's citizenship."

Aquila put a hand on his father's shoulder and silently asked for calm, but Drusus' anger had already pushed Jaida past the sadness she could bear. Standing quickly, she shoved herself to the door and moved down the dark hallway.

Seth followed without thought. The bare stone walls of the temple manse threw back dark echoes and the gritty greasy smoke of tallow wicks filled the air, grating in his throat at every breath. The hall ended abruptly at a small asymmetrical opening.

A single flame lit the wretched space, leaving two hard cots and single couch in grey half-light. There was no hole in the outer wall and no place to draw fresh air. Jaida sat on one small bed, thrown sideways over a pile of rough bed linen, sobbing the rank smoke deep into her lungs.

There was no easy way to reach her. Nothing could be clearer than her aversion to his touch, and there seemed to be too few words he could offer to try to ease her pain. He understood her anger, but as awful as the end result had been, he could not accept the blame for this brutality.

There was nowhere in his heart that he could hold the cost of owning another human being. If it was illogical, so be it. It was an abhorrence jabbed and beaten into every muscle in his body. Every agony and humiliation he recalled or blocked from his mind, stemmed from the inhumanity of slavery.

It was done. What mattered now was finding a way to minimize the suffering that would ensue.

"Jaida." He moved past her, holding back the hands that wanted to reach and pull her up against him. Turning instead, he sat on the single couch and clasped his hands together at his knees.

"The other girls may be alive," he whispered. "Perhaps, somehow, they're still with the caravan to Gaza. But even if he does have them all, I don't think they'd be dead."

If she heard his attempts at reassurance, there was no sign. Or perhaps she heard, but found no cause to hope in his words.

The dirty air made the space between them seem thick and she pulled it in against her skin, shutting him away as best she could. Still he reached out. "By morning we will know if he is camping anywhere in the city. By tomorrow Juba will have scoured the area and squeezed every piece of information from the street. He'll have word back from Gaza in three days. If he's here, we will find him."

"We think he may be holding the girls. It's a chance, at least. And that will make

him easier to find. As long as they're alive there's a chance we can save them."

"Why?" She sat sharply and turned on him, sucking back on harsh sobs, her grief thick and wet on her face. "What makes you think he would keep them alive?"

The answer was hard to give and he knew it would be hard to hear, but there was perhaps more hope in it than horror. "Lailah didn't die five days ago." Seth tried to keep his tones even and to soften the sharpest edges of his words. "She died on my doorstep, or very near. She has bruises, older injuries. But she was alive until moments before she was found."

Jaida sniffled as hard emotions twitched and twisted in her features. "Moments?"

He nodded. "There was fresh blood."

"She left your house, was captured and beaten for five long days, then returned to you as a corpse. Is that to be the fate of all my sisters?"

"Perhaps." He spoke softly and steadied his resolve to face her anguish.

"Raped?"

"Yes."

The anger in her eyes almost melted into tears, but he held her glare gently as she continued her accusations. "So the dangers of the priesthood or traders or any other free man, were less than those the goddess named after all? All the dangers you touted for a slave were nothing to the terrors that caught my sisters in the desert."

"The dangers were the same. You just have a name for the perpetrator. I could have kept them safe."

"You didn't."

"They wouldn't stay."

"You could have made them." Grief broke the words in her mouth and she sobbed again, folding hopelessly into her own hands.

"And you," Seth said quietly. "I can make you do as I say. Will I? Should I order you to the safety of my house?"

Her eyes were dark and swollen, tears streaked her cheeks, but fire spat from her lips as she raised her face again and snapped, "Now you'll own us? Why? Are you any less dangerous than the men outside your walls?"

"Look at you." Trembling rushed through her, carried on a wash of fury and helplessness. "So used to getting everything you want. Everybody jumps to your command. You should only have to say, and it's so. You should only have to want, and it's given to you."

Seth stood, turning from the sight of her, hanging his face into shadow.

"My sisters should have stayed, it was enough that you wanted them to. Is my fate under your roof so much different to the one my sisters met?" Standing suddenly she strode the length of the small room and dragged his shoulder back. "You don't want to order me as a slave, because you think I should give you whatever you want. That's it. That's all you stood to gain. What has it cost your pride to have us all refuse you?"

"Nothing." Frustration burned on his tongue, but there was no anger in his tone of voice. "Nothing I've done has cost me, not in pride or in gold. Everything I own was given to me, and I've tried to give as much freely to you."

"We were priceless slaves, your father said. Priceless virgin priestesses." Jaida's breath still hiccupped as she spoke, but she faced him squarely with the strength of her grief. "You don't want a priestess; you want to take us from the temple. You don't want a slave, so it isn't to protect your investment. So why? There is no other reason for you to want us under your roof. You want the same from us that Ishaq took, you are only less inclined to beat us into submission."

Seth let a sharp laugh hack from his mouth. "You're wrong," he said. "Maybe your

virginity weighs heavier on your mind than it does on mine.”

Jaida stepped back as if she'd been slapped.

“The night you arrived I argued with Decimus over the value of a life. I didn't know then what he knew, what he'd learned. I still thought in terms of price. But he knew that some things are so precious that even a mountain of gold is irrelevant as long as they are kept safe in the world.”

“Kept safe,” she said sadly, dropping weakly to her seat on the hard cot as the flare of grief and anger began to sputter and wane. “Then spend your mountain of gold keeping us safe here. Find my sisters if you will, if you can, and spend another mountain of gold on their safety.

“And when I have my freedom, spend another mountain again, to keep me safe until I can contract to a temple and pay for my own security. Do that, if we are so precious. If you can still set a value in gold on keeping us safe when we are free, then do it. After all,” she hissed, without the strength or courage to raise her voice. “We are priceless.”

“You are,” he agreed. At the door he ducked, turning beneath the uneven stone. Without meeting her eyes, he added, “I don't deserve this anger. When you've calmed down enough to know what it is you want from me, ask Juba to bring you to the house. Whatever I can give you, it's yours.”

From the grey hallway he heard, “I've told you what I want. I won't need to tell you again.”

Jaida didn't watch him walk away. Her hands were tangled in the rough weave of her bed sheets and she buried her weeping between them. He didn't deserve her anger. Part of her mind railed against the statement, screaming out against all the unfairness and helplessness she felt. But another part entirely knew the truth in what he said, and it only served to fuel her sense of grievance.

The girls had been offered more than generous terms, by a man who owed them nothing. He had given them the freedom they demanded. But at what risk? And at what cost? They were children, and like children they needed guidance and protection, even protection from themselves. Instead they had been turned out into a hostile world, without the skills to find their own way to safety. Harder sobs rose at the thought, and she punched her fist ineffectually against the hard packing of her bed.

What did she want?

Her sisters back. Lailah safe and laughing, catching sunlight in her golden hair. But most, if she was honest, if she answered in her heart where no one else would ever hear, most she wanted to feel safe. Ishaq was out there in the streets, moving through the shadows of the rose stone city, and Jaida was afraid. Most of all, tonight, she wanted to feel safe.

Footsteps in the hallway made her raise her head. Wearily she smeared away the tears and snot, rubbing at her features and forcing them into a semblance of normality. Strings and knots of hair floated and tickled, and she brushed them back, sniffing hard in an attempt to clear her head.

“They've gone.” Ianthe's voice trailed away as if they'd taken all hope with them.

She moved to sit beside Jaida, her feet scuffing heavily over the stone, too weighted by grief to lift. “They'll make her funeral pyre tomorrow, did he tell you? At their family tomb.”

“No.” Jaida shook her head and watched Ianthe smooth the tracks of tears from her cheek. “He was more concerned with finding Ishaq. He thinks the other girls may still be alive.”

Ianthe nodded. That portion of the conversation between Drusus and Juba must

have sounded much the same.

“And he still wants us to return to the safety of his house.”

“Wants us? Or wants you?” Ianthe tried a weak smile but her eyes were dark with pleading for reassurances. “You won’t leave me alone, Jaida, will you?”

“No.”

“I would understand. At least I’d try, but Jaida I’m so scared, and Lailah is dead. The others may be dead out there, too. Or being kept, and beaten....”

“No.” Jaida raised her voice to stop the flow of thoughts and images. “I am, we are, chosen by the goddess. If any of us had followed her wisdom and stayed safe in her temple, this would never have happened. Do you think I’d choose a man, now?”

Their hope was in the goddess; but the memory of Seth’s long strong fingers, clenched and raising knotted veins along the hard muscle of his bare forearms, made Isis’ promises seem so much less substantial than his.

In prayer and devotion they could hear the goddess’ will; but when he stood close beside her, his chest awash with fragrant oils and drawing her eyes down the sculpted contours of his flank, the goddess seemed so much further away.

“You could,” Ianthe breathed.

The words struck Jaida and she flinched, her reaction shocking through her like a flare. Those words echoed a quiet voice deep inside, that whispered where even Jaida herself tried not to hear. She looked hard at her sister, but Ianthe refused to meet her eyes.

Staring at her own hands, or watching her toes trace the paving stones, Ianthe said carefully, “Would it mean choosing, if we went back there? If you went back and I came with you? Couldn’t we go to the house, just until it’s safer? Just until they find Ishaq. We could still serve the goddess, couldn’t we?”

A fresh wave of tears rose into Jaida’s eyes, but they were silent tears of admission, and she shook her head. “We should stay here.”

Both girls breathed the cruel air reluctantly, their sinuses raw with grief, and Ianthe clenched her remonstrations into a frown. She held to her study of the floor, silent and unsure. The quality of their food had fallen steadily and the beds they slept in offered little comfort. This tiny space was all they called their own. In the home of their patron were furnished rooms, suites of rooms, with clean air and flowing water. “It would be more comfortable there,” she tried. “I expected our lives as oracles would be,” she moved her hand around the room, “something more than this.”

“When we find a temple better suited to our needs and a less antagonistic priesthood, our lives will be better,” Jaida answered.

“But by then we’ll be separated. Even if we can settle on the same city, we’ll have separate lives.” There was more confidence or desperation in the arguments. “And until then, wouldn’t we be safer with him?”

Jaida looked at her fingers. They were trembling with fear and weakness and the awful certainty that if she put herself in a position to choose, the choice would test her faith beyond her strength. “We have thanks to give each morning, two services each day, personal audiences and prayers and sanctification rites to perform at the temple. It would be ridiculous to travel back and forth every day. If we’re dedicated to the goddess, we should stay here by her temple.”

“No one comes to the temple for our rites, yet. Not unless we give away free food and wine. The priestess of Al Uzza has made sure we don’t conflate the goddesses, and none of her rites can be reformed. Her sacrifices. All we’ve learned our whole lives is made an abomination here. We can’t even do what we’ve been trained to do while we’re here.”

“Give them time.”

“I’m afraid. What if we don’t have time?” Ianthe stood, striding the narrow space of their ward. “What if the men Juba has guarding us now were free to help in the search for our sisters? What if the goddess herself brought Aquila here to save us? What if it’s her will that we should be kept safely in his house?”

Jaida clenched her fists and her chin dimpled over frustration, “What if? What if? I don’t know. Ask the goddess for direction. Ask her where we should be. The only thing I know for certain is that I won’t be safe in his house!”

Ianthe froze, her agitated tread stopped mid-step. “You think he would harm you?”

Jaida snorted, pushing a fistful of rough linen sheet up to rub her nose. “No.”

Her sister’s silence carried over thoughts she had no need to speak aloud. Their years of isolation meant so much of what they thought and felt was understood by common experience, and silently Ianthe stood herself in Jaida’s shoes. Choices rose again that they had never had as slaves. They had, by mutual consent, agreed that if one stayed in service both would stay. But what if one had options now more tempting than a life of celibacy and devotion?

“We will,” she said at last, sitting as she did at Jaida’s side.

To Jaida’s silent question, she answered, “We’ll ask the goddess. We will spend the night in meditation, and tomorrow we will go to the temple and perform an oracle.”

Again Jaida tried to laugh, but the sound was an ugly snort. “In her incense? With her hallucinogenic herbs? Will that give us her answer, do you think?”

“It did before, it doesn’t matter how. She warned us all about the danger and that was true.”

That was true. She had shown Jaida there were dangers in every shadow, and she could recall the face she’d seen with sparkling clarity.

Seth rested back, his arms above his head, gripping one wrist cuff with his other hand. His thumb worried at the buckle absently, and he stared hard at the roof above him, trying to read answers in the crazing of the plaster. Drusus talked with Juba, hashing and rehashing what they knew, crunching distances and days and working over speculation and conjecture.

Seth heard only pieces of the conversation and most of what he heard he discounted as irrelevant. Jaida was right in more ways than she knew. For the last ten years he had nothing to do but want, and to want was to have. It was an easy life and it had gone a long way toward healing the hurts from the years that had gone before.

But the skills that had kept him alive in the desert and the arena lay dormant in the dark shadows of his mind. The prickling sweats of nightmares had worked as a whetstone, keeping his wits as sharp as any blade. And now, as anger and purpose churned hot in his gut, the need brought forth remembrance.

“There’s no more I can do tonight,” Juba conceded, stretching some of the stiffness of age out of his spine. “I’ll stay here tonight, Sethos. They’ll bring word from the street at sunup. If I’m here, it will save time.”

Seth stretched up, embracing the older man fondly as he retired.

“I’m not staying.” Drusus pushed his fingers hard against his eyes, rubbing at tension and fatigue that clung there on his skin. “Old men need their own bed to sleep well, and I’ll soon be leaving mine for ever.”

“Tomorrow I have to finalize my contracts with the royal council, and then the girl will be laid in the crypt. The undertakers will come for the body before daybreak, and

we'll have the funerary pyre tomorrow night. Only for the sake of the girls. There's an excuse for you to see your priestess, darling."

"That's crass Dec."

"But true. I'm not getting any younger. Marry her before I leave. Make me happy on my last journey away from my home."

"She doesn't want to marry me." She was lost and angry and afraid, and what would he give to see her lovely eyes free of that terror. "She's angry and I can't blame her."

"She doesn't know what she wants. A few years of extravagant comfort and she'll soon get over that. Lie to her. Women are happier when they're lied to."

"This from your vast experience of women." Seth smiled.

"Oh, they're all the same. Give them money. Give them babies. They'll soon fall at your feet."

"I don't want her at my feet."

"The other one, then. She's more beautiful anyway."

"I don't think so."

"You're being difficult, Sethos." Drusus stood, slipping his fingers down over the silky length of his moustache. "Sometimes you have to take second best, I should know. I bring you eight, you throw away six, and the one who won't have you is the only one you want." Ducking his head to kiss Seth's cheek, he moved to the door and through. "I spoiled you. Don't make my mistake."

"You never made a mistake in your life, *mi Pater*. And you know it as well as I do."

The narrow shaft of the stairwell crowded claustrophobically as Seth walked up to his rooms. As he climbed, he gathered the length of his *khameez*, and pulled it up his back and over his head. Jaida was angry and grieving for her friend and all she'd lost. His heart ached for them all, but it was only her he longed to comfort. All he could do was pit his wits against the man who'd harmed her and hope, if there was hope, that he could save the lives she loved.

He lay back on his bed and pulled a cushion over his eyes. On her own he knew he could protect her. And if she would come to the house where he could know who came and went around her, all the better. Even if she wouldn't stand in the same room with him.

There was no denying the desire that rose in her blood, and the memory of her dark eyes and the promise of her mouth rippled through his body. But all he had was nothing to a girl whose heart belonged to the temple of her goddess. If she wanted wealth or comfort, or pleasure, there were things she wanted more.

So be it.

For the moment he needed to concentrate on his opponent.

Dec and Juba had debated endlessly, but they were following the wrong thread. They were speculating, filling in the gaps with possibilities. It was an endless tread that took them nowhere. What they needed was to strip away the assumptions and suppositions. Just as any other opponent, no matter how strong or how skilled, every time Ishaq moved, every action, told Seth something about him. And he lay in the darkness, peering into shadows, gathering the things he already knew for sure.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN.

Morning light came slowly to eyes heavy with lack of sleep.

Meditation that moved them past the physical demands of their bodies was one of the life lessons both girls had learned many years ago. And as their prayers of petition drew to an end, Jaida let herself enjoy the familiar sensation of slipping back into her own flesh. She let connections form and firm: her spine, her shoulders, her hands. Her body stretched away its strains and discomforts, and she turned to face her sister.

She smiled. "Ready?"

There was, with so much terrible uncertainty and fear and grief and pain, some genuine joy in these small miracles, and Ianthe returned her smile. They had to bathe, which meant a journey to the one of the city bathhouses. Until midday only women could be present, so it seemed there would be no threat for them there, and they had Juba's Nabataean guards swarming about them. They could bathe, be oiled and massaged, and have any body hair removed with pitch and gum. There was some comfort too, in the simple rituals of life. And when they returned to the temple, once their oracle began, they would be alone and silent but for the voice of God.

Both girls were deliberately quiet, holding onto what they could of the prayerful calm as they prepared their plain bleached linen shifts and laid out their slippers and cosmetics.

"Do we know where he served his conscription?" Seth dragged bread through a dish of spiced honey, and raised it carefully to his mouth.

"No. The girls didn't know. But they saw him at least once a year, so that narrows the field." Juba ate lightly for a man of his size, nervously. His spies had come in at daybreak, but the streets were silent and all the tombs and parks were empty. Ishaq had risen, it seemed, from the sand of the pavement and slipped back beneath it without a trace. No one had heard or seen anything of him and no sign of him was to be found in any hostel or inn. As they broke their fast Juba's men were spreading their net, ranging wider into the valleys and villages within easy reach of the city.

Seth rinsed sticky fingers, and sipped sweet wine. *Legio II Taiana Fortis*, raised not twenty years ago for the Dacian wars, but based now, with what auxiliary troops they had, in Egypt. *Legio III Cyrenaica*, for the most part here in Petra, and *Legio VI Ferrata* at Bostra. All battle hard and wary, relaxing into peace after the murderous years of the Cyrene uprisings. Together, these three legions formed Juba's narrow field of choices, and that news was better than it might have been.

"Drusus is taking this better than I would have expected," Juba confided, watching red wine seep up into his dry corn cake. "Even he couldn't have predicted this; he didn't know about this son. I watch him and I wonder what is it he knows that he's not telling."

"And now you're doing the same with me?" Seth grinned and squeezed a ripe fig open, then tore the fruit into pieces.

"You're more like father and son than you know. Don't you think it would be better if we all shared what we know?"

"Dec lives like a king because he keeps his secrets. Did you know he dug the undertakers out of their beds last night and had the body taken to the funerary vault before dawn? What does that tell you?"

Juba looked confused. "That he didn't want her here? That isn't of great consequence, is it? She's only a slave in the end."

"It means he's expecting trouble, and he'll protect his trade licenses first and last."

"Your trade licenses."

"Exactly. Everything important that isn't already in at the *Curia*, will go in this morning. I'm surprised he's not here to collect the documents himself by now."

"And you'll protect what's important to you, first?" Juba smiled.

"That's why you're here, my friend."

"You could have made it easier for us all if you had just taken what was yours. None of this would have happened. I'm not complaining while the cost of all this security is lining my pockets, but both the ladies would be safer here at the house." He grinned coquettishly. "In your bed."

"There's nothing mine to take," Seth answered irritably. "And it was Drusus himself who lectured me on the value of beauty. There are things you can't own, things so precious and fragile that just catching hold of them breaks them forever."

Juba wiped his fingers and prepared to stand, muttering, "Father and son."

"Earn your money, Juba. While Dec is still here to protect it."

"You'll do well enough. His wealth will be safer with you. There are too many men who'd be pleased to see him ruined. Some in your own household."

"Some with good cause."

Juba was noncommittal. He didn't share his employer's liberal views on slavery, but there was truth enough in the sentiment. "There aren't many of us with wealth that didn't come at someone's cost. He's survived ill will before. He will again."

"I don't doubt that for a moment."

"I should hope not." Drusus sailed into the room with Zayed in his wake, swathed in reams of toga, his arms wide like a stage orator about to deliver his finest declamation. "I'm late, Sethos. I've been entertaining the Third Legion. Not all of them, thank goodness, but enough to tramp sand across my priceless Median rugs."

Seth rolled from his couch, standing to embrace Drusus. "Things are moving quickly, *Pater*."

"They've trooped off to the crypts in search of the corpse for the moment. How soon they're back here will tell us whether we have an officer to deal with, or merely foot-soldiers looking for a month's pay in every gold coin."

"What was the reason they gave for the search?" Seth had already removed his *khammez* and a glance at Zayed sent the *promus* from the room in pursuit of full Roman attire. Ishaq had no intention of playing a subtle game, and the regalia of Roman nobility would be some proof against low attack.

"A report of a murdered prostitute, they claim."

"He didn't expect her body to be there, surely, so they were sent to compromise your trade discretion. Whoever he has in his pocket here doesn't know you've passed the licenses over to me. Yet."

"And by the time they get here, there'll be nothing left to find. I'm taking everything with me to the *Curia* now. You will have to tell them..."

"I won't be here." Seth cut him off, walking calmly from the *cenarium* and through the atrium toward his stairwell. "I'm going to the temple."

Juba took up Drusus' case as he followed. "Sethos wait until you've settled the legalities of this thing. Get their paperwork over to the satrap. Whatever charges Ishaq raises with the Romans can't hold once you've established these girls as slaves, and your slaves, at that." There was no serious crime that could be committed against a slave. They were goods, no more or less. Murder, rape, mutilation, they were no more than property damage, and not redeemable by law. "Leave it to me to keep the girls under cover, and we'll look at levying theft charges against him. It will bring him out

into the open.”

Drusus had given up the chase and had moved to the studio, seeking the documents he needed and those that must be kept in confidence, but Sethos led Juba up the stairs to his private suite.

“Dec can look after the legalities. He’s better at it than me, by far. I need you with me, and I want as many armed men as you can muster in a hurry.”

“Where?”

“I’m going to the temple, or the manse, where ever the girls are now.”

“You think he’d risk an attack? To kill two girls?”

“You still think he’d want to kill them?”

“You don’t?”

“I think he wants his inheritance back and they’re worth nothing to him dead.”

Seth had dressed in a tunic and he stood with his arms extended, as Zayed draped the noble length of toga.

“You go now, rally your men and bring them to the temple. I need a force big enough to hold out in a stand-off, but they need to be ready to fight if it comes to that.”

Juba shrugged. “I’m going. I’ll meet you at the temple. Tell me, are you going to keep an army posted around them indefinitely? There at the temple?”

“If I have to.”

The older man shook his head. “I hope this is all worth it.”

“It’s only gold,” Seth found a smile tugging at his lips. A mountain of gold, maybe.

“And when will you tell me what Ishaq is going to do?”

“As soon as I know, Juba.” Seth grinned. “I promise you, as soon as I know.”

Drusus stood in the study with three servants, their backs bent beneath heavy leather document cylinders. “You’re going to the priestess first, Aya? You may be right.” Checking briefly over the parchment he held, Drusus slid it into a backpack and walked to where Seth stood.

He looked questioningly at his father, looking for approval. “If they come here, Zayed will stall them off. If he can’t, there’s nothing here for them to find. And the Nabataeans will be confident as long as they have all this under their own roof.” He tapped the nearest document cylinder, then paused as though he feared rebuke. “How much credit have I drawn so far?”

“A lot. Not more than you can carry. Yet.” Drusus smiled some encouragement. “You will have to work hard to get back on top.”

Seth shrugged. “There are some things I’ve learned over the years. More than I realized.” He leaned to hug Drusus. “Don’t risk coming to the temple. Who do we know in the Nabataean senate that might be of use?”

Drusus grimaced, but the expression told Seth nothing.

“Romans? Do you have anyone on Jabal Habees that ranks high enough to trust?”

Again there was nothing to read in Drusus’ expression, and Seth let the question pass. There would be time enough to find those answers when he knew how far Ishaq was willing to go.

Jaida pinched their special incense into the brazier sparingly and sniffed at the rising smell, assuring herself that Seth had told her the truth in this, at least. Although she lit tiny blocks of both resins, she had not steeped khat in their temple wine, and no guards stood ready to fan the smoke back over the altar.

She worked under a pall of dread, her heartbeat driving all the nurtured calm from her system as she moved toward the time of testing. If this was nothing but a lie, a trick with herbs and hallucinations, what hope was there of an answer? And if it wasn’t, if

Isis herself chose this door to their consciousness, then her answer must be heeded. If the goddess had given them Sethos Asinius Drusus Aquila as protector, it was to him they had to go. Jaida watched her fingers as she pressed the incense casket closed. And if the goddess demanded their devotion it had to be given, and the temptations of freedom, even there in his house, had to be denied.

Drawing a deep, calming breath, Jaida smoothed her stiff linen shift and took her place, kneeling beside Ianthe at the altar.

The words of her prayer were illusive as she tested every sound and sensation, questioning every thought. Her lungs took air reluctantly, afraid to admit the scented atmosphere, and the tension in her neck and shoulders burned. The silver goblet in her hand shook with the strain of holding it still, and she lifted it to her lips, sipping and bowing her head with mumbled thanks.

Even in the face of so much doubt, a long familiarity with their incantation drew the words into her mouth and then slowly into a rhythm that was set deeper than thought. With the rhythm came relief, and with the relief, slow breaths that carried Babu's chosen inspiration into the blood and on into the spirit.

Beside her Ianthe tilted gently forward, her equilibrium disturbed by the air around her, and when her forehead touched the altar stone, a rush of giggles bubbled from her mouth. An unintended smile broke over Jaida's mouth and she forced her features to straighten. Her fears had ebbed on the tide of incense, and her confidence in the wisdom of the universe expanded. Their prayer had receded into murmured syllables that made no obvious sense and the slap-handed way the resident priestess whacked the temple gong, struck them both as funny. Stifling giggles, Jaida ordered her heavy limbs to comply as she struggled to her feet and pulled her sister upright.

Even with her senses heightened, with her head light and arms leaden, this time there was no sense of being overwhelmed by the circling silver wash. She found it hard to speak, her mouth was dry and her tongue thick, but her memory and purpose had not deserted her. Facing Ianthe, her sister's lovely face lost in blissful calm, Jaida held to her grasp on the importance of their ritual. Taking Ianthe's hand, she led them from the dense smoke of the holy place and out into the deep shade of the unlit auditorium.

On the dais they stood facing each other, breathing the cleaner air and letting their minds clear. They needed no questions, only the patience and humility to receive the answers when they came.

"I see Jupiter," Ianthe whispered. "Shining in the sunlight. Angry."

And Jaida let an image form of Jupiter, so stern and naked, shifting as she watched from blinding white marble into warm golden flesh. Above her his accusing fingers relaxed and curled as they reached to her cheek, his cold eyes darkened, and his soft lips hung only inches from her own. Heat rolled up into her chest and pushed a groan from her mouth as she stepped back. Her body tried to carry her away from the vision, but her eyelids refused to open, refused to relinquish the grip they held.

She swallowed, searching her mouth for moisture, and raised her fingertips to her lips. "What else?" she asked, turning her face down.

"He's cold. The stone is cold. I remember, do you, the cold of the statues in the *aedicula*." Ianthe's voice was wisps of air and her eyes were hardly open. "The gods were cold and we prayed in the smoke from their altar."

Jaida remembered clearly the bite of the stone on her bare knees, and the fear and confusion, mumbling an approximation of the prayers her sisters seemed to recall so much better than she did. She remembered deep shadows and the hours that passed in meditation, when she dared not look to the stairwell behind, where the shafts of afternoon sunlight would tell them how much longer they must kneel. She remembered a single

ray of sunlight on her podium, lighting endless blocks of Latin script and endless creeds to learn by heart.

"Ishaq brought us fruit," Ianthe said. "And he smelled of sweat and leather, and his skin was tanned by the desert sun, and he used to make us laugh."

His face, in Jaida's memory, opened like a flower from bud to bloom. From the smooth-cheeked grin of a young man, she watched the lines of laughter etch deeper into his features and become lines of care, as his temples greyed and his eyes cooled and narrowed their gaze. His skin faded from deep umber as if the blood had drained from his throat, and he hardened there before her into Mars in stone, the Grecian Ares, cold, and stern and furious.

"He stopped laughing, though." Jaida spoke almost to herself, her tongue too dry for conversation, and she turned back to the holy place, moving slowly to fetch her goblet of wine. She sipped, and carried the drink back to offer to her sister.

Ianthe groaned, her fine features twisted in distress. She was shaking her head, slowly, sadly. "I hear crying."

"Who is crying?" Jaida asked, her own eyes burning at the sight of her sister's pain.

"I am," Ianthe whispered. "Deep inside. I am. Crying and crying, tears that will never end."

Jaida heard the weeping too, all the fear and sadness of little girls clinging to each other in the darkness. Alone and afraid and forsaken.

She closed her eyes and rode the swirling movement in her head, trying to escape the memories. Away from the cold stone and darkness there was light and hope. "Why are the gods angry?" she thought, and the words came from her mouth unbidden. But she knew the answer before her sister spoke.

"Because the children are crying." Fat tears pushed between Ianthe's lashes and rushed down her cheeks.

Somewhere there was light and Jaida knew they needed to find it. The words in her head were shining, they reflected something more than darkness and fear, and they had the crystal chime of Isis' blessing. She wanted to watch the sounds forming and washing away, to understand their secrets as the goddess made them clearer, but a footfall nearby snagged at her attention.

Seth walked toward her out of the temple's midday shadows. Of all times and places, this was the last she'd have thought to see his face. But here he was god. He alone walked between the guards that were set about them. Today again, he dressed as one of the race of lords.

He looked uncertain, a small frown on his brow and his step hesitant. Before he reached the last line of seats, he stopped, waiting for some sign or movement, anything that would tell him what she thought.

She didn't think.

Her heart leapt into a thunderous rush that echoed in her burning ears. Tears and laughter clashed together and she bit her lip, afraid of both the terror and relief she felt at the sight of him. He didn't speak, or if he did the noise of her own blood was too loud in her ears, and her eyelids were too heavy to gather light enough to see. Releasing her sister's hand, she turned and let her feet find the two small steps down.

Standing before him, she said, "The gods are angry," and waited to see how he dealt with the news.

He nodded, his soft gaze fixed on hers. "I'm not surprised."

A smile touched his mouth for just a moment and she watched him breathe the air, saw him cast a glance up to the stage, to where Ianthe stood. At that moment, she

wanted most to lean into his warmth, to rest her head on his shoulder and feel the strength of his arms around her, to breathe from his skin a scent more potent than any temple incense.

“Why are you here?” he asked. “Who is this for?”

She answered simply, “Us.”

“Why?”

Ianthe called out, her voice grainy with old emotions that had risen to the surface. “Because we’re afraid.” Standing above them as she did, with the smoky light of altar candles framing her slim figure, she appeared childlike, and Jaida watched her fiery aura flash and flare.

Seth called her back to his face, from the firelight to the profound darkness of his eyes, and to his lips as he spoke. “Did the goddess tell you that you have an army in place around you, now? Did she tell you you’re safe?”

He watched Jaida as intently as she watched him, as though the answer would come from her lips instead of her sister’s.

“She’s calling her children back,” Ianthe said. “The gods are angry, and the Eternal Mother wants her children returned.”

Sadness moved in his eyes, even if his expression didn’t change, and Jaida read it there as she nodded slowly to affirm Ianthe’s vision. “Yes.”

“So you’re going to stay here?” He frowned slightly, but nodded. “All right.”

Jaida turned to her sister, silently willing her to answer ‘No,’ to say they wanted to stay where there was clean air and sunlight. Where there were gardens and green growing things that softened the edges of stone warmed by the sun.

On the dais above, Ianthe raised her hands to her forehead, covering her eyes and her cheeks, swaying slightly. When she spoke again, some of the roughness of emotion had left her voice, but still she spoke softly. “Are there armies around us?”

Seth shifted his weight forward and heat of his chest reached the bare skin of Jaida’s arm. It seemed to pool there, growing in her awareness and spreading on silent ripples.

“Yes,” he answered cautiously. “At least one.”

“Is Ishaq coming with an army?”

“Yes. Or part of one.”

She’d been left out of the conversation, and the importance of the words he spoke was slipping. Her eyes ran down over her own hot skin, so creamy pale beside his tan, and her attention fell to the taut cloth of his tunic where it crossed his chest. The white linen of his toga fell in graceful folds from his left shoulder to his hip, and she followed each loose ridge, her thumb grazing fingers that itched to touch the cloth.

Ianthe asked, “Which army poses the greatest threat?”

Tension set in the muscle of his forearm and he tilted his head. His silence seemed to stretch and bow, and she moved her study back to where Ianthe stood. At last he asked, “Threat to whom?”

“To us.” Ianthe pointed back and forth between Jaida and herself, then stepped down from the stage and moved slowly closer to where they stood.

“That depends on where you want to be.”

Ianthe surprised Jaida by smiling. “We know where we want to be.”

That was plain. It needed no inspiration to know that they wanted sunshine. With every glimpse of freedom, their familiar world of cold stone and shadow grew more oppressive. Their vision and all the memories it carried, had shoved roughly at the sorest parts of their hearts, reminding them of pain and what their devotion had cost. Each moment spent outside Al-Uzza’s temple manse, with its thick air and animosity,

made the chance for self-determination so much more appealing.

But all that could matter was what the goddess wanted. They had come to her for answers, and as Jaida looked to her sister for affirmation, she knew what that answer had to be. The goddess wanted her children back. They had to stay here.

Choosing the sun would make all they had endured worthless.

Ianthe smiled still, her eyes unfocused, her gaze set on some vision Jaida couldn't share. "And now we know what we have to do."

Seth asked, "What it is? Does your goddess want to tell me, or do servants like me have to guess?"

"To serve Isis, we must be safe. To return our sisters to their rightful place, an army must be defeated."

He laughed dismissively. "Which army will be defeated, then? Is she planning to defeat them herself?"

"The goddess has chosen you to achieve her purpose."

Jaida's eyes flared in surprise. She closed her mouth. Apart from the seductive call of sleep there was nothing in her head that sounded like instruction. She had no direction and no guidance. There were memories, some too painful to recount, and an ache for a life she'd never known, but nothing she could call divine intention.

"Has she? And does my judgment count?"

"Yes. It does."

Jaida looked unsteadily from one speaker to the next, her heartbeat climbing toward panic. Yet again decisions that would change her life forever were being made in front of her, and she could do no more than gape.

Seth's eyes were set on Ianthe's smile, his gaze so tightly focused he seemed to be reading her face. "And if I say you are safest in my home? What does the goddess say to that?"

Jaida tried to speak, but her throat had closed. The goddess knew the dangers, just as Jaida herself knew them. In this man's home every temptation, every traitorous desire, every wicked thought or action could be magnified a thousand fold. And standing next to him, every single heartbeat drove a pulse through her body that yearned for the comfort of his arms.

Ianthe nodded. More than that, she bowed her head, her long ropes of hair falling forward over hands held together in supplication. "As she wills," she said.

Words stuttered on Jaida's tongue and Seth turned to face her, surprise and delight slowly remaking his features. She had seen that look before and seen amusement light the darkness of his eyes. She had felt his nearness then like a wind off the desert, heating her skin and drying her mouth.

"Your goddess wants her children, your sisters, to serve her as they did?"

Jaida was unsure. "Yes," she tried, but a shrug pushed her shoulders up and she turned to Ianthe for help. Her pulse thumped in her stomach and in her ears, blood heated her cheeks with a rush of bewilderment.

Ianthe stepped closer. "She does."

"Then they're best where they are. If that's what you want too, it will save lives if you go to Ishaq with your sisters, now. Juba's men will die for nothing if the goddess wants you there."

Something like a fallen sun exploded in her head and Jaida stepped backward, gasping in shock. She spun from Seth to Ianthe and back, trying to make sense of such a statement. Ishaq represented every terror she could name. Her sister had been brutally murdered, the others lost somewhere in the desert. He had become the stuff of nightmares and yet, here was their only hope telling them they should return to their

tormentor.

Ianthe was silent, and Seth continued, "He wants his inheritance back. None of you have any value to him, dead or," he paused to emphasize the bleakness of his warning, "damaged." As if it was no more than an aside, he said, "And he wants to ruin Drusus. Maybe me, when he has all the facts.

"He's got their money, now, that he didn't count on having before, and possibly enough allies in the army here to instigate a siege. If he has to."

He turned to face Jaida squarely. "So tell me, does your goddess want you kept as you were, as slaves in her service? With Ishaq, as Babu intended? Or does she want you and your sisters free?"

Beside her, Ianthe made small gagging sounds. All the confidence of her vision had deserted her in a flash of terror and she stood next to her sister and their would-be saviour, choking on indecision. But Jaida hardly recognized her presence.

Adrenaline was racing to shunt the drugs from her system. It was strengthening weak knees and cramping in her empty stomach, replacing the opiate soft-focus with clarity and harsh reality. This was so much more than their lives and futures, so much more than arguments over ownership or intention. Lailah was dead. And now he was telling her others would die, an army, on her word.

In the world inside her head, the goddess was stony silent. Only her breath dragged and her heart beat roughly against her brain, as the cold logic of her own arguments pushed her up against the wall. How many deaths could she weigh against her own fear? How much faith could she put in the goddess' protection? How willing was she to stand forward on her own avowal that slavery was tolerable and service all that mattered? Service in Ishaq's bloody grasp.

Ianthe was silent.

"My sisters have already chosen their path," she started cautiously. "They chose freedom. In service, or not, they chose to be free."

Words came thickly from her dry mouth and she swallowed convulsively, clutching her hands together and aching to run away from his stare. All of her wanted to find a dark corner and to fold down over herself and hide from the choices she had come to. "I choose...." She stopped, turning to Ianthe for some kind of support and encouragement, but her sister had covered her face and turned away. "I choose," she repeated, her voice trailing into air.

Drawing herself up taller, she said, "We choose to do as you say."

It was said. The choice was made.

"Whatever I say?" Glints of victory had gathered in his eyes and on his mouth.

"Yes," she said, looking down. Her heart rushed and stuttered, but there was lightness in its beat. There was relief in making the choice. The consequences still had to be met, but in the end if the choice was between shadow and sunlight, she had chosen as she must. "The goddess has chosen you to protect us."

Ianthe whipped her face around, glaring guiltily from the shadows. She gave her head the slightest of shakes.

"Then let's hope she makes it easy to get you home." He pointed up to the holy place, where Al-Uzza's priestess hovered over small but obviously critical tasks. "Finish what you have to do here. You won't be able to go back to the manse. Anything that can't be replaced can be collected later."

He turned to walk back down the central aisle. "Stay here until I come back."

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CHAPTER TWELVE.

Seth strode to the doorway, shock still bubbling too close to laughter in his chest. He bit his lip to halt the smile that crept over his mouth again, and forced his attention out into the white glare of the day.

The Nabataean guard was overtly on display. They were darlings of the unseated royal tribe, proudly evocative of ancient strength and trusted even with the security of noble Malichus II's family. They'd been *in situ* from day one and their presence now in greater numbers drew no more than passing interest. Less visible to those who weren't determined to seek them out, aggregations of subtler militiamen were taking up positions in the shades and alleyways. Along verdant paths that led from the rear of the temple to the manse, and under the lip of the nearby hillocks, men loitered, too numerous to miss, too seemingly innocuous to watch.

Juba was worth every denar.

The man himself was not immediately visible, and Seth chewed his lip in the last shade of the portico, as he reformed strategies in his mind.

Above them to the west, the fort on Jabal Habees overlooked the city and the busy temple precinct. From the Roman annexation more than a decade ago, the Third Legion had positioned a large and growing vexillation high on the natural outcrop.

Once a royal residence, it had every natural advantage for security and observation. And a keen watcher on those heights would know in advance that the numbers at the temple were growing. But soldiers, Roman or otherwise, had to cover distance. And unless they were already moving down into the city, the position of the fort would give them no advantage.

Their advantage in Petra, Ishaq's advantage, he knew now would be in numbers.

No men in uniform would have searched Dec's house without an officer's order. Ishaq had to have the aid of a centurion, at least, which meant at least eighty men at his command. Above that guess, there was no limit. Above it, speculating on rank and numbers became pointless. In this distant province, peaceful now and under easy command, corruption in the ranks went some way to ease the boredom of men toned by warfare. Even the *Praefectus Castrorum* himself could not be above suspicion. For the moment it was irrelevant.

What mattered now was travelling quickly and safely between al-Uzza's winged lions and the sanctuary of his home.

Seth spoke discretely and respectfully in Aramaic, asking the nearest of the Nabataean muscle militia, "Is Juba here yet?"

The guard remained silent, maintaining his search for any subtle threat, but he inclined his head slightly to one side, his eyebrows alone directing Seth's attention to the manse. So far as Juba knew they were securing the temple grounds and that plan had just changed. With a quick backward glance into the temple shadows, Seth slipped down to the lower court and jogged the path to the manse.

Impatient, he called from beneath the arched *loggia*, "Juba!"

The scuffed rush of feet through the entryway preceded several personal guards, and Juba stepped out to the pavement, his hand shading his eyes.

"Change of plans, my friend. The Priestesses need an armed escort to my house immediately. If they searched there this morning we may well meet the Roman squad coming back this way. I'll deal with them quickly, I hope. If I can get the girls through my door, he'll need the governor himself to get them back out."

Juba had the good grace not to swear, but his nod of acceptance was less than

deferential. "It doesn't matter then, who's seen? And the men here now, are they to follow?"

Seth nodded as he started to turn away, his mind already moving over the familiar route to his home. Walking backward as he spoke, he called, "I need your litter. If you don't want to walk, be back inside and ready to leave as soon as you've got your men in formation."

The distance between his home and the city centre had always seemed a luxury, with haste in any venture frowned upon by Nabataean society. Slaves and servants ran if speed was needed, but for those with higher social standing, be they Roman or natives of the Arabian province, decorum was the order of the day.

Today the niceties of stately travel were cast off. Nabataean guards had replaced the bearers, and the six men jogged with each litter, making the journey less comfortable and conversation difficult. Around the jostling vehicles, other guards moved in tight formation, but Seth struggled and failed to keep his attention on such details.

Summer sun made light of the canvas canopy and burst through beaded curtains in pursuit of the priestess' skin. It caught loose threads of hair, sparkling like a halo about her head and shoulders, and he found himself transfixed by the study of every tiny detail of her face. Even the shapeless white shift she wore seemed to drink in sunlight and throw it back in pristine glare. It shone like fine marble, stiff and unforgiving against her golden skin. He knew the soft cream curves that hid beneath that stern fabric, and the memory was sharper, more compelling for its intrusion.

Her eyes were reddened by smoke and lack of sleep and her cheeks were pale, but she held herself clenched, her arms and legs pulled into a tight ball, refusing to relax into the cushions. She refused also to meet his eyes, choosing instead to watch the glare bleaching Petra's greens and rose golds into dusty silver as they passed.

Without shifting her study but aware, it seemed, of his, she asked, "Would you have taken us to Ishaq? To our sisters?"

That was a question too difficult to answer truthfully. He wanted to be able to say 'If that is what you chose to do', but his heart balked at the words. That choice was no less abhorrent than keeping the girls in bondage for himself. He'd been truthful; it seemed unlikely they would be physically harmed if their owner had been handed his inheritance back without a struggle. But what a price. No gold, not the mountains and canyons that surrounded the city, could redeem such a sacrifice. When his silence finally drew her gaze, he had to answer. "No."

She nodded very slightly. Her pale eyes shone in the light, emphasized by a fine line of black kohl, and their pinkness looked like tears that hadn't fallen. "I don't understand how we could be safer there," she said. "He murdered Lailah."

Seth turned the gold around his index finger, watching red flash from its intaglioed cabochon. He'd offered to return them to their old life because knowledge of that option was their right, and Lailah's fate was part of that whole.

Hypocrisy burned like indigestion. He had no right to protect them from the whole truth. He was no shepherd guarding livestock and no father with his children. If any of them had stayed to hear the possibilities and threats, this situation would never have arisen. No, he could not have sent them back. But he owed her the truth. "Ishaq lost his inheritance and his father. Without you he has nothing.

"He had nothing to bargain with, just as his father had nothing, except to sacrifice one of you. He could never have known he would find the girls returning immediately to Alexandria, so he had to have bargained with men to retake them here, and then to be paid in the only currency he had. Flesh.

"He couldn't have taken one girl, let alone all six, from a guarded caravan without men. A lot of men. And only men who knew him would have taken that kind of risk on his promise of payment. They had to be comrades."

"So he gave Lailah to the men who helped him?" Her voice was weak, but didn't waver. "As payment?"

"Fellow legionaries. It's the only thing that makes sense. It seems he's not a vicious man by nature; Zaliki would have gone to him of her own free will."

"He has their gold. He could have paid men."

"He couldn't have known that when he started. All he would have known was Drusus had them and he brought them to Petra."

"But they left her on your doorstep."

Seth shrugged. "Maybe. He doesn't know too much about me. It was Drusus he sent troops after this morning. Lailah may have told them you had all been at my house. Or she might have tried to get there by herself. When they were done."

A knot of pain tied briefly in her features but she met his gaze squarely.

"He has no need to harm any more of them, now. He has gold. If any man touches any of your sisters now, it is only jeopardizing the fortune he stands to make."

For long moments she stared at him, heedless of the thrust and jerk of the litter. The frank intensity of her study burned. In all the precious moments he had taken in the last days to watch her, she had never dared to face him so searchingly. "We should have gone to him, then."

It wasn't confidence that fuelled her fearlessness, he could see that. It was a desperate search for hope.

"We would have been safe enough. I didn't understand that, you see. The men here, Juba's men, will have to fight now for our safety."

"No." The idea was sickening, and it flared into anger that lit his eyes. "How many times do I have to tell you? The future they had planned for you was not a life of comfort and safety. It was a short but lucrative gamble. They would have used you up and thrown what was left away."

Her nostrils flared over rapid breathing, but she refused to let herself look away. "You don't understand. The goddess didn't choose you to protect us. Ianthe made that up. She said it was part of an oracle because we were afraid and she wanted to go back to the protection of your home."

He almost laughed, but the deadly seriousness of her attitude caught the sound before it left his throat. "Did she?" He could not insult the faith that gave her the only truths she knew. "It won't make any difference, now. Not to me or the men I pay."

She held her ground. "Ishaq won't give up without a fight. People will die for us."

"He's made a formidable enemy in Drusus, Jaida. In its crudest form, he's stolen very valuable merchandise that still belongs to us. That might have been all, but he tried this morning to scandalize the household and to compromise Dec's trade licenses. He tried to ruin him financially. A wiser man would have taken his gold and disappeared. Greed and vengeance is going to cost him dearly."

Trembling moved over her lips and she blinked repeatedly, forcing herself to continue with ideas that pained or terrified her. "So there would be a battle anyway? Men would die, either way?"

"I hope not. But it's a possibility."

The silent stare resumed, her breathing hard in the small space, and Seth found himself straining forward, anticipating something more than words. The sharp focus of her eyes on his and the rasp of her shallow breath intimated passion, pleasure, and his body responded with a hard and distracting pulse. Then she said, "Ianthe wasn't lying

when she said you pose as many threats to us as he does.”

There was no answer to that but to wait.

“We don’t know this world. Your world.” Her eyes begged a silent appeal. “The frescoes, the party, we’ve never seen the life that you say the whole world lives. Our faith and service are all we know. We’ve never had those choices. Until now. We don’t know what’s right and wrong, or what to do and what to run from.”

“No one does,” he said gently. “Those are the choices free people make every day. You can learn.”

“Not like that. Don’t you see?”

Yes he saw. She was pleading for space and time and understanding. But no part of him wanted to move away. The confines of the litter suited him well, with her near enough to touch and smell and the memory of her honey sweet mouth called to mind with every word she spoke.

“Yes.” He nodded. “I understand.”

He had Drusus as a model for acceptance, and Kartikeya to remind him the importance of challenges. But he had so much more life to offer her than any smoky altar could. He could wrap her in the safety of his arms, closer and more and certain than any god she named. And no statue she would kneel before could hope to bring a rush of heat into her blood or desire to her flesh as he could.

He looked to the outside, moving beaded fabric from his view as he checked their progress. He had one wish, at least, that she was safe inside his walls, or she soon would be. If that was the best he could hope for, so be it.

He turned his face away and Jaida felt the hard resolve that kept her upright fail. Her spine seemed to melt and buckle, and only the press of her palms on her folded legs kept her from sagging into the softness around her.

Every breath she drew dragged the warm smell of him further into her lungs. When she looked into his face, his eyes held her tenderly and led her deeper under the spell he cast. And all the time, inside she screamed in fear while her heart tried to convince her she was perfectly safe.

She hung her head and wished herself back to the threshold, where the goddess’ words were just about to form, where light and guidance were hers to take.

But her body played traitor again and again. While she could sit, wrapping her limbs up in a ball of uncertainty, the litter made too small a space for Seth to easily share. He lay propped on an elbow. His ankles crossed beside her, his russet sandals richly tooled and studded, and the warm tan of his calf not a hand span away. Further, if she let her gaze slide, the hard muscle of his thighs, dusted with soft dark hair, slipped under the frayed and intricately knotted fringing of his tunic.

The mass of his toga spread about him like fine bedlinen and the intimacy of the image it stirred sent her eyes to the canopy above in search of distraction.

She was tired, and the dry burn of unshed tears made her eyes all the more desirous of sleep. How good it would feel to stretch out beside him there, her hips tucked back into the curve of his, his strong arms wrapped around her.

The wide dark leather of the cuffs he wore accentuated his thick wrists, and as always, the gold of his rings called her attention like a siren’s song. What would they do, those fingers, long and strong and tanned against her, spreading over her own skin? In the painting on his wall, the woman had closed her eyes, resting back and trusting her lover’s tender touch. Her breath caught on a painful stutter and she groaned a small sigh of regret. Just to know that touch, just once to feel the thrill of surrender, to lie in his arms and let fear fall away. To rest. And feel safe.

One of the guards tugged the curtain open and called a warning in Aramaic, and

Seth pulled himself up and rolled out through the curtain before Jaida could follow her daydream to its conclusion.

Ahead of them, Juba's litter slowed to a halt at the direction of a Roman centurion. Jaida peered between the front curtains, watching as the litters were set down and Juba made a less elegant descent to stand beside Seth, waiting in the sun's white glare.

"Sethos Asinius Drusus, an order was made to search your house." The centurion barked, making no attempt at eye contact as he strode to where Seth stood.

"By whom?"

Behind the centurion Jaida counted two squads of eight, all carrying pikes and shields, armed and armoured. Beside them were four Arabian auxiliaries in tunic and mail, with their short leather *schenti* and high brass grieves. The officer ignored the question, continuing his officious shout. "The search was made without your presence or consent."

"Is that so," Seth asked calmly. "What were you searching for? Was there a charge?"

"Suspicion of sedition." The centurion grinned, unconcerned with the protocols that should have been followed. Seth wore the narrow purple stripe of equestrian rank: nobility.

"You're reaching high. Who suspects sedition? On what grounds?"

"You're standing in the middle of a private army, even now. That's raising concerns." Rome had no love for the mercenary armies that thrived in and outside the borders of her colonies. In the hands of wealthy merchants, even Roman citizens, they could represent threats or support uprisings where ever there were hints of unrest.

"This is no army of mine." Seth tilted his head at the nearest Nabataean guard. "These men are privately contracted to anyone who needs security. Including our Royal hosts in Petra. This is their coordinator. He's the man to ask about deployment."

Juba bowed his head slightly.

"For now, if you finished your search of my home, you won't need to hold us up any longer. Good day to you."

A tap of the centurion's *vitis* and behind him each of the infantrymen drew swords. Jaida's hand came up to her mouth, catching a sob of fear. Beside her and behind, the Nabataean guards had made no response. They stood like bronzed colossi, unmoved by the threat of violence.

The street in which they'd been stopped carried fair traffic from the city to the better residential suburbs, and the faces standing gaping were for the most part wealthy faces. A ruffle of dissent moving up the road from behind made Jaida duck quickly back to peek through the rear curtains. Unformed units in striped *khameez* and trousers or in short tunics and rough loin clouts, all heavily armed, made their way through the milling audience to the side of the standoff.

Seth spoke again, his tone allowing no room for misunderstanding or delay. "Centurion," he announced, obviously speaking for the benefit of those on the streets around them. "If you have orders to detain me, they had better come from the top."

"Every one of the men here will resist any effort you make to arrest me or any other member of this party. There will be blood from one end of this road to the other. Think carefully." He let the officer consider the growing number of armed irregulars crowding onto the street and sidewalks around them, and the comparatively small number of soldiers at his command.

"I'm going to speculate that you don't want any harm to come to the priestesses, here." Seth opened his hand to the litters and Jaida felt herself melting into the cushions underneath her. "That being the case, they'll be safest at my house. I'll be waiting there

with them for the orders that you bring from up there.” He jerked a thumb back toward the canyon walls far behind, where the fort overlooked the valley.

For some time the old soldier weighed options. His stance and attitude said clearly that he was not a man used to being defied. At length he raised the vine cane, and as one his troops stood easy, their *gladii* slipped back into scabbards.

“Good.” Seth stood closer to the officer, his voice lower, and Jaida strained to hear what she could of the conversation. “How many years of service are you gambling on this, my friend?” he asked. Without looking at the men at arms he asked, “How many of them are you willing to scourge when this comes back to bite you?”

“If you have orders, give me a name.” Seth paused expectantly, but there was no reply. “If not, you’re on dangerous ground. I will have your head on a platter. Believe it.”

The centurion was not unmoved, but there was no fear in the face he turned briefly to Jaida. “It’s all a gamble,” he said. “You use what the gods give you, I’ll do the same. I’ll see you again.”

Snapping into tight formation at his nod, the Roman squads stepped into stride and moved past the litters, on toward the distant fort.

Seth turned to give a sharp acknowledgement to his militia, then moved with heavier steps back to the litter, and sat, drawing his legs up as they moved off again along the road.

Jaida tried to stifle doubts and fears that might sound like foolishness. Ignorance of things these people took for granted was an endless source of embarrassment, but the tramp of feet still echoed on the cobbles of the street, and as the guard picked up the pace she couldn’t keep the words from forming. “Will they come back?”

He sat facing her, his eyes tracking hers back and forth and moving slowly over her face, her cheeks, her throat. He found a small smile, and answered, “Yes. But not before you’re safe behind the walls.”

Safe? There was nowhere safe.

“Did you know him? Was he...? Do you think he was one of the men who...?”

“I don’t know.” Seth cut her off, and she forced herself to dismiss empathic terror and images of violence and rape. “But he has too much confidence for someone so low in the pecking order. It’s not often a professional soldier will put his career in jeopardy.”

Jaida read the importance of that fact in the clench of his features, but there was no way for her to translate it into something she could understand. He was thinking hard, shaking his head in silent confusion and more questions rose than she could put into words. Striving for basics, she asked, “Professional soldier? Is there something different about him?”

When he trained his full attention on her, Jaida felt her stomach flip. When he caught her in his gaze, her pulse responded to the touch and she leaned into his words. “It’s nothing unusual in itself. It’s just the fact that he’s not a conscript; he’s still in service by choice. But he’s not following orders on this; he’s acting on his own volition and risking a charge of insubordination and decimation for his men.”

Jaida shook her head and felt stupid. Soldiers, armies, they were part of the life that went on around her, but she understood nothing of them.

“He’s a centurion,” Seth explained. “He’s fifty; maybe fifty five. If he’s a Roman citizen, conscripted for twenty-five years, he finished his term long ago. But good officers are precious, they’re poached from legion to legion and paid well for their service. He doesn’t come from money or he wouldn’t still be here, no matter what the army offered him. This is his career. His life. Why would he put that at risk?”

“Could he be foreign born? Like Ishaq?”

"No difference," he answered. "If he was recruited as a POW at some time in the past, or conscripted as part of a provincial levy on young men, he'd still only have twenty-five years to serve. Then citizenship and discharge. In the end it comes to the same thing. He's still in uniform by choice or financial necessity."

Ishaq had been a soldier for as long as any of the girls had known him, and he too must be nearing fifty years old. If men without family wealth remained, by necessity, in the hard world of the legions, his anger at Babu's loss must be great indeed.

"You think he knows Ishaq? That they're both risking their careers on the promise of payment when...?"

Seth caught hold of her hand and a sob that alloyed shock and pleasure jolted from her mouth. Her question touched on something more important than she could guess, and his face seemed to light with inspiration. "How much do you remember about Ishaq? Tell me everything you know."

He kept his hold and her fingers trembled in the warmth of his hand. What did she remember? Nothing. Nothing she could see that was important. "He brought us gifts." She shrugged. "He was the only person that ever brought us gifts."

What else? She tried to force her mind back over years when he had brought the brightest days they'd known. But Seth's touch was a distraction. The jiggling of their litter made her feel less steady, and his grip at once gave her stability and pulled her inexorably toward ruin. Jaida closed her eyes and dragged her concentration from temptation to an image of Ishaq.

"I didn't know him well; he was already a grown man when we came to Babu. When we were small he made us laugh. He smelled of leather and horses and sweat, but we saw so little of him to remember. There were too few days we saw him."

Her memory skipped to the visions that came in the temple of Al Uzza. She understood nothing of the world of men and arms, but she understood something of the role she'd been raised to fill. She understood the oracle. "I saw him today as Ares. As Mars," she answered. "Isis showed me the god of armies and he was angry. I saw him age and change from laughter to stone."

Jaida nodded to herself. In her heart she felt the truth of what she'd seen. "This is a time when the gods walk among us." Carefully she slipped her fingers from his hand, keeping her face turned down and saving herself from the heat of his eyes.

"Did Ishaq, man or god, wear armour? Did he dress as a Roman? Or as a *Natione*?"

She pressed her eyes, trying to set memories. "Both." The answer seemed useless. "When he was younger, he always wore a tunic and leather loincloth with linen breeches. But in the last few years, he's worn silver scale armour."

Seth was silent; the hand that had held hers had clenched and tapped a thoughtful drum on the cushion between them.

"But the goddess showed him naked. Brave and bare and cold." That had to be important, it was part of what she'd been shown, what she had to see. The vision had to be spoken.

"And the gods are angry?" There was no ridicule in his tone, at least. "Why?"

Because the children were crying. But that was a vision she couldn't speak. He had no right to make so little of the life they'd lived. Their fear. Their pain. Their tears. "You came to the temple before our Lady answered."

"The Queen of Heaven is angry? She wants her children returned," he reminded her. "And the other gods? Who else has an interest in this mess?"

"Jupiter," she whispered, recalling without effort the stern white stone melting into golden skin and warm dark eyes. Looking up, she met those eyes and felt her heart

squeeze blood from her face. Zeus, king of the heavens. Osiris, lord of both worlds, beloved of Isis herself.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN.

Tamir stepped forward when they reached the house. Zayed led Seth across the atrium and into the study as soon as his foot crossed the threshold, and the older man silently ushered the girls deeper into the house.

With Ianthe following silently, Jaida slowed her step, pausing as she recognized the brightly tiled *tablinum*. Ahead, through an open doorway lay Seth's private garden. The scent of honeysuckle drifted in, and water chiming over rocks and reclining nymphs filled the air with subtle music. With the sound and scent came memories and a sudden flush of guilty pleasure. This house hid threats in every corner.

"Jaida, look." Ianthe pressed past, walking cautiously out into the sunlit oasis. She reached for scented ivory clusters that trailed from the balcony above, and made small cooing noises as she touched the moving water. "It's perfect. Come and see."

Beside her, Tamir raised a hand to guide her through a narrow passage upward, and Jaida froze. "I've seen it," she said apprehensively. "And I know what's up there."

She was shaking her head, talking small backward steps when Tamir smiled warmly, and placed a gentle hand on hers. "Don't be afraid, child." He struggled to speak, and Jaida stared harder at the servant, at his mouth and chin and down over the brown skin of his throat. Scars were massed about his neck where flesh had once been mangled, lacerated beyond hope of repair. "I chose the main suite for you. The rooms are quite separate from his."

Across the narrow alcove, another stairwell rose steeply into shadows, and she found herself looking at the ceiling above, as if it betrayed evidence of his private quarters, here over their heads.

"There are other rooms," she said. "Suites of rooms." And she pointed vaguely through the door toward the guest's wing with its frescoes and its naked goddesses.

Tamir looked horrified, closing his hand over hers, his rheumy eyes pleading or admonishing. "No," he chided. "You are a guest. A welcome guest. I would not want my own child to take a room down that end of the house."

"Is it so bad?" she asked, unconvinced and unwilling to take a single step up.

"Not so bad," the old man said. Conversation was not easy for him, but he showed no resentment for the effort it required. "But you are so much more than the guests who use those rooms. And Juba's men might need them."

He took two steps up the stairs and motioned for her to follow. In the clear white light outside the door, Ianthe turned her face up to the sun, smiling, with her arms outstretched as if she could absorb enough light to banish all the cold stone and shadows of their past.

"It was me who had these rooms made ready for you, and he wouldn't want me to upset you over the choice. But he will want you safe and there is no safer place in the whole city than this."

And Ianthe felt that, too. She too had chosen this place, this house, as a haven against the threats that hovered all around them. Sighing, Jaida resigned herself to good grace and followed up the stairs.

The house was undisturbed by the intrusion of the troops.

They had made no effort to damage or disrupt anything, and their search, although necessarily fruitless, had no obvious intent. They had moved through almost every room, paying no special heed to the study, or the missing documents, or even to evidence of Lailah's violent end.

Seth rinsed his hands in cool water and wiped a damp cloth over his brow and shoulders. "Zayed. We'll eat in the annex where it's cooler. Make sure the ladies have anything they could want, and bring them down when the food's prepared. Arrange to send someone back to the temple manse before nightfall to collect everything they own. Make sure the priestess of Al Uzza gets a decent payment for her trouble." With Juba following like a loyal pup, he strode back along the main corridor to the baths, issuing the orders as he went.

As Juba stripped and stepped down into the cool water after Seth, he said, "My boys tell me that the centurion who commanded the search didn't come down from Jabal Habees. It looks like he is stationed with the cohort in the southern wadi. I've got people chasing information on him, now. I have irregulars in place around the house here and at the servant's residence. The Nabataean guard will take rooms within the walls."

"We've got a problem." Seth closed his eyes and rested back onto the marble bolster, letting his body rise slowly in the comforting water. "Our man Ishaq is not an ex-soldier. He's still serving. And he didn't have to follow the girls here. He was already here when they arrived."

Juba was silent. The complication of finding their quarry had just been simplified. The chance of isolating him, capturing him, and thereby releasing the women he had abducted, had just become a logistical nightmare.

"When I know the rank of the cohort serving in the southern barracks, we'll get a better idea of how many men he's got at his disposal." Seth remained still, speaking to the air above.

"That's the easiest question to answer. I can have the rank of the cohort by the time we've eaten." Juba continued, thinking aloud, "He could have picked up the caravan almost as soon as it left our gates. He could have stopped them without a hiccough, and brought the girls back here under escort, and no one even raised an eyebrow. Whoever he is, he could have five hundred men around his prisoners if you think he has them in the barracks at the southern fort."

Seth shook his head. "What are the chances of hiding five girls, those girls, safely in a *castrum*? Not good, not unless every man in the cohort is in on the enterprise. And if he has to pay off five hundred men, he isn't going to keep a lot of his inheritance."

"Where then?" Juba took a rough cloth from a servant, scouring his face, his neck and shoulders.

Seth allowed himself a smile. There was only one possibility, and it made the number of Roman soldiers in the small southern vexillation much less daunting. At least as far as finding Jaida's sisters went. But before Ishaq could rally his troops and push orders, real or fabricated, Seth needed to identify the private house he had to be using as a prison.

Although Rome forbade marriage for her troops, most men, in their twenty-five years of service, found a way to take a wife and home in the *vicus* that grew up around each fort.

"He can't afford to have too many men involved in this. But he must have enough superiority to command the bulk of the southern cohort. So, he's an officer, professional, with one or two brother centurions willing to cover for him on the promise of a share in his prize.

“Some of those centurions are going to have illicit homes and families in the city, probably near the fort itself. I need your very best watching that fort tonight.”

“Dawud?”

Seth nodded. “I need the address of any centurion’s house near enough and big enough to hide all five of the girls. And I need it by tomorrow.”

“You’ll have it. They’ve had five days to prepare somewhere, but they will still be buying in unusual quantities of food. They’ll be secretive and they’ve probably also put a guard on the house. It won’t be too hard to find.” The realization bought a smile to Juba’s face. “Now, tell me how you convinced your sweet priestess to return to this den of iniquity.”

“I didn’t. Her goddess did.” Seth matched the smile, but only briefly. “And the gods are among us, she tells me.”

“How are they, then?”

“Not happy. Don’t pretend that doesn’t faze you, Juba. You’ll be off to the nearest shrine to burn offerings and sprinkle blood and oil before you close your eyes tonight.”

For all that Juba made light of Jaida’s devotions, he was in all respects a god fearing man, if not devout. He feared the wilful gods and all their petty antagonisms as much as any man. And living as they did in a cultural crossroads, Juba himself a native of Alexandria, he had any number of pantheons to dread.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to show some piety. A little divine good will might make the difference between success and failure, dear boy.” He feigned indignation and turned to climb the stairs up from the water. Servants stood ready with cloths and scented massage oil and he stretched his aging frame over a narrow couch. “Although, I can see how devotion could be problematic for you. Here you have this little lovely with nowhere to run and only her temple status to protect her.”

This attitude from Drusus was irritating enough; from Juba it was wearing far too thin. “I promised her she has nothing to fear, here. I meant that. You and Dec should step back and leave her alone. She needs some time to find herself.” It was advice he wanted to take up, himself. She couldn’t have been plainer if she’d begged. Jaida wanted to find her own way into the world, at her own pace. And she didn’t want his company any more than necessary. But stepping back was harder than it seemed.

“To find herself? Surely you can find it for her. Another small party? A few too many drinks? She only needs to slip once, Sethos, and you would be the one to catch her. Then you will look more like a saviour and less like a fiend when she has nowhere else to go.” Juba laughed to himself.

“Or, Juba, I can concentrate on finding her sisters and I can try to bring them safely home. And then she might deign, at least, to stand willingly in the same room with me. Until then, leave her alone.”

The girls’ luxurious bedroom, with its wide plinth beds, perfumed pillows and veiled draperies, its crenellated water basins and walls of perforated cedar, paled to insignificance when they were led into the annex. There was no place where the eye was not immediately assaulted with colour. Fabrics which alone would be cause for awed study, warred with glass and brass and mosaic tiles.

And against the flush of noon heat, the air rushed cooling moisture in breezes passing through damped curtains and blinds.

For all its glitz, the room was informally welcoming and the girls took places on a deep-cushioned daybed, curling bare feet up under themselves. Servants, Zayed moving prominently among them, carried trays from buffets set around the walls. After the increasingly modest fare of the temple, the food was a wonder of flavour and substance and both girls ate, forgetting for the moment the crises looming outside.

Only when her breath came heavily over a slightly more than comfortably full stomach, did Jaida turn her curiosity out to consider her fellow diners.

Her eyes went naturally to Seth and found him briefly watching her, snatching his face away and his conversation off toward Juba and a shabbily dressed stranger. The man was not unlike her host, with dark hair and eyes, but his cheeks and throat were rough with unshaved growth. One deep scar puckered the skin over an eye, and others left deep clefts in the tanned flesh of his forearm. His long green-striped *khameez* was tattered; the ankle cuffs of his trousers greasy brown and napped with horsehair; his *ghutra* greyed and unwashed, stained under the *agal* with sweat and hair oil.

“Eighth,” the man said, stretching to force the words around a mouth full of half chewed meat. “The two cohorts ranked lower are both garrisoned down at the city of Aila. What the eighth cohort has there that interests me, is a cavalry *turmae*. Thirty Arab horsemen give him a lot of mobility. And speed.”

As the stranger swallowed and selected other rags of succulent meat, Seth asked, “How many of them do you know personally?”

The man shook his head, but something subtle in the action suggested it was an avoidance of the question, rather than an answer.

Juba tried, “Could we find an ear inside the fort?”

Again a shake of the head, but less certain, and accompanying it was a push and pull of air with an open palm. It seemed enough had been said on the subject. That gathered brows, fingertips brushing palms, and shoulders raised a fraction, had settled the matter for the time being.

Ianthe sat at Jaida’s feet, her body turned away toward the oiled Nabataean guards.

The men, it seemed did not speak Latin. Although invited into company they were self-contained and manifestly uninterested in the rest of the group.

Jaida slipped her foot across the silk and nudged her sister’s shin. When Ianthe turned, she clenched her brow and drew her lips tight, saying plainly ‘don’t stare at them,’ and Ianthe grinned. She looked instead at Seth, and then to the stranger he entertained, and shot a small grimace of disgust to amuse Jaida.

He wasn’t so disgusting. In the depths of his eyes was a resonance Jaida recognized, and she turned from one man to the other, seeing more in every moment that was similar. He had not so much of the innocence she had first seen in Sethos, his gaze was colder and harder, his mouth not nearly so full and not so suggestive of laughter.

But the room around them answered any questions she might have had about relationship. The stranger wore grime as Seth wore scented oil, deeply imbedded in his pores. The hair that scrapped across his torn brow was greasy from neglect, and from well across the floor his disregard for hygiene was apparent. He was scarred, not the neat and tended scars she had seen on Seth’s chest, but roughly, life threateningly and poorly repaired. Not even as a soldier, where his wounds might have been overseen by surgeons. More as she might have expected on a slave.

When he stood, however, Seth moved to embrace him, holding him warmly in a brotherly display of rough affection that paid no heed to filth or smell. From over Seth’s shoulder, he spoke words in Aramaic that made Juba and the arrogant, near-naked guards laugh. He stepped back, looking directly and contemptuously toward where the girls sat, and pointed at Ianthe. Again a bolt of laughter rose and both women ducked their faces in embarrassment at jibes they could not understand. Then he left, not through the hallway toward the atrium escorted by the *promus*, but by a small door in the furthest corner of the room, leading out beside the tiger’s lair.

“Excuse our friend,” Seth said soberly when the laughter had died behind him.

“Roman society is usually kinder.”

“As is Alexandrian,” Ianthe answered.

A Nabataean guard added his thoughts to the discussion, the only comprehensible word ‘Greek’, and again a roar of laughter filled the room. A sharp look of displeasure from the host calmed the rising tide of rude hilarity, and the men, looking as much as they were able, chastened, turned back to their own quiet conversation.

“You’ll have your clothes and whatever else you left at the manse this afternoon.” Apologies were bright in his eyes and Jaida found herself leaning as always into the dark welcome of their depths. It was tragic, she insisted, clenching her own small fist, that he need do no more than look in her direction to have her hypnotized and mesmerized. She looked instead down over his cheeks, over smooth golden skin and down to his lips, smiling gently. In the safety of his house now, with a full belly and with the desert air itself made civilized at his word, she was left to wonder just what dangers there could really be in his company.

“We don’t own a lot.” Ianthe took up the conversation leaving Jaida to watch in silence.

“Whatever you need, tell Tamir. He can work miracles. Clothes? Cosmetics? Ask.”

A sigh seeped from her nose, long and hot and shaky. A sigh of confusion and acceptance that groaned at its end, wishing for some guidance. If only she could know what the goddess wanted from them, any firm word she could trust that told her where she had to be. In service? As priestess? As oracle? She should never doubt it. This was her life; abstinence and dedication were hers just as power and luxury were his. This was the life and fate she’d been born to.

Had he brought her here to tempt her away from her devotions? The old question rose, and as she watched him sitting with Juba, speaking quietly about implications and possibilities, she was no closer to answering for him. Why?

Why? She looked at Ianthe, at the pure symmetrical beauty of her face. Why did he want them here from the beginning, all of them, free, if not to somehow compel them by obligation to his...? What? His bed?

It would have been easier and very much less expensive simply too have taken what he owned. Gold bars glimmered richly in his ear, and the creases in his cheek that came with eloquence, formed also with a smile or with a frown of confusion. Eyes that brightened and sparkled with amusement, darkened threateningly under a hard frown. Eyes that flicked to meet hers and just as quickly fled.

Had she seen the truth in the half-light of al Uzza’s rush candle? If there was no price in gold too high to pay for her sisters and herself, was it pride alone that demanded he only take that which was offered to him freely?

Staff?

Spies?

Guards?

Did they all serve him out of love? She turned to watch the Nabataeans. No, surely they were all too well paid to care for the good or bad intention of their employer. Yet Juba had said that in the ranks of those he’d set free, there were many who would serve him for no reason but gratitude or devotion.

It would not be hard to want his company.

She watched him chatting and the knowledge warmed her stomach. He was stunning, there was no doubting that, and she bit her lip to crush the memory of his mouth on hers. Heat welled suddenly into her chest, her blood washing remembered passion through her limbs and thickening in her heart. As her breath caught and surged unexpectedly, she closed her eyes and thanked the goddess he was too far away to

smell.

Beside her, Ianthe had turned her attention to him also, and was watching him the way the feral cats of Alexandria's alleyways watched a hole in the wall. Jaida's heart kicked up another notch, and again she slipped a foot along the couch. "Don't stare," she mouthed, annoyance creasing her brow.

Ianthe met her glare with raised eyebrows. "Look at yourself," she whispered, returning a shove with her toes. There was as much irritation in her sister's even features, and it took a moment of silent engagement before both girls softened their outlooks and forced a smile. As heat dropped slowly from Jaida's cheeks, Zayed stepped discretely to Seth's ear, and he stood beside his *promus* and nodded politely to the women as he left the room.

Drusus was in full flight, and Seth barely caught him long enough to embrace before he swept on through the atrium and along to the annex, hands waving and eyes rolling with operatic zeal.

"Monstrous," he announced, and Seth smiled, watching the effect Dec's flare for theatre had on his guests. It took a moment as he followed before the question even dawned of 'why?' Both priestesses were staring, turned and almost lifted from their seats as Drusus flowed across the floor and fell dramatically into a couch. "What a morning. Monstrous. Where's my drink?" Zayed stood beside the couch, a goblet set on a tray beside the obligatory jelly and biscuit, his eyes dark and violent.

"Drink," Seth encouraged. "Then tell me what happened. You went to the *Curia*, deposited the trade documents with the council, and..."

Drusus drained the cup and rested his head back onto the bolster, exhausted.

Juba waved a hand, a gesture barely more than a suggestion, and the Nabataean guard stood as one to leave, filing toward Seth, hands extended. Once the room was less full, Seth resumed his seat on a deep couch and waited.

"I had the opportunity to meet with young Malichus today. I enquired after his dear mother, as is expected. It seems word of the priestesses here has already reached the royal court. Our one-time Queen has taken a keen interest in the ladies and their future."

Seth knew better than to pre-empt the drama by breaking in with questions. Dealings with the remnants of the Nabataean royal family were always tense; attracting their interest was rarely a good thing. But it would be safe to guess that if Dec had spoken in depth to the son of the deceased king, it had been his intention to do so. And if his mother, Queen Gamilath, had taken an interest in the case, they could be certain Drusus himself had sent her word. All that remained was to let the story unfold as Dec wanted it told.

"She's here, did you know? In the city for a month."

"I didn't know, Drusus."

"No? I should have told you. She wanted an opportunity to speak to the oracles at the temple. You've confounded that now by bringing them here."

Seth nodded. He could see that, but then, Dec knew he'd hoped to bring them here when he left the house this morning.

"We wouldn't have had to worry about that. I'm sure you can nominate a room somewhere for an audience."

Seth nodded again. "Except?"

"Except, when I had finished the conference this morning, and convinced the council there were no concerns about security and the resale of licenses, I called in to visit Lucius Aninius Sextius. He is particularly interested in acquiring licenses for the south-east and east African routes."

Seth considered the news. Sextius was the son of the Roman governor of *Arabia*

Petraea. “The caravans on those licenses run through Romanized territory. The council won’t care if he buys up licenses outside the Nafud and the Rub’ al Khali.”

“Exactly my thoughts. But did you know he and his wife have been wanting an audience with the priestess?”

A hot pulse started hard in his temple as Seth tried to run ahead of Drusus’ story. He had engineered some kind of rivalry between the Nabataean royals and the Roman governor’s son over Jaida and her sister. Why? And more importantly, when did he intend to bring this to a head?

“How is that a problem? What did you offer them? And when?”

On the couch across from where he sat, Jaida watched with obvious concern. He could read her fears clearly in the stark white of her stare. As he began to know her better, he realized it was only uncertainty and unfamiliarity with people that kept her listening in silence. Behind those eyes a million questions burned, and he marvelled at the sharpness of a mind that could carve understanding for itself from the little life had given her.

Her beauty was arresting, as it had been with each meeting. Her pale searching gaze, so full of fear and longing; displaced, and trying desperately to find and hold a safe place for those she loved. There was no safe place, yet. The world was not a place that cared for fragile beauty. It was a hard place, where nothing was as she knew it, and the truths she’d been given were turning to rags and shredding before her eyes.

And her beauty was consuming. The memory of her in his arms, her mouth hot against his and desire rising darkly in those haunting eyes, set fires raging over his skin through sleepless hours. And when he slept, she walked through dreams, naked and perfect, until he woke in panicked sweats, struggling frantically with the unknowable dangers that moved around her.

His fist had clenched with the memory, and he looked down at his hands as he straightened his fingers, forcing them to release their fears. She was here at least, at last, and that fact brought some relief. A deep breath filled the tight emptiness in his chest, and he looked to Dec for an answer.

The answer was slow coming. Drusus turned his saddest eyes on the girls. “I’m getting too old for this Sethos. These meetings drag on. I’m tired. I want a quiet life. Grandchildren.”

Seth shook his head slightly, watching as compassion stirred in Dec’s audience, building as he spoke. “I’ve made a mess of it, I think. I should have stepped back and left these arrangements to you. I knew the priestesses would be overcome tonight. Even if they can no longer travel to the cremation, they will want to say their farewells to their sister.”

He touched a nerve so raw and painful, both girls dropped their faces, grief pooling in their eyes. But he was moving on to issues more compelling. “I’d already agreed the Prince and Queen should visit tomorrow. Now Sextius and Agrippina. Refusing one or the other will give deadly offense. Putting one in ahead of the other will be just as bad. And darling, they will both want *the* oracle. Not one of many.”

Seth pulled a hand down over his face and tried to read the subtext of Drusus’ performance. This was not a game he enjoyed, but the skill in it was vital to détente in *Arabia Petraea*. Here, direct questions were considered gross, knowledge was power and jealously hoarded, and open discussion distrusted as a trap. Dec was manipulating the room to serve his own purpose. And what was that?

Trade, first and last.

Seth’s wants were important, but came a poor second.

The girls and their future came somewhere down the scale near the gates of a slave

stall, hanging only on Drusus' inherent love of the beauty and Seth's determination to have them free.

He wanted Roman support and protection for his caravans, and Sextius' gold in his pocket for the coastal licenses. He wanted the goodwill he had built with the Nabataeans guaranteed for Seth after he left. He wanted divine direction provided for them both, along those lines. Hence the oracle. So why cause friction?

And why the tragedy of age act? A quiet life and grandchildren?

He wanted one oracle, and he had a spare. But he knew of only this two. He had no idea yet that they would soon know where the other girls were being kept, and neither did the priestesses. And so he was making these girls an offer. Not just freedom, ladies. Not just a quick tumble. Your host wants a wife and heirs.

He stifled a grin and stretched irritation and stiffness out of his neck. It was unlikely the girls would take the bait on the first cast; surely, neither was used to this game. Juba paid extravagant attention to his selection of food, Jaida still looked into her own lap, but Ianthe, when he turned to her, met him squarely. She held his gaze, her breath coming in nervous gusts, her eyes wide and a smile of realization beginning on her mouth.

He watched her, wishing he could speak aloud his thoughts as they occurred. Instead he said, "*The oracle*, Drusus. An oracle giving personal readings to both the Roman hierarchy and the Nabataean royals." He blew a long whistle through his teeth. "What would a position like that be worth?" Especially if that oracle was caught up in a bidding war. The day Decimus Asinius Drusus was overcome by age and infirmity, the sky would fall and mountains would flee from their places.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

Jaida was shaking and tears filled her eyes. Each time she wiped them away they reformed, and the trembling that rattled her hands and fingers threatened on her chin and brow. Their possessions had at last arrived, giving Ianthe an excuse to tow her from the annex to their rooms, and there Tamir fussed through a pile of clothes far larger and richer than those they'd left behind.

"Listen to me," Ianthe growled. "Forget Ishaq for just a moment and listen to what he was telling us. There are two lives here for the taking. For us. One as priestess; not in smoke and dope and danger, Jaida, not the way he described it to you. With royal patronage. Royalty and their protection. And the Romans, too.

"And one as wife. Look at this place. Could you stand a life in luxury like this? Would it pay us back some of the years of cold and fear and emptiness? And children. Children of our own, just like every other woman. And a man. That man. Is it such a bad offer?"

Ianthe grabbed her arms, pulling Jaida's face up close to her own, her dark eyes fierce with passion and the desire to seize this chance and run.

"There are not two of us," Jaida insisted, and from beside his folding Tamir huffed derision under his breath. She ignored him. "It's not Ishaq I'm thinking of. Our sisters need us. The gods are angry and they want our sisters here where they belong."

Ianthe howled, pulling at her own hair and raising her arms to the heavens above. "I made that up. I made it up so you would want to come here and let him do what he could to save the girls. While we waited here. I made it all up."

"I didn't. I saw it all and heard it all, and I know that the vision was true. I know you told him the goddess chose him, but the rest was true. I saw it." The image of Jupiter's cold white marble melting into hot flesh flashed across her sight and Jaida stepped away from her sister, turning instead toward the clothes Tamir folded.

Ianthe swept on, "Then you stay in the temple. That will be your choice. We only have tonight to decide. The oracle has to be read tomorrow. You be the oracle, you stay in the temple and I'll accept him and the role of wife and mother."

The thought cut deep, and the images that formed had hurt before she could shut them from her mind. Hands she knew in dreams, hands that thrilled with their fingertips swept over the dark silk of Ianthe's belly. Her long lean thighs parted before his touch. And the mouth that tasted of honeyed wine and spices sought the yielding softness of her sister's breasts. Sought them. Found them. Sucked them deep.

"No!" She almost shouted, to the choice and to the images it brought. "We were born to this life, we should stay together. He will find the others, Oseye, Eshe, Rhea, Zaliki and Shemei." She listed their names aloud, and left the silence there to testify for Lailah. These were not acquaintances they'd once been fond of. These were flesh and blood sisters, deeper even than that. They were souls bonded in the furnace of shared suffering. "The goddess wants them found."

She reached to take a silky dress from Tamir's hand, and he snatched it away, shocking her with a muttered curse. "Don't be a fool. The gods are fickle and men are worse. I was born to wealth and privilege. Look at me now. I thought the gods would smile on me for as long as I piled gold into their coffers. Look where that certainty brought me.

"Your sisters were doomed the day they walked out this door. Find them? Yes he'll find them if they're alive. And bring them back for you if that's what you want. If that is what you choose. But there'll be no happy ending for them."

"Ishaq won't hurt them now," Jaida wrestled her courage into place and tried to face this unexpected attack. "We're his inheritance. He needs us all safe and unhurt."

"Then leave them where they are." Tamir dropped the pretty fabric he held, threw it back to the pile before him, and trudged slowly to a couch. Sitting, he dropped his face into bent and callused hands and let his breathing slow to a less painful rasp. "Well-born women," he looked up at Jaida, raising a finger as if he meant her, "have very few options in this world. If they are lucky and wealthy enough, they marry well. Those that marry hope for love or children or both. Without those things they will be divorced and discarded.

"Those that don't have love or money are worth nothing. They can be prostitutes or mistresses, some quite lucratively if their looks hold out. The rest will fall to slavery sooner or later. And a soft woman will die. If she cannot work she will simply be used up as a whore."

"My sisters can work. They can serve in the temples as free women. They can make enough money to live well in years to come." Jaida tried again to hold up the hopes she'd gathered.

"Oh child," Tamir's energy had left him flat and he struggled to hold his head up high enough to finish. "They don't know enough of the world to stay safe for that long. One man. One mistake. Rich men fall into slavery overnight. Your sisters don't stand a chance.

"I was wealthy and lost everything. My wife and daughter were sold beside me. Sethos rescued me, but we didn't find my family soon enough. Not nearly soon enough. And my daughter was as beautiful as you." He stood painfully and smoothed a gentle finger over Jaida's tear lined cheek. "Every bit as beautiful as you. And your sisters."

He shook away the memories. "You have to realize what he has offered you both. It's the only hope you have. Take it. And you." He turned to Ianthe. "If you choose to be wife, you had better have children in that magnificent body. Without his love to keep you safe, the old bastard," he spat at the floor, refusing to name Drusus, "will have you dead in a heartbeat. He wants grandchildren, and there is darkness in his soul that Sethos will not see."

Below, Drusus had recovered, and Juba left no doubt as to whether they would share what they knew. In a few short words he'd given Drusus all the intelligence they'd gleaned, explained the inferences drawn from that, and concluded, for better or worse, that they would know whose house was holding the hostages by morning. The older men had many years of association, and this open dialogue represented habit and familiarity. It also said quite clearly where Juba felt the real power and influence lay.

For Seth it was a moot point. There was nothing more he could do tonight and other issues pressed closer to his heart.

"One oracle, Dec." He said it bluntly, not a question.

"I'm leaving soon, Seth. Days. This is just one way to move things along."

It was that, indeed. "When are you leaving?"

Drusus shrugged and flagged a hand airily. "You're not happy? If she chooses you, so be it. If not, my darling, she will have a temple built for her. Between the Roman nobility and the royal family she'll have more gold than you within ten years, and you will still be able to gaze longingly at her from across the courtyard. You might even discover some new religious zeal. And when she's seen enough of the world to be less idealistic, maybe she will see you as a better choice after all."

There was a perverse logic in the argument. In truth, if Jaida chose to stay with her goddess, if nothing he would give her could equal her devotion to her training and her service, then this was perhaps the only way she could be guaranteed protection. But he would have given her time and the chance to make an informed decision. "I would have done it differently."

"And I'm glad I took the chance. You should be too. By tomorrow night I hope one girl will be in your bed and useless to her stalker and the other set for a life above the reach of any man, as pet of the royal family. Learn to trust your instincts."

"My instincts won't matter a damn if Jaida reads that oracle tomorrow." There was a weight in the words that dragged in his chest.

"You wanted the girls here at the house from the start. You should have gone with that feeling. I should have supported the choice. Instead we've given him time to put his own preparations in place."

Seth stared hard at Decimus, forcing down the rising sense of loss and trying to hear the important information in this praise. Time? The girls had left the city five days ago. If his reckoning was right, Ishaq had captured them immediately and held them all this time. And all the while Jaida and Ianthe had been under light guard at the temple.

But they hadn't been snatched back. Even though Ishaq had his infantry to command.

"Now he's ready," Seth realized aloud. "He sacrificed Lailah and showed himself to Ianthe to try to force their hand."

"They were not in danger of being molested while they were at the temple, he could afford to leave them there. If they had been here all along it would have forced him to move without preparation. He couldn't risk letting them having access to all this for too long." Drusus pointed directly at Seth as he spoke, suggesting it was temptations of the flesh Ishaq feared more than wealth and luxury.

"But he wants them here, now." Seth nodded. Ishaq was willing to gamble, just as

his father had been. Willing to risk one or both of his priestesses for the chance at revenge on the man who had taken them away. “Which one of us does he want?”

“Let’s call it both.” Drusus looked to Juba. “And ask instead, how? The searches this morning were clumsy at best.”

Juba shrugged. “So what did they get? Information. Layout. Security. They would have seen you’re nearly ready to leave the city.”

“Why wait to find out?” Seth smiled coldly. “Dawud will be here tonight with information on the whereabouts of the hostages. That alone might be enough if we can surprise them. It will only be a private house and I can send in two hundred men to bring the ladies out. Forget them for a moment. Meanwhile, I will have the lovely Agrippina here tomorrow.”

“The dragon woman,” Drusus sneered.

“A woman of passion and varied tastes. She might have as many lovers in the Third Legion as Ishaq has *milites gregarii*. She might know every single one, and what they are doing. And she has a father-in-law who is governor and owns them all.”

“Her lovers probably are the common soldiery, dear. All five thousand of them.”

Seth let his smile bloom. Dec’s disdain for his paramours was legendary, as was this noble lady’s preference for a little rough trade. Officers were better suited to this purpose, though, and she loved those, too. A centurion who wanted to skip a level or two of the slow climb to the top. Someone who might turn on men below him with a savagery peculiar to the Roman army. Agrippina would have officers in her retinue of lovers.

“If she would do almost anything for me on other days, what will she do when a status symbol like a real live oracle is up for grabs? She might be stuck in the outer extremes of empire, but the ladies who lunch in Rome will be falling over themselves to invite her home.”

He stood, gripping and turning the cuff at his wrist out of habit. “You’re not leaving any time soon, Dec? Zayed will see to anything you need. I won’t be too long.”

The *promus* glared darkly, and bowed in silent deference.

“I’m going to find my guests.” As adrenaline coursed heat through his blood and churned his gut in exquisite terror, Seth turned to face the fact that chance had spun the wheel again. Jaida should know, they both should know, that this was not a choice they were forced to make tonight. Life, he hoped, would go on long after Drusus had left for Rome.

In the atrium he paused, tugging the shoulders of his *khameez* straight and pushing nervous fingers back through his hair. Tamir slumped his way through the room, the old and soul-deep sadness defining his form even more clearly than usual. “Where are they, Tamir?”

The servant pointed vaguely over his shoulder, grunting as if his heart had broken all over again, and Seth followed his finger through the *tablinum* and out into the late afternoon light. Jaida sat on a vine-covered bench facing the fountain, her head back and her eyes closed against the sun.

He was never ready to see her. Whether it was a stolen glance over luncheon or a meeting anticipated overnight, her faultless elegance left him breathless. For a moment he stood watching the sunlight running over her skin. He had thought himself silent, but she turned suddenly to face him, jumping a little with fright. She’d been crying, but her tears had dried in the sun and she turned back to watch the fountain, tacitly accepting his presence. “I don’t want to disturb you,” he offered.

“It’s all right. I should ask you some questions. I think you’ve been honest with us.”

High praise indeed. He walked slowly to the column nearest the bench and leaned against it, avoiding the sun's heat. She had changed out of her white box of linen, and the change was exquisite. Rough spun cloth in palest green tied behind her neck, and divided in front all the way to her navel. A ribbon that seemed fashioned from sparkling jewels caught the pieces together under her bust, but left the clean expanse of her back and shoulders bare. It was not a gown for mourning, and Seth doubted she had chosen it for herself.

"I'm sorry I can't take you to the funerary pyre. Drusus had planned the ceremony for you."

She nodded. "Is there no way we could go?"

"It's possible. Just an enormous risk." There were people, theoretically, that he could ask to smuggle her out. Agrippina herself perhaps. But the risk was too great to suggest it. Better one funeral than two.

"Tamir has offered to go in our place."

"Ah." Seth was not so surprised. The old man's grief for Lailah had been an echo of past losses, and he'd cared for her body as if his service were payment of a long overdue debt. "He seems to have put himself at your disposal. You can rely on him."

It was true, Jaida knew it instinctively. The old man, with his wealthy past and murderous scars, had never caused her a moment's doubt.

"He brought up a girl. A servant." She watched Seth standing in cool grey shadows with his face down. The vine that ran over the balcony and columns clustered thickly at his shoulder, and it seemed he would as soon hide in the foliage as stand forward to speak.

A brief tick raced over his forehead and he reached to tug a spray of honey-suckle blossom free. "I should have thought of that earlier. You should have had a woman to help with dressing and bathing."

Sick terror squirmed in her stomach, and cold rushed over her skin making her rub her arms. They were hot to touch, sharp in the summer heat, but along her bones an uncomfortable frost was forming. It seemed for all her fear, there was not so much to lose and so very little time. Pulling a breath deep into her chest she marshalled what bravery remained and said, "She wasn't sent to help with dressing, although she has. Tamir sent her to help my sister, or me, prepare for..."

Tonight. The word jammed. The thought itself was a lump that made it hard to breathe or swallow. Upstairs now, as they spoke, Ianthe's skin was being oiled. Her hands and feet were being pampered, soaked and buffed in softening lotions, her hair was being perfumed. Her mouth would be scoured and her teeth polished. Through the evening and night her sister, and if she chose now to take herself back up the stairs, Jaida too, would receive long and sensual massages and hear stories of passion explicitly told. They would eat specially prepared food and drink wine sweetened and spiced for lovers.

All the preparations, as she understood it, for a wealthy bride. Or concubine.

"Tonight," she finished in a whisper, turning away from impossible choices. "Do you need a wife?"

The question caught him by surprise, the answer almost yelped. "No."

Without looking back, she asked, "Do you want one?"

Gravel crunched as he approached and the air grew thin and hard to hold. Her fingers ached where she had grasped the front edge of the bench and held it in a vice-like grip. The seat was more than long enough to comfortably sit three, but Seth loomed too large near her. Not just broad shoulders, long legs and capable hands, but heat radiated from him that rose to brush over her cheeks. The perfume from his skin wove

tight skeins of tension from her chest, through her firming breasts and nipples, down to tug at secret pleasures.

He sat in silence, shredding the blossoms and dropping them to the gravel at his feet. She watched his fingers pinch and bruise the fragile petals, tearing out their fragrant hearts and discarding them. At length he said, "Drusus wants everything settled before he goes back to Rome. That's all. He wants grandchildren."

"And you would marry because that's what your father wants? Not for love?" It seemed an odd thing that someone so blessed with freedom and abundance should have such constraints on his own life. "You'd have children for his sake and not for your own?"

Seth shrugged. "Not many people are lucky enough to marry for love. They marry for wealth or position or political power. In the provinces they marry for the chance to get back to Rome. And for heirs, pedigree preferred."

When it suited him to dress as such, he wore the narrow purple of equestrian nobility. And when it was *a propos*, he sparkled in the jewelled robes of Nabataean high society. He threw gold at the winds and ordered men in their hundreds to do his bidding. If Drusus could move the pomp and theatre back to Rome, it seemed likely that his son could do the same. So why would he choose an Alexandrian slave to carry his heirs?

And surely she could not be alone in judging him attractive. Jaida looked at the clean bright stone of the wall that kept the city out. She could not guess who lived and moved beyond those walls, but there must be women, wealthy or beautiful or both, who valued all those things in a husband and found Seth as attractive as she did. Why were there none at his door?

"Would your father prefer someone without a pedigree, who could be harrowed and discarded? Or would you?"

He faced her, annoyance written plainly over his features. "No!"

"Tamir told us," she went on, "there is no future for a woman who isn't wealthy or loved. Tamir said..."

"Tamir is a bitter man. He has good cause to be, but not everything is as bleak as he says it is."

"You said it yourself, before my sisters fled. You said then that there were dangers everywhere, there was no safe place. That the lives we had lived were destined to be short but lucrative. Tamir said my sisters were doomed the day they left your door, and even if you bring them back, they have no hope."

He shook his head and turned back to his sprig of vine, stripping leaves from its stems and stems from each other. "That's why Drusus wanted me to keep them as slaves. To ensure their safety and their future."

"Why didn't he keep us himself? If he knew you wouldn't keep slaves, why didn't he keep us himself?"

The question had to come, and Seth wondered why it had not come sooner. He had to answer now even if he had been unable to explain it before. Too much had gone by; she had suffered enough in ignorance.

The twig had been exhausted, there was no more there to keep his eyes from hers and he rolled the last small fragment in his fingers and then dropped it to the ground. "The truth?" he said. "You were a gift. To me. He could have taken you all to Rome with him and lived like Caesar on the revenue you made. He could have sold you all at the markets in Gaza city and brought back nothing but gold. I would never have known and he wouldn't have lost any sleep over it. He could have sent you out to provincial temples, and taken good money for as long as you were marketable, and then dumped you into brothels on the coast."

“You have no idea what he could have done. But he didn’t. He has a love of beauty almost as driving as his love of gold, and so he brought you all here to me.”

“Because he wants grandchildren?”

He nodded.

“But you wouldn’t force us to stay?”

Again, he nodded assent.

“And now there are only two of us left, you will finally force us to choose between you and the temple. Tonight. For his sake.”

“No, I won’t force you to choose,” he said. “One of you can read the oracle tomorrow, and don’t worry over that, either. Drusus will tell you what has to be said. He won’t risk a political meltdown over something like this. Whoever chooses to play that part will have her own temple. She could wield more wealth and political power than most of the senators in Rome.

“The other is still free to leave. Or stay.” He laced his fingers, clamping his hands between his knees. “And I hope by tonight I will know where the other girls are being held. If I’m right, we’ll be able to step straight in and get them out.”

“Tonight?” Jaida’s heart threw itself against her ribs, making her head light as his meaning became clearer and sending sobs of joy out on choked laughter. “They might be free by tonight.” The goddess had chosen him after all. This was more than she’d been able to hope for and she wanted to throw her arms around him. There was no greater gift he could offer to her; even just the chance, the hope, the possibility her lost sisters might be brought home to her arms. “Do you think so? Are you sure?” She giggled, catching sobs in her hand and let tears of joy stream down her cheeks.

He fixed his study of her so intently it squeezed her heart and she wanted even more to wrap herself around him. Shaking as though winter snows had settled on her spine, she reached carefully to take his hand in both of hers. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you. Thank you.”

Looking to her hands, Jaida willed herself to release the hold she had. She wanted to run to Ianthe, she needed to assure her they had chosen as they must. As the fates decreed. They had no need to make this irrevocable choice today. But heat hived into her fingertips, vibrating along overwrought nerves and buzzing into her elbows and shoulders.

If he drew her closer now, she would be too weak with hope and relief to pull away, and every inch of her longed to be drawn. In that moment of relief there was no thanks for the goddess and no doubt as to whom the laurels would be due. There were no ideals and no dramas. If he’d moved in that moment to take the choice from her, to make the decision himself and to have her submit to his will, her spirit would have soared on wings of perfect joy.

“Thank me when they’re here,” he said. Then standing, roughly taking back his hand he said, “So you see your choice was not as urgent as Drusus suggested. You asked me if I want a wife. Yes. Would I prefer to marry for love? Yes. Of all the gifts I have from Drusus, you are without a doubt the finest and most precious, but would I force you to stay? Force you to choose between your goddess and me? Steal heirs from your body and discard you? No. Never.”

Walking slowly, with his shoulders hunched aggressively and a frown of profound annoyance that seemed aimed at himself, he slipped under the veil of creeper and into the shadows of the house.

Another restless night had come, as yet without word from the spies and without sleep. Dec and Juba had debated and speculated deep into the night, leaving Seth at last to anxious solitude.

Pacing miles through the rooms and corridors of the house felt better, safer, than lying awake in the massed silk of his bedding. The *triclinium*, vast and unlit except by moonlight, caught night breezes over its balustrades and he stripped down to loose trousers. Peering down into the central courtyard, he could make out Kartikeya's fretful form slouching from one end of the enclosure to the other, stretching up onto rocks and grunting bootless love songs to the night.

The house was mostly lit and men moved through the rooms below. But his private suite with its balcony and adjoining rooms, were hidden by the wall and tiled roof of the walkways.

And hidden with them were answers to questions he didn't want to ask.

An image of Jaida, naked by firelight as he'd seen her at the temple, flashed before him and a frisson raced down his spine, squirming uncomfortably in his gut. There was a chance she was waiting, her skin and hair a fragrant wash of intoxicating perfumes. And in that vision she didn't drop to hide herself in shame, but stepped forward, held a hand to him in invitation and offered her open lips and closed eyes.

But just as likely, perhaps more, the lovely Ianthe would have chosen to forego her temple service. The gods above and below knew there were fates worse than taking her to be the mother of his babies. She was exquisite, as were all of Babu's stolen children. She would have his gift of freedom and their children would inherit his adopted Roman citizenship. Certainly, there would be no question of her being abandoned. As the mother of his grandchildren, Drusus himself would see her draped in silks and enthroned in a palace in Rome if ever Seth chose to divorce her.

Jaida surely would have taken her hopes back to her sister. The oracle had to be read and either of the girls might choose to stay or go, but, in truth, he didn't want to face the choice.

He would not compel either girl as Dec had hoped. Neither could he trade their gratitude for power. Looking down over this sprawling symbol of his wealth, seeing in the blocks and trellises a solid representation of Dec's adoration, the certainty grew that life held more important secrets. True gifts came without obligation.

Yes, he would sooner marry for love. But love was freedom. It meant another's happiness was what mattered most. And the grasping heat that scratched sharp fingers through his gut and clenched in his shoulders and jaw, that burned to be screamed against the sky and drove him to pace miles through this fortified cage, had to be put aside.

Meanwhile, dawn could not be far off and he'd expected Dawud before now. Juba used men from all sectors of the city, in any capacity that suited his purpose, and Dawud was one of the best. He lived, when he chose to, in parts of the house. At other times he haunted the crypts and tombs, or caves in the crags and mesas that framed the rose stone city.

Seth had known him from infancy, or as close as he could recall, and in his scarred and darkly unbalanced form lay the model of what life would have been if not for Drusus.

Kartikeya grunted, finding Seth in the moon's blue shadows, turning the eyes of the ultimate hunter up to his saviour and tormentor. There was judgment in the heat of that orange gaze and it chased him from the balcony, down corridors and service wells through the *peristylum* and up, quietly, to his room.

His suite was dark and silent and he closed his door, shutting out any lingering

hopes. Tonight the room seemed far too large for one man. There were too many empty places; the only sound came from the moving water below and his own pulse.

Honeysuckle rose on the night air and he sat, clenched, on the edge of the bed, peering at the full moon through the carved cedar wall panels. The scent carried memories in on the moonlight, recalling green eyes dark with desire and lips as soft as the petals of a Damascus rose. In the garden below he had promised her safety and tasted those lips and held that desire. And there too, he had stepped back from saying the few simple words that might have guaranteed him everything he craved.

As it was now, tomorrow she might read the oracle. She might speak for the gods and hold the powers of the known world in her hand. And leave. And move forever, forever, from his reach.

Cold sweat formed over his shoulders and he stood, walking to press his forehead against the fretted carving of the wall. Night breezes found their way to his skin, but the heat in his belly pushed their cooling touch away and he stepped back, pulling the section of wall inward on stiff hinges, and walked silently out onto his balcony.

Not ten slow steps away, clearly lit in blues and shining in the hot, thick air, was the wall that separated him from the object of desire. Just as his, the wall panels had come from some long gone Persian palace, and through them the ancient moon crept, silent and breathless.

The half-light led him closer, peering into dappled shadow.

Veils surrounded her bed, he saw, but in the heat of a summer night they'd been hooked back, spread wide and trailing out from their beams. On the ceiling between them, moving slowly in the shadows, a reed fan ruffled the air over the ghostly form sleeping beneath. White silk clung close to smooth skin, and in the darkness as he watched, the silk began to slip.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN.

Jaida heard the quiet footfalls as he walked the narrow corridor between their suites. She felt each step like an unexpected touch, and the thump of his door closing jolted in her system like a slap. The night was cruel. Long and hot and cramped by indecision.

There can have been no word, surely. If her sisters were safe, if they'd been found, the house would have been alive with the news. It was hoping for word of their fates, she told herself, which left her lying rigid and sleepless, her own breath shaky in the noiseless room.

She'd bathed near midnight, following her chambermaid down to the baths only after most of the men had retired. In the tepid water she'd let her searing flesh cool, so her skin was cleansed of itching sweats and her mind calmed just a little. She'd refused all other attentions, accepting a massage of cooling oils only after a protracted argument.

"Ksirakakoli!" The girl insisted in fractured Latin. "Cool the skin."

Cooling it had been. Across her back, the warmth of slow moving hands gave way to cool, the chill of a winter wind, and Jaida luxuriated in the sensation. Rolling, lulled close to sleep by the gentle pressure of massage, her hot blood cooled under skin tingling with Ksirakakoli, she let the girl move her attention to her arms, her hands, her breasts, belly and thighs.

When she stood to dress, her skin leapt at the slip of silk over her arms, cold and alive. As she walked, every movement of air shifted the soft fabric over her and every nerve, every inch of her skin, responded to the touch. In her room, as the servant brushed the damp from her hair, wisps tickled over bare shoulders and her breath caught, sharp and erratic. There was magic in the oil, magic that brought her skin to a life of its own and that teased at her imagination, so the night air itself licked and bit at her bare breasts.

She might have argued if there was any point in the exercise. The young woman trained to the bedroom spoke little of anything Jaida could understand, and no small part of her heart yearned to be led down these wicked and delicious paths. She could not deny the hard pulse that firmed in her flesh, or the moist terror that seized her gut every time she considered her choices.

The goddess had chosen her, but so it seemed, had Seth.

The goddess had plans for her, a destiny mapped out, and now safety in a rich world she had not had the courage to hope for.

But then, it seemed, so had Seth.

She lay in her soft bed with its fragrant cushions, under a fan moved by the barely awake servant, listening for sounds of him moving about in his suite. Across the room Ianthe slept, her back to Jaida, her thoughts her own.

When the creak of stiff hinges shocked through her, her own hard breathing sawed in her ears like a groan, and skin that had been iced began to burn.

There was weight in the silence, weight that pressed the hot air down over her body, moulding to her curves. A fine sheet of silk was all that kept her bewitched skin from the night breezes and she turned her face to the dappled silver light of the wall. A shadow moved there, a flicker of blue and black, and her heart stopped. He was standing out there, so near and silent in the heavy night, looking, perhaps, down over the moving water of his fountain.

Just drawing breath was painful and she closed her eyes, lost in the throb of her pulse and its echo through her flesh. Gooseflesh rose under silk and she groaned. She remembered the burn of his eyes on her bare skin; she knew the heat of his lips and the hard press of his body against hers.

At her side her hand closed, catching the filmy cloth in a grip that held every terror and wicked dream she'd ever known. Slippery silk dragged slowly over her breasts and air left her mouth in a long shudder of pleasure. The sheet moved, sliding over nipples that ached, over soft belly skin and burning thighs, to ruffle onto itself in a pile on the floor.

The fan shifted breezes over blisters of sweat as she lay naked and burning. Moonlight reached her in mottled shreds that bloomed against her skin. She clamped her eyes closed, imagining his gaze upon her now, his breath on her cheek, the strength of his long fingers searching across her body. In the charged darkness, slowly so no creak or gasp could break the spell of silent anticipation, she moved her leg, bending her knee and raising her thigh, so the moonlight could find its way to secret shadows.

Heat bloomed up over Seth's chest and throat, brushing his cheeks with a deliciously erotic thrill he had not known for decades. She was magnificent, utterly mesmerizing in her untainted candour. There was yearning in this vaguely iniquitous vision that moved painfully through his flesh. His blood pumped hard and urgent, driving out all thought but her. There was no more time or place, only his body and this woman, and the hot night air that lay between them.

And the wall. His vision widened suddenly as a soft footfall and a hand on his shoulder snatched him back to reality.

“Aquila,” Dawud’s grunt pulled Seth’s hand into a fist and his elbow up to jab into an unprotected throat, but the movement stopped with recognition. “It isn’t easy to find a man who spends his nights skulking around outside his guest’s bedrooms.”

The particular choice of words in Aramaic and his brown toothed grin lent the jibe a tastelessness that Seth found uncomfortable. Wrapping an arm quickly around the informant’s shoulders, he turned him away from any possibility of sharing the sight, ushering him back into the darkness of his own rooms.

“Well?” Seth demanded. “What do we know?”

“I found them.” It was as simple as that, the answer shrugged as if it were a foregone conclusion. “Just as you guessed, the house of the first file centurion, eighth cohort.”

“Close to the fort?” Seth had moved into his washroom and was dragging a dark *khameez* down over his chest as he strode past racks of clothing. He ripped a length of turban muslin free, binding it quickly over his head and under his chin, back up around his forehead and then coiled it in loose reams around his neck and shoulders.

“Close enough.”

Close enough to call quickly for support, Seth reasoned. That made it risky. “What sort of guard have they got?”

“Only four and a horseman. But they’re ready for trouble. There’s a signal pyre with pitch and naphtha. He can have support from as far as Jabal Habees in the time it takes to run the distance.”

First file, *pilus prior*, was the highest ranking centurion in the cohort. If that wasn’t Ishaq himself, he would not be far behind in position: *pilus posterior* or *princeps prior*. Still, it seemed unlikely he would have an involvement with the officers of higher ranking cohorts. The first and second cohorts of the Third Legion had taken the privileged position on Jabal Habees. But Roman infantry was all one blood when it came to armed resistance. Support would come for the commanders of the eighth cohort, and any questions would be asked later.

“All right.” Seth sat, ordering his thoughts. “Four guards and a horseman. We’ve got forty men, here, now, but there’s no point in trying a frontal assault.” Through the open wall the moon was still bright, but the stars had washed out with the promise of approaching daylight. They had an hour, two at best, before the dawn and a change of watch. “There’s another hundred in or near Drusus’ house.” Juba had taken a full contingent back with him to Dec’s mansion. The searchers may have been crude, but their actions spoke of reconnaissance, and that suggested an attack. This house, too, had attracted their attention, and Seth peered through the darkness at the wall nearest Jaida’s suite, unwilling to leave her unguarded. Her naked skin in dappled moonlight rose before his eyes, soft curves and cleft shadows, catching his breath and sending defensive rage boiling through his system.

“We’ll take twenty men from here, but hold them back.” So far as he was able, he’d formed his plan of action. Leaving Jaida here was not an option he could consider. “The priestesses we’ll take through the *bab al-sirr*. Tamir can wait with them in the *tutus caverna*.”

If Dawud had thoughts or reservations he had no desire to share them, and he followed in silence as Seth moved to the door of Jaida’s suite. The chambermaid spared little more than a glance at Seth when she opened the door, her dark eyes finding the man behind him, her smile warm, her hips thrust forward.

“Bring the ladies,” Seth said in Aramaic. “Bring clothes and bedding down to the annex. Now.”

Tamir followed a houseboy into the annex, carrying years of sleeplessness on weary shoulders. He nodded with calm resignation when Seth ordered him, with the girls, into hiding, and stood back from the bright light of lamps, finding bleak shadows or casting his own. A glimmer that might have been hope touched his eyes when Jaida and Ianthe walked into the room, their servant behind them, half buried beneath a high wad of fabrics.

The moments apart had again perfected her. No memory ever did justice to the reality of her presence. Her hair was loose, falling forward over one shoulder, a robe of pale embroidered silk wrapped around her slim form. Where she clasped her arms nervously at her waist, she pulled the fine fabric in tight. In the heat and adrenaline of coming conflict, now more than ever, his body ached to press against her, his arms to fold around her. In all that he had been complicit in her sadness and her danger, he had promised her safety and it was a promise he meant to keep.

Without thinking he stepped toward her, speaking as if she alone was in the room.

“Dawud has found your sisters,” he said, searching her face for relief and joy. “I’m going with him now to see how they can best be brought out, if they can, but I won’t leave you here like this.”

Pointing behind him, along a wall that ended with a small unadorned door, he indicated things that lay beyond. “No decent house in Arabia would be built without a bolt-hole. That’s where I want you to wait.”

In her eyes her thoughts and feelings played out plainly, hope and joy tinged with fear and the dark thrum of excitement. He wanted so to kiss her, then. To lift her palm to his lips, to draw her closer and to knot his fingers in her hair as he pressed his mouth against hers. Now was not the time and he groaned inwardly as he stepped back, motioning for the small group to follow as Dawud led down to the doorway.

Jaida no longer cared who was moving beside her.

Fear and sleeplessness, hope and burning desire, had left her in a world apart, light headed and detached from all that was happening around her. And standing in front of her, holding her still with the power of his eyes, even as his hand asked her to step forward, was the man who embodied all of that emotion.

He represented all she feared and more than she dared hope for. In dreams and fantasies she’d known his eyes and his hands, and his mouth, on her skin. Asleep, or restless and burning, it was this face, this man, who had stirred in her all the feelings life had intended to deny her. She stood, not moving and hardly breathing. He was waiting for her, that much she realized, waiting for her to follow to a safer place. While he went out into the night in search of her sisters and their enemies.

She’d seen him as a noble Roman and dressed in the finery of an Arab statesman. And she’d seen him informal, in loose linen that showed the dark contours of his chest and belly. And she’d seen him standing near to naked for the sake of her own embarrassment, but never had his beauty been as plain as it was now. Shaking so she thought her knees might crumble, she slowly opened the fist she’d clamped protectively against her ribs and reached out to take his hand. “I’m ready,” she whispered, the words betraying decisions she did not yet realize she had made.

In her trembling hand, his fingers were warm and steady and he drew her, not toward him but past, to follow where the others had already gone.

The door was small, too low for Seth to pass through without ducking, and from it they emerged into open moonlight. Beside them a narrow walkway led between the wall of the house and the high picketed fence of the tiger’s enclosure. Jaida strained for

glimpses of danger as they passed the big cat's lair, fearful that he might throw his weight against the fence at any moment. But worse, at the end of the path a gate opened into the courtyard itself. Dawud led as the small group crossed quietly, with Kartikeya watching their progress from his rockpile with benign disinterest.

"This is safe?" Jaida asked, her tone rising in disbelief.

"Safe enough."

She looked up to Seth's face, amazed at the smile that moved his mouth.

"The worst he can do is fall on you." He grinned.

Where the *triclinium* ate its way back into the solid rock above their heads, the moonlight failed, leaving only an inky black oblong. Ahead the cliff rose toward it in lumpy striations, the raw face of the canyon wall left natural and undressed; and where one stone rested against another, Dawud ducked into the shadow and disappeared entirely. After him the chambermaid, Ianthe and Tamir.

Jaida crouched into darkness, twisting to fit between massive boulders, her free fingers reaching ahead, feeling for gaps she couldn't see. Her other hand held to Seth's fingers with the certainty she would be forever lost if she once gave up her grip.

Echoes spread in the space around her and she sensed a widening of the path as Seth returned the hold on her hand and pulled her to a stop. In thick darkness he stepped nearer, gathering her against the firm heat of his chest. With one arm protectively around her, he lifted her hand, pressing his lips onto her fingers, then onto the back of her hand. Again his lips shifted, to the inside of her wrist so sparks leapt along her nerves and stabbed her groin with hot pleasure.

She could take her hand back. The knowledge flared across her consciousness, but briefly. If the world was as it should be, if she could focus her mind on the duties she had chosen, she could step back now and forever.

Breath shuddered from her lips and she pressed her body closer, hard against him in the shadows where thoughts were elusive. Arching, stretching up into endless darkness, she let her mouth find his and let the fears she'd held so tight melt in her blood. Tiny noises, sharp sounds that jammed between terror and relief, slipped from her throat, but it was more than the softness of his lips and the hot perfume of his skin that had her sobbing with joy and fear. He represented all her life had proscribed, a world she had barely glimpsed, full of dark dangers and desires.

As if her thoughts were glowing coals, bright and hot in the shadows, he said, "You'll be safe here." His arms were strong around her and there was a rightness about his embrace, a belonging she had never known, and safety that relieved the pounding of her heart. His chest was as hard and warm as sun soaked stone, but his pulse, where she pressed her face against his throat and shoulder, throbbed with life and passion.

The footfalls of their companions had scuffed ahead into silence and Jaida felt isolated in a vast black unreality. Clinging to Seth's strength in the unknown gave her courage, but there were dangers, she knew, in the shadows.

Peering up toward his face, she could make nothing of his features and her mind's eye drew for her Jupiter, warming from marble to flesh, his fingers brushing gently over her cheek. But in that image, Mars stood too, cold and brave and furious.

There were warnings there, warnings as clear and as real and as present as the firm comfort of flesh, but she couldn't name them for him. The goddess had given her warning in visions that made no obvious sense, but they had to be spoken. The oracle had to be read.

"The gods are moving among us," she told him again. They were angry, clashing, and wreaking havoc in the lives of men. There was only one certainty she had held to, of Isis. "They're angry," she nodded to herself, and gripped the strength of his arms.

“But Mars has only his armies. Where Jupiter is, there is Juno. Where there’s Zeus, there is Hera. Osiris and Isis. Sister-wife and Queen of Heaven. Where ever you go the goddess is with you, and she wants her children safe.”

A small groan sounded through the darkness and his fingers gently skimmed her jaw, lifting her chin, her face, her mouth. Reaching to her unerringly, as though she were visible, lit from within, his lips touched hers. “I’ve never seen them lift a hand in the affairs of men, Jaida. Never.”

She was silent a moment. That was impossible. There was no part of the day or night not swayed by the whims of the divinities. “Then you didn’t know where to look,” she said bluntly.

Powerful arms held her tenderly against him and a small laugh rumbled in his chest. “You’re right, I didn’t,” he answered. “But I do now.”

There was a lightening of the gloom, almost imperceptible at first, but as her eyes adjusted they strained and gathered shreds of distant lamplight. Somewhere ahead, past gutted rocks and twisted fissures, the others had reached the secure cavern and had lit waiting torches. The luminance barely touched the plains of his cheeks and his brow shaded the hollows of his eyes, but she could feel the intensity of his gaze.

His breath on her cheek was a warm caress and her flesh strained toward him, aching to drag away her thin robe and the coarse weave of his, to press her burning skin against him before the light, and the night, and its demands came between them. Passion in the face of terror. Before the coming dangers could steal this sense of safety and certainty, she whispered, “She is with you. She chose you.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, and shadows moved across his face. “And did she choose you?”

There was no hesitation. Confidence she hadn’t felt building and a conviction that resonated with the clarity of crystal chimes, spoke for her. “Yes. But I didn’t understand why. Until now.”

Light flared into the cavern and a small embarrassed gasp slipped from Jaida’s lips as she stepped back. Dawud’s guttural Aramaic curses echoed off the stone and Seth wrapped his fingers deliberately around hers as he moved toward the sound. Conversation passed back and forth between the men and he pulled her into a jog, ducking and standing to wait as she passed him and entered a room cut from the native rock.

“Tamir knows the exits and the hidden rooms. Wait here; don’t move until we come back for you.” Seth’s eyes glowed, fierce with the rush of coming peril and they held hers up to the moment he dropped her fingers and turned from the light.

Jaida couldn’t watch him leave. The soft scuff of footsteps faintly echoing and receding was proof enough he had gone. Turning to the lit room, she faced a blaze of silent allegation. In the long moment following, Tamir turned quietly to a line of sealed urns and lidded baskets, and the handmaid grinned salaciously and resumed her arrangement of the bedding wads, but Ianthe held her stare, cold and reproachful.

“What kept you?” A smile flicked over Ianthe’s mouth, but it twitched away leaving no more than a tight lips and breath blown too hard through her nose. “Was there a problem?”

Guilt, embarrassment and anger fanned rising fires in Jaida’s cheeks, her pulse thumping at her throat as she straightened and answered, “No. No problem.”

“We had decided,” her sister whispered, stepping closer so her words had some semblance of privacy, but she didn’t look at the others who shared their confidence. “You were to accept the one choice; I was to have the other.”

The last words were a hiss, and Jaida pulled her shoulders back and let her chest

fill with confidence. "There are not two choices. There are not two of us. Nothing was decided."

"Jaida, you chose to stay in service to the goddess. You chose that from the beginning."

"So did you. When our sisters left, you chose to stay and follow this road to its conclusion."

"That was before we had this offer. This choice."

"I'll say it again." Now frustration drove Jaida across the cavern floor. "The choices we had have not changed, not from the day we first arrived. The gods are moving among us, and we're only dust stirring in their shadows. Our goddess rolled the dice and we were gifted to the only man in all the realms who would do her will in this. I know it and now so do you."

"Are you calling your lusts the will of the goddess, now?"

"Perhaps. But I know with certainty that he has chosen me, as the goddess knew he would. There is no one else anywhere, no man in the Empire or beyond who would have given up our sisters to let them live in light. No one. She knew he would do her will."

"And what of our will? Our sisters' choices? Mine?"

"We're all living with the consequences of the choices we made for ourselves, Ianthe. And there are other gods with their own pieces in play. All I know for sure is that we are here now and our goddess wants her children safe."

Ianthe groaned and wrapped her arms tight around herself, raising her closed eyes to the low roof and spinning to follow Jaida's impatience. "And if she changes her mind? If she loses interest? If she is defeated?"

"Did you learn nothing in the years we spent on our knees? She's brought us too far to leave us now. It's a miracle that we have even survived. And as for being defeated? There are gods and gods and gods: gods of stone, and gods of wood, and dog gods, and lion gods, and gods with eagle wings. But Isis is Queen of Heaven. She is every goddess. For every single god, she is their mother, their sister, their lover and their nemesis. With that kind of power, how will she ever be defeated?"

"A queen, but a queen with only these few men to use in her battles while Ares has the Roman army. In Troy, did Hera stop her own son when she was Queen of Heaven?"

"No, she had Pallas Athene stop him for her." Jaida clenched her brow over fears she didn't want to own. "Our goddess will keep her chosen one safe because she loves him."

Against the wall, Tamir's derisive grunt resounded, amplified by cool stone. "If we left his protection to the gods, we should all have run as far from here as we could go by now. While we still have the chance."

Pushing a palm irritably across her eyes, Jaida turned to where the old man worked, laying his cache of preserves onto a beaten-gold platter.

"Is there something you know, Tamir? Are there dangers that Sethos knows nothing about?"

Again the old servant grunted as he straightened slowly and offered a tray of syrupy figs and raisins, balls of goat cheese dripping golden olive oil and lemon peel, and strips of smoke dried meat. "Sethos will be safe enough. As long as I've known him he's been a thinker. When other men rushed in and slashed about with swords and axes, he'd step back and watch and think." He laughed and coughed.

Staring straight at Jaida with a look that hinted at some grim satisfaction, he said, "He let other men rely on their gods for protection. So! He'll rescue the girls if it's possible, if your goddess truly wants it. And we'll pray that she does. After that? We'll let the gods of this world and then next have what they're owed."

Shivers of dread ran over her skin; the fine hairs along her spine tickled against soft silk. There were threats she couldn't hope to identify in the cold light of Tamir's eyes, and his promise of payment for the gods suggested a debt a long time building. "Please, Tamir. If there is something you know...."

Whenever men spoke in this desert city, they said as much in silence and gestures as in any sound they made. Knowing this only heightened her sense of ignorance and fear. There were things, perhaps, that were said between Tamir and his master that had passed her by entirely. Perhaps in those last angry grunts of Aramaic, Dawud had given a warning late in coming. But there were dangers, vague though they were, and they seemed to give Tamir's painfully stiff age a renewed vigour. Whatever they were, they made him smile.

"Sethos said greed and vengeance would cost Ishaq dearly. Vengeance has always cost dearly. What are the gods owed, here? Please tell me. Has Sethos cheated the gods? Has Drusus?"

Tamir spat as if his mouth had filled with venom, and his broken lips twisted into a sneer. "There are men," he said, "who would stand behind Sethos if it cost them their lives. They would protect him when the gods are angry or looking the other way. Not all men can rely on that same promise."

Ianthe had moved closer, drawn into the tense conversation by all that was unsaid. "Men he freed? Slaves? They're the people who would give their lives for Sethos. People like you?"

"But not Drusus? What did he do that he has such a debt to repay?"

Now Tamir shrugged. Suddenly, it seemed, the question had lost all interest for him and he turned his platter briefly to Ianthe and then returned it to the baskets by the wall. "What has he done in all his years? Who could possibly hold that accounting?" He dusted his hands, wiping them clean of grime or responsibility and poured two glasses of ruby wine.

"His money has paid your wages. His son bought your freedom. You live under this roof. Again, his money. Why would you wish such judgment on him?"

From her place against the wall, curled up with her head propped on her palm, the chambermaid mumbled something in her native tongue that made Tamir smile.

"The gods are fickle, child," he said directly to Jaida, as if she alone had joined the conversation. "They turn a blind eye when one man ruins another for the sake of spite, and it matters not a damn who was devout and who was a skulking cur. Somewhere there has to be an accounting and I will live to see it."

There was too much that she couldn't understand. In the weighty shadows of the cavern, dangers crowded in around her and Jaida felt them all the more acutely because she couldn't see them. Anxiety shivered over her skin and she rubbed gooseflesh from her arms as she took a glass of wine.

Somewhere in the night outside, Seth worked to keep the promise he had made to her, unaware perhaps of the harms he drew like silent vapours in his wake. Whatever Tamir knew, he was confident there was no risk in it for Seth. Or at least that he could meet the challenge when it rose. But harm aimed at Drusus would certainly cut his son to the marrow. Jaida knew too plainly the empty burning ache of loss and the heartsickness that filled every moment when loved ones were in pain or danger.

Already he was facing dangers on her behalf, answering not only with gold but also with his own flesh and blood, for choices her sisters had made. "Tamir, what do you know?"

Smiling, despite a cough that failed to relieve some unseen obstruction, the servant bowed deeply. "I know that I'm an old man who has worked hard to repay a debt of

gratitude; and that I've known enough suffering to repay all the suffering I caused in ignorance and arrogance; and that if the gods are just at all, I have lived long enough to see them make their stand."

"He ruined you? Did Drusus cause your ruin? So you are bitter and with good cause. But his son brought your freedom. Would you cut the man who saved you by striking down his father?"

Tamir straightened, nodding as if in assent, but saying, "No. I wouldn't raise a hand against any man. Sethos will do what he can to save your sisters and then the gods will take what is owed."

"If he frees my sisters, will that be the beginning of the end for Drusus?"

Another bow, but not so low or deferential and another smile. "Make yourself comfortable while we wait. Everything is in motion now. All the choices have been made and it will end as it ends, just as the gods themselves decide. Tomorrow the sky itself might fall." So saying, he turned and walked into the darkness of the fissure.

He had no more to say and the circular questioning only added to the unease churning in her gut. Moving to where soft cushions were piled comfortably against the wall, Jaida crouched to her knees and dropped into a tight ball.

In the darkness just beyond the cut stone walls, the unknown waited, rattling the chains and shutters of her imagination. Out there in the darkness, beyond the familiar cool of stone, Seth was moving across the playground of the gods. And he wouldn't know the dangers until he faced them. He wouldn't know his enemies until he saw them. Jaida glanced briefly at the chambermaid lying against the wall, her eyes closed and her lips curled mockingly. There were enemies, she feared, in those who stood beside him. But Tamir had said there were those who stood with him who loved him, loved him more than their own lives. Would it suffice against the gods, if men loved him?

And did the goddess love him? Warmth flowed into Jaida's heart at the thought and swelled it to bursting. Yes Isis loved him and she'd chosen him, just as she had chosen Jaida herself, to move and twist and manipulate their circumstances as they must. Just as their hearts decreed. There had never been a question of what he gained, he had acted as he must, offering freedom because it was more precious than gold. And in the choices of the heart lay the secret to understanding the will of the gods.

Seth had chosen her, too. He had given her the freedom to choose between the life she knew and the life he offered, because, he said, she was more precious than all Drusus had given him. He had chosen her.

Heat washed anew over drawn nerves and up her throat, clenching her heart and cramping her chest. He had followed his heart as the goddess knew he must. And he had chosen her.

"Where will this leave me?" Ianthe asked quietly. Standing stiffly, her spine locked by the last reserves of courage, her empty hands trembling against her thighs. "You'll go to him. You will, you must. I knew that. Before, when we had to leave the manse, I knew that was the only choice you could make."

She stepped tentatively toward where Jaida huddled and lowered herself slowly to the ground. Her dark eyes were wide with terror, blistered by forming tears. "I can give the reading tomorrow. I can do that." Her voice failed and she gulped and swallowed, trying hard to damp her wretched throat. "But there won't be only one oracle by then, will there, not if our sisters are here with us, safe. There won't be gold and palaces for the darling of the nobles, not if there are so many to choose from."

Her terrified study of possibilities focused down onto Jaida, and she slipped a hand out to touch her sister's shoulder. "This will all be gone if Drusus is ruined, won't it? It

will all be gone.”

Jaida returned her stare and struggled to find reassurance when she had none for herself. “We’ll be together,” she offered hopefully. “And we’ll be alive. If there is no more than that, we have a chance.”

“This is what Tamir meant. Take what is offered. The gods are fickle. Don’t ask for more, this chance won’t come again.” A tear bled down her smooth brown cheek and Ianthe wiped it away, shaking her head in despair. “We should have made our choice then, Jaida. We should have taken his offer tonight. I would have chosen a home and children over riches in the temple.”

“And the others?” Jaida held out a glass of wine and Ianthe wet her lips.

“They...” She wanted to say they had made their own choices, Jaida saw the fear and recrimination in her sister’s eyes, but the words didn’t come. They had all been through too much together to ignore the bonds that held them all so tight. Ianthe shrugged. “Here we are again. Afraid, and we don’t even know what to fear. Alone again in a stone cell. Will you say we have to trust the goddess?”

A laugh snorted through Jaida’s nose, wet and raising tears. “Yes.” She laughed again and wiped the tears from her own cheek. “And Sethos. If she chose him, she’ll protect him.”

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN.

Seth followed down streets he had not known existed. At times they had left the city, moving through secret ways cut from one ancient tomb or funerary *triclinium* to another. Dawud knew every turn and hide-away in the darkness, and it was all Seth could do at times to stay at his heels.

The city was waking with silver in the dome above, but shadows gave enough cover for the route Dawud chose. He raced down an alleyway shaded by tattered canvas awnings and turned abruptly up a stairway to a flat and anonymous stone roof.

Dawn had not brightened their vantage point, and Dawud had run to the raised edge in a silent crouch before Seth made out the form of a man sleeping against the wall. The man did not wake as Dawud shoved his corpse aside, wiping blood from a short blade across the thigh of his *khameez*.

“Sentry.” He spat at the body and motioned impatiently for Sethos to join him at the wall. “See there.” He pointed over the stonework at a nondescript house, below and across the street. “The signal fire, two guards, one more on a rooftop over there.” His knife hand flashed out, indicating patches of light and shadow below, and Seth narrowed his eyes, forcing sense from the dark mosaic of shadows.

“The cavalryman?” Seth asked, searching out anywhere stock might be held or stabled.

“I want the horse,” Dawud grunted.

“It’s yours. Where is it?”

“Side street, down there.”

Morning light was edging closer and the hour would soon be sounded from the nearby *castrum*. They had cut their run fine, maybe too fine, and they were here alone, with twenty of Juba’s armed militiamen left posted back along the valley at Dawud’s urging. Twenty men could not be hidden, and twenty men could not be trusted to know Dawud’s secret ways. There was no time left for musing over options, and yet Seth took

another moment, visually feeling his way around each block and window of the house they watched. "One sentry down, four to go. Who's inside?"

"A woman, two kids. The *Arab el-Hajaya* is one of those two men by the fire; the fourth Roman sentry is inside, along with your man, Ishaq."

"Ishaq owns the house?"

"No. The centurion that we met on the road, with the searchers, but he is on duty at the *castrum*. Or he was. He'll be moving back here with the dawn change of guard."

"We have to move. You take care of the men at the fire; tell the *Hajaya* horseman you want his horse." Seth grinned. "I'm going over to the sentry on the other roof and then down to the house."

Dawud turned and moved silently across to the stairway down, while Seth took more time to familiarize himself with the building opposite. The sun was still far below Petra's artificial horizon, but grey light was seeping over stone, enough to tell him where he had to go.

He had no strong heart for bloodshed, but Seth found his hand as quick and competent as it had ever been at taking a life, and stealth and speed were still effective weapons against brute strength.

At the window of the centurion's house Seth huddled into shadow, motionless despite spines in the surrounding shrubbery, viewing the lit interior. The house was typical of peasant dwellings, its single large front room at once an *atrium*, *cenarium*, and kitchen. Curtained doorways on two walls led into what would be the sleeping chambers and *ablutium*.

Inside were two men, as expected, and with them two women. The girls he knew on the instant.

Oseye stood by the far wall, her lovely face twisted in pain, her dark eyes burning with silent fury. The white linen of her tunic was scuffed and stained, her hair a wild chaos that matched her eyes. Behind her, with one arm held across her ribs and onto her breast, the other pressing a short triangular blade hard against her throat, was a Roman guard.

His whole attention was focused on the figures there before him, his eyes dark with animal desire, his wet tongue touching lips panted dry.

Movement behind him pulled Seth back from the light and he turned to Dawud's approach, his fingers pressed against his lips in warning. Juba's operative was grinning, leading an unsaddled horse, and he crouched lower at the window ledge to share the sight within.

It took no time for Seth to see and know his opponent. Ishaq was as Jaida had described him: the goddess showed him naked. Brave and bare and cold where he lay on a dining couch. His dark hair and dark skin were greying with age and hardship. An unhealthy flush reddened his throat and cheeks where a rash of sweat broke over a roughly shaved chin.

He lay back, propped awkwardly on one elbow, reaching with the other arm over the vast rounded swell of his belly. Coarse dark hair swirled over all of his skin, thicker and darker on the midline of his chest and paunch and densely matted over his shoulders and upper arms. He peered down, his chins pressed hard against his chest, his mouth turned in a sneer of contemptuous pleasure as he pushed Eshe's copper-blond head down onto his groin. Her hands were tied behind her back, her tunic torn from her shoulders, falling open to reveal the pink translucence of her back and chest.

His thighs were spread wide around where she knelt, his feet pushed onto tiptoes as the pressure of his gratification grew.

Seth stood, slipping sideways past his companion to the heavy planking of the

entrance door. Blind shaking fury coiled in the muscle of his thigh, as he raised a foot and kicked out against the latching bar. A second kick and the door splintered from the jamb, flinging back into the room to the sound of screams and a bellow of rage.

Seth fixed his eyes on Ishaq as the man threw off shock and delirium to surge to his feet. From by the wall, the Roman guard was faster, throwing Oseye aside and launching forward, his knife blade swinging in a murderous arc a hair's breadth from Seth's shoulder. Seth froze, hauling up on the momentum of his run. Spinning to face his attacker, he drove his fist and the hilt of his dagger back onto the bridge of the man's nose. Cartilage and bone ground under the force of the backhand blow, and blood sprayed out on a yelp of pain. The man was blinded, stopped for a moment by the sheer agony of his injury. But shock kept fighting men upright in defence of life, and Seth knew he had no more than a few seconds grace.

Ishaq had crossed the floor, curved uncomfortably over painful priapism, his angry member purple and wet with spit and bile and slapping against his belly. As Dawud sprang in through the open shutters, the house around them erupted into pandemonium.

Lying where she had been kicked, Eshe screamed with all the power in her lungs, tearing horror and shame and mortification up from her toenails and bawling them from her throat. Oseye stood for no more than a second, torn between leaping at Ishaq's exposed nakedness, and rushing to cover and hold and soothe her lover's pain.

From within the bedrooms children set up screaming, their mother rushing through the heavy drapes, her face lit by nightmares, screaming and bellowing for help as she struggled toward her children's terror.

The guard fixed Seth in his sights, wiping a monstrous paw across his face, smearing the bloody mess. He flicked his knife to his free hand, and drew up a groan of rage as he pulled his *gladius* from its sheath and started in pursuit.

Dawud crossed in front of Seth, an ornate scimitar held aloft, its broad curved blade intricately etched, its hilt crusted richly with gems. The blades smashed together with the ferocity of profound hatred. Dawud held all the embellished brass and complexity of ten thousand years of culture; the Roman held the cold steel precision of the new order.

Outside, the *buccina* sounded the hour clearly from the nearby fort. With it came the change of duty, in moments a new guard would be arriving at the house.

Running low, as if he could climb under the piercing screams, Seth dodged around the struggle, stumbling over a twist of discarded clothing as he jogged toward Ishaq.

The man was gone, thrown naked and desperate out through a window and into the lightening dawn.

Oseye struggled to pull Eshe to her feet, shielding her against the cup of her shoulder as the mother of the house burst out, brandishing a child's tin sword. The woman set upon Sethos, slashing the toy across his arm, his shoulders and face, and whacking with the flat of the blade.

"Oseye," he called, fending the blows as best he could, trying all the while to catch the frenzied hands that flailed about him. "Where are the others? Get them out. Where are they?"

Life and death were at stake, but Oseye was reluctant to release her beloved. Crying out with such vehemence that the sound alone set a fire in his marrow and rose up over raw nerves, she stumbled, almost falling, to a brass ringed trapdoor and hauled up with all her might.

Seth caught the mother, bundled her arms up tight against her body and flung her roughly back through the curtain to her children. Beside him Dawud hacked the last furious blow down onto his opponent. Drenched in blood and sweat, his face set in a

vicious rictus, Dawud laughed aloud and screeched lurid abuse at the gods.

Shudders caught Seth unexpectedly, shoving him back with all the clarity of the coming sun to the days when this blood and this pain, and this one-fingered salute to the gods and their misdeeds, was the way he had lived. For a moment he stood covered in grime and lice, cuts festering and his limbs weak with starvation, waving a dull sword at the crowd as if he had won. There had been no victories in those days. He had simply killed those who were too weak or too broken-hearted to survive the games.

A sudden and irresistible burst of nausea gripped him and bile retched into his throat, burning as he forced himself to swallow the past and fix his thoughts on the present.

The first watch of the day had sounded; men would be here momentarily; Ishaq was loose and the signal fire unguarded; the girls were here – and he needed them safely at his house, somehow, as soon as possible.

As his vision cleared and the dust of the arena left his throat, he saw them rising, slowly and fearfully from the cistern below. “Dawud,” he called. “We have to run them to the caves. Which way?”

“No.” Dawud turned, a half-smile changing his gore spattered visage. “Take the horse back to Juba’s men, quickly, then home. I’ll take the women further south. They’ll be expecting them to move north through the city; to be heading for your house or ‘The Palladium’.” There was plain contempt in this slang reference to Drusus’ home, but Seth had no time for lessons in etiquette. “Tell Juba’s men I’ll be waiting in the white caves until noon. Then we’ll shift the women, one by one, back through the city streets.”

Seth met his flat stare. There was no time to argue, and he faced a man who might as easily cut every lovely throat as follow the orders of any other. Dawud knew every cave and hidden pathway in the rose stone city; he knew every tomb and catacomb; there was no better man to hide the girls than this one. If he could be trusted. “If you harm them I will kill you,” he said calmly.

“You were never fast enough.” Dawud grinned.

“I never had good cause before. Don’t try me.”

“You’re soft now, Aya. A soft toy.” Using his childhood name as Drusus did served to colour the words with fraternal teasing and ridicule, and Seth turned away, motioning to the frightened group of women to step forward.

“Go with him. Now. Do everything he tells you to do without question. Do you understand?”

Most of the girls nodded fearfully.

“Oseye! Do you understand? Everything he says.” Horror and burning hatred filled the dark eyes when they met his, but she tightened her lips into a firm line and nodded once. Seth spun to the curtains that covered the doorways, ripping them loose and throwing them into a pile at the feet of the group. “Use these for cover. Go. Go quickly.”

Eshe reached to grip his forearm, her eyes wide over something broken. “Will we be free, now? Is this really freedom?” Pain and despair shone from her pale face, her features melting into a colourless mask of confusion.

“Yes,” Seth answered. “If you go now and do as he says.”

Dawud took Rhea’s arm and pulled her, and the others with her, through the door. Laughing back over his shoulder, he said, “What do you know of freedom?”

As if they were made of no more than smoke and dust, the girls followed Dawud into the darkness, vanishing between bushes and stone walls. Seth threw himself up onto the waiting horse, lying low and kicking it into a hard gallop as the woof and roar of the signal fire erupting caught the yard behind him in bright golden light.

He had no choice but to trust the spy. Two quick movements of his hand had a

length of muslin wrapped around his face, with no more than his eyes visible to wary local tradesmen. He had to run the horse hard to where Juba's men waited, warn them of the coming troops and give them Dawud's instructions.

Moving without haste and in small groups, the militia would seep past any Roman surveillance and get to the white caves at the south end of the wadi by mid-morning. The plan was not bad at all. Then the girls, moving back through the busy city singly with one man or two, would be almost impossible for the Romans to identify.

But his mind refused to hold to the details of the rescue. Again and again it slipped back to the words that were still in his ears. What did he know of freedom? What did he know of slavery? The questions were foolish, but they caught in his gut like a fist of ice, squeezing at his innards and raising sweat on his lip. Perhaps it was too long since he'd known either.

Jaida had tired of lying crunched tightly in her ball of fear, and she walked now, slow steps from one wall to another, then back past the line of stores to her cushions. The serving girl slept on, with a cloth of heavy damask over her eyes, and Ianthe divided her attention between staring blankly at the walls and picking idly at the antipasto platter.

Tamir had not returned to their company, although at times Jaida could hear him moving in the corridor beyond the light. Seth had mentioned rooms and passages, but where they were or what they held she couldn't hope to guess. It was true, as she had said to Ianthe, all she knew for sure was that they were here, waiting and hoping that out there in the world their sisters were safe. Waiting for hours, days, years.... Waiting, it seemed for a lifetime.

When Tamir did return, it was with a basket of folded clothes. He had been back into the house, it seemed, but he had not needed to pass through the room where they waited. The hints of joy that had coloured his cheeks in the early dawn had greyed and left him older and if possible, sadder. He dropped the basket, leaning over it, too tired or played out to lift his face.

"Now, you still have to choose. So choose."

Jaida walked to the basket and drew out pieces of a jewelled costume. On top was an undertunic in burgundy silk, tier after tier down its length heavily gathered. With it was an ivory *stola*, made from fine linen and edged at the low-cowled neck with thick gold embroidery. Along with that went a sheer sky blue *palla*, its fringed ends so heavily beaded Jaida feared the weight of the glass would tear the soft fabric. And yet again, at the bottom of the basket, a thick purple *pallium* with more beads and embroidery along its edges.

Ianthe stared at each piece open mouthed, as Jaida lifted the clothes from their place.

"There's more there," Tamir rasped. "Jewellery."

"What is it?" Jaida asked. "What does it mean?"

"What does it mean?" The old man smiled and moved stiffly to sit on the store baskets by the wall. "That purple mantle there? To any Roman in the empire, that bestows a rank akin to Caesar himself. It's ceremonial. Honorary. You wouldn't want to send the world to war or speak out of turn at court. But that purple mantle guarantees you protection. As near as anyone can be guaranteed. And wealth. And a life of privilege." He slapped his hands down onto his knees. "Who wants it?"

The girls looked at each other blankly.

"When Seth gets back...", Jaida started.

"He's back."

"Now? Are the girls safe? Why didn't he come?"

"He has guests."

"And our sisters?"

"I gather they're safe. But they're not here. I told you Sethos was smart." He wiped a hand over his face, seeming to sag and Jaida let giggles of relief bubble up from her chest. "Now, while you still have the chance, which of you will live as the Priestess of Isis and oracle to the nobility of Arabia."

Ianthe stepped slowly to the basket and slipped down onto her knees, carefully moving the layers of fine fabric aside. Her eyes were heavy, but she plastered a thick smile on her face and looked up at Jaida. "Have babies for me. Name your daughter for me and bring her to me to bless." From deep in the basket she brought up a cord of twisted gold threads, tied at the front into a round knot as large as a pomegranate. She grimaced at its weight. "Look at this." Gold loops that hung over the ear and trailed disks of amber, ebony and lapis lazuli, dangled from the fingers of her free hand. "I'll have everything else I could hope for."

"Yes. The girls are safe. We'll be safe. Seth will find a way. If he hasn't been betrayed." Jaida turned on the old man. "Has he, Tamir? Has he trusted people who mean him harm?" She walked to where he sat. "If you harm his father you will harm him, too."

"His father? That monster isn't his father. Sethos was bought and paid for. He dressed him up and built this pleasure dome around him because he loves to own beautiful things. He gave him his freedom and adopted him as his son only because Seth wouldn't live as his lover."

Jaida stepped back and back again, trying to gain some perspective on the magnitude of this revelation. Sethos had been a slave?

"A slave?" she whispered. He had acted as he must; no wonder he hated slavery with such passion. He had freed Jaida and her sisters because he knew the truth of slavery. And others. How many others had he granted manumission? All of Drusus household. Tamir himself. "You, too. Seth freed you."

"Yes he did. But that was at the end of a story that began when I refused to sell Sethos to Decimus Asinius Drusus, ten years ago." His rheumy gaze turned inward and he hung his face, slowly shaking his head. "I could only see how valuable he was to me. A very lucrative property." A small smile flashed over his mouth for a moment. "Not as lucrative as you or your sisters, perhaps. But not far behind."

Tamir struggled to his feet, limping and unable to straighten. When he rested his wrists on Jaida's shoulders and cupped her face in his hands, there was no strength in the trembling fingers. "And I lost my daughter. My devoted wife and my beautiful, beautiful daughter. We were too late to save them, although he tried. So much like you."

"Drusus ruined you because you wouldn't sell him a slave?"

"Not only ruined financially, although he did that completely. He slandered me too, so I had no recourse to support. A rich man can brush off rumours, but a poor man can't risk scandal. It is one thing to be bankrupted, in hard times a wealthy man can call on friends, but to be shamed and outcast by society? There is no hope after that."

There was hatred warming the old servant's blood, but that might have been all. His hands were cold, his face hanging slack from the bones of his skull.

"You child, you remember, that if Sethos loses everything today, he will still have a hundred men who will keep a roof over his head and find food enough for him."

It was a warning and Jaida heard it clearly through the reassurances and promises.

“If you only choose to be his wife for the luxury that goes with giving Drusus heirs, you might want to fight your sister for those robes.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.

Drusus looked untroubled, dressed in startling white with the purple of his family rank pulled casually across his lap, but Juba paced uneasy circles, mumbling, “They’re good men. My best. They’ll bring the priestesses safely back.” A sudden thought leapt from his lips. “Back to where?”

Seth handed him a silver chalice of wine almost as big as his head and he tipped it back, gulping. Seth shrugged. “Into the walls and caves. Somewhere around the house. It’s Dawud, who knows?”

“You know, Sethos. Damn it all man, surely you can share some of what you know, now. You’ve stolen back this Roman’s inheritance, that must force his hand, so you are expecting him to retaliate and sooner than later.”

“I don’t know where they are. We were out of time, I had to trust Dawud.”

Drusus laughed loudly with what seemed genuine amusement and flicked fussily between sticky jellies on the plate beside him. “You weren’t born a gambler, Aya. You must have learned it from me. What’s life without the thrill of chance?”

“It’s not a game I like, *Pater*. I’d rather know everything ahead of time. I don’t like surprises.”

“It’s lucky you have your oracle then, darling. Have you convinced her to stay yet?”

Seth ignored the question, nervously biting dry skin from his lower lip as he watched Juba pace. “When are we to expect the royal family, Dec? Zayed has the staff working miracles, but we’ve had no word from them, no warning of their intentions.”

“Soon enough. Our cashiered queen wouldn’t normally stir from chambers until afternoon, but she’s got Sextius to consider. Knowing the Roman convention for dealing with business associates in order of importance through the morning, I’d say she’ll be here well before luncheon.”

“No one wants to miss out.” Seth glanced up at his *promus*, assuring himself that Zayed would rise to any arrangements that should be made. “If he does bring them here, the ladies will start dribbling back to our door sometime after noon.”

“Did you discuss my proposal with these ladies last night, Aya?”

Drusus knew he’d spoken to Jaida about his proposition. He wasn’t asking if she knew her choices, he was asking if she’d chosen. Seth picked at his nails and turned the gold rings around his fingers absently.

The sense of emptiness, of nothingness, of being nothing and no one, slithered around his gut. He didn’t know what she’d chosen. If she’d chosen. The goddess had chosen her, she said. But the warmth of her kiss, the hunger and desire she had pressed against him, promised something that had begun to feel like hope. It was a hope he didn’t want to nurture for fear it came to nothing.

He had sent for Tamir and told him to ask the priestesses which one of them would stand as oracle today. He could have gone himself, asked her directly himself, but the possibility of hearing her choose service to the temple weighed too heavily on his heart.

Her devotion to her sisters, too, added to the weight. If he’d gone in through the *bab al-sirr*, holding their safety up like a prize, he would have been welcomed with

hope, joy and relief. And in that would have been the temptation to use her innocence, her gratitude and elation, to drag her toward the choice he'd make for her.

And it might be an empty promise. He was, after all, gambling on Dawud.

"They're still in the safe-room. You'll need to give directions to the oracle and soon I suppose. She won't know what you want her to say." He tugged the muslin free from his hair and rolled its length into a ball over his hands. "I can send someone for them. Unless you want to go in there yourself."

"Send someone, I'm too old for caves. Where will we all be meeting? The *triclinium*?"

Seth stood, nodding to Zayed, who left the room. "The *triclinium*. You'll want theatre." He turned to Juba. "You have men on hand?"

"Always."

"I'm going to bathe and dress. Zayed will take the ladies up to the banquet hall. Remember Dec, they don't know this world. Give them a little more than you would normally give. For me."

Jaida sat uneasily, unable to relax across the dining couch.

Massive cedar panels inlaid with gold and pale veneers had been moved into place at one end of the *triclinium*, creating a temple in miniature, and the smoke of lamps and censers spread across the ceiling high above. Inside the enclosure, Ianthe waited, dressed in the magnificent garb of a Roman priestess, with Tamir and Juba still coaching her through her act.

Drusus walked slowly down the length of the *triclinium* balcony, his hands clasped behind him, his face turned down. It was as close as Jaida had seen to an aspect of concern. There was no extravagance in his movements, he was thoughtful and subdued and that added to the fears nestling uncomfortably in her stomach.

The bustle of servants laying buffets and arranging the decor passed her almost unnoticed, except when they drew nearer, scattering petals and positioning lamps.

She felt sick, physically ill. Her stomach churned as she considered her position and what she should or shouldn't say. Drusus moved at the edge of her awareness but she didn't want to watch him. His attention had been fixed on Ianthe, ensuring she memorized the points he wanted divinely decreed. He had spared Jaida no more courtesy than the touch of a hand and a frank appraisal of her appearance.

Tamir saw in him a monster, a liar with a dark soul who took without conscience and ruined what he didn't take. He had seemed to her an old man grieving eloquently for lost youth, and devoted to his son's success. And Seth had seemed his son in truth, and not an acquisition. Should she warn him?

How? What could she say? She knew nothing of the circumstances that were moving around her, not the people nor their motives nor the shadowy dangers they represented.

She could name Tamir, but that would be pointless. He had years of living under this roof as the servant of a slave. He had hatred enough to seal his lips against any questioning or duress. But his loyalty was to Sethos and she hoped there was enough in that to keep them all safe.

The best she could do was tell Seth what she had heard, if she could see him alone for even a moment. She had no details to share, but she could hand him her fears. He would know what to do with them.

She pushed nervous sweats from her palms and tried a few deeper breaths. Outside

the sky was high and blue. If it was about to fall, there was no evidence of collapse to be seen.

The clatter of a messenger running hard spun her attention to the door and a young man almost fell into the banquet hall, delivering a breathless message to Zayed. It was a summons, that was plain, and although he ignored Drusus, he moved quickly to tap at the wall of the temple, and then curtly directed Jaida to a couch further from the centre of the room.

She watched him breezing an expert eye over the preparations, even as he swept from view and down through the exit.

The fates were moving on.

The choices were made, Tamir had said, it would end as the gods decreed. Already Isis had supported Sethos against Ishaq and his armies. Her sisters were free and everything was in motion. And the fear that it stirred shook through her like riding over rapids or standing on top of an avalanche.

“No *locus consularis* today?” Juba sat wearily beside her and pointed up at the curve of couches, to the position she had been given on the night of Seth’s party. “Not to worry. I’m sure Sethos would have it different if he could. But royalty. And the son of the governor of *Arabia Petraea*. Someone has to step back graciously.”

Jaida looked at him as if he spoke a foreign tongue. His words were clear enough but she had no idea if they should make sense to her. All she could think about was when Seth might enter and she’d been watching the doorway fretfully, her breath short and shallow.

“Step back?” she asked shakily and resumed her study of the door.

“You know this oracle is for Queen Gamilath, matriarch of our Nabataean royal family, and her son Malichus.”

“And for the son of the Roman governor, yes.”

“So they will take the position of honour there at the head of the room. You had that spot last time, but I promise there’s no slur intended in moving you back here. It’s a question of protocol, that’s all.”

“Oh. Yes.” She counted the couches, guessing the distance from the top told the story of rank. The two prime couches met at an angle at one end and then others flowed down either side in staggered lines, curving away and back from the centre of the room. The place she had been given was third in line.

“It’s not too bad. The dignitaries will take their own couch, not three to each as we would. All you have to remember is that anyone can move from the top down. But you mustn’t move up there without an invitation.”

“Where will Seth be? I need to speak to him.” She looked again at Juba. He had been honest with them all and kind. He seemed to serve Seth willingly and without question.

But as she weighed the benefits of asking his advice, Drusus took up the position opposite and Juba said over his shoulder as he walked, “Where he was last time you were here. Excuse me.”

That was where Juba’s loyalties lay. Without a backward glance he strolled across the floor and sat down beside Drusus.

Jaida resisted the urge to wipe a hand over her face, gently patting sweat from her top lip and pressing her fingertips lightly under the curve of each eye. Her makeup had taken the chambermaid eons and she had no desire to smudge it down her cheeks. Her hair had been twisted into rolls from a centre part and caught at her nape in a jewelled knot. Her dress was diaphanous silk, shimmering like pearl and caught on gold brooches from her shoulders to her wrists. The wide neckline cowed deeply, and it was tied in at

the waist with a thick ivory cord so its bodice flared elegantly into winged sleeves.

Drusus and Juba leapt to their feet as servants dropped to their knees and huddled with their foreheads to the floor. Jaida stood, uncertain which action to emulate. She had been seated third from the top; she guessed that meant she should stand.

An entourage swept through the door and Jaida would have known the woman leading was queen if she'd been swathed in mud and sackcloth. She was tall, her face mostly covered by a heavy gold mesh draped from a domed headdress, and she caught Seth on her arm like an afterthought.

Behind them came a young man, richly robed in a dark embroidered *bisht*, his hair thick oiled ringlets running over his shoulders. Next, already partly obscured by hurrying aides, a beak-nosed Roman escorting a slim, bejewelled woman, her hair a high mass of intricate curls.

Queen Gamilath marched ahead intent on gaining the temple set, looking neither left nor right. The Roman woman however, craned a graceful neck, fixing dark tarry eyes on Jaida and a curious smile on her lips. Seth paused at the curtained entry to the makeshift temple, bowing to his guests as they filed in behind the cedar panels. Drusus joined the line and entered too, and Juba's ever-present muscle slowly spread themselves around the banquet hall.

They were past in a moment and Jaida finally remembered to breathe. She was frozen by doubts, lost in an unfamiliar world, and she stared unblinking at Seth. He had taken several steps across the room toward her before she realized he was approaching.

His eyes held her captive, soft and warm and she leaned in to them, her hand reaching into the space between them for guidance or reassurance. His fingers closed around hers and a small shock of pleasure left her lips.

"Priestess," he said. "Are you coming in to hear the reading?"

"No." Jaida searched his face, the warnings she had prepared and the fear and urgency they conferred becoming less vivid. Tamir had vowed to serve this man with his life, and standing close to him that vow made perfect sense. Men and gods loved him and so did she. Forcing herself to breathe and to think, she said, "It isn't right. I can't."

The rushing of her heart threw waves of heat out along her nerves, her knees were weak and her fingers trembled in his, but she had to try to tell him. If all her fears were groundless he would know. He would do as the goddess knew he must.

"There are dangers," she whispered, leaning in closer to his ear, and he lowered his face instinctively so her cheek was by his, the warmth of his breath on her shoulder.

"In the shadows, I know." He smiled.

"No. Tamir knows something, a threat to Drusus. He said he would never raise a hand against him, but he is expecting something to happen today that will ruin Drusus. Somehow they've protected you, but not him."

Seth glanced over his shoulder at Juba, frowning, and nodded thoughtfully. "You won't come in?"

Jaida shook her head.

"This will take a while." He pressed her fingers gently and turned to join his honoured guests, leaving Jaida to meet Juba's inquisitive gaze.

Seth sat, irritated by the dense incense. There was nothing enlightening in what they burned; Dec was taking no chances with his oracle's memory for detail. And Ianthe's costume was a work of art. None of the bare skin and filmy fabric of her former

readings, nothing designed to sell sex first. This was the garb of a powerful woman, rich but modest, wrapping Ianthe's exquisite form in heavy layers of solid, no nonsense Roman opulence.

Her prayers were vaguely familiar and he watched her moving slowly through the ritual, drawn from the complexities of his own thoughts by the compelling performance. Gamilath was engrossed, her attention focused intently, almost desperately, on the girl before them. Malichus and Lucius Aninius, too, were transfixed. Dec watched with a hint of satisfaction lighting his features, as Ianthe covered each salient point and wove a sense of magic around the blunt disseminations of politics. With studied grace she worked the stray snips of rumour and gossip she'd been given into a mesh of miraculous insight.

Agrippina divided her attention between the ritual and Seth himself. She was shameless, sitting beside her husband with her hand stroking high along his thigh, her expression of desire aimed past him at Seth.

As important as this company was, there was no allure inside this cubicle to rival that which waited outside. And knowing she was out there, not performing on this stage, filled his gut with fire and butterflies, and seeped along limbs grown warm and blissfully heavy. It didn't prove her choice, he warned himself. It told him only that she was unwilling to pretend a sacred ritual. But she was out there; she was not lining up to be installed in these inviolable vestments. Ianthe had chosen the role of priestess, and if his bones had not stayed firm, he would have melted into a hot sludge of pure relief.

She was concerned about betrayal and subterfuge, and all the more because she was unfamiliar with their constant presence. He knew the danger already, as did Drusus, even if they had been unable to define the exact nature of the threat.

Drusus would have named Tamir as an enemy, himself. Zayed beside him, too. Both would sooner see Dec in the gutter. But they had no truck with Ishaq and his cronies. They would fight behind Drusus before they would side with common soldiers, and they would never give an enemy of Seth's aid or direct support.

But these people drew a dark line between ideas, which Dec would call pedantic. Silence, or refusing to halt, was not the same as helping in this world.

He chewed at his lip, thankful that the reading was drawing to an end.

Tamir could be relied upon to keep Jaida safe; he had adored her and her sisters from the first. But if disaster was coming to their door, an old man scarred by the beasts of the arena wasn't nearly enough to guarantee her safety. He looked again at Agrippina when the audience finally began stand. There was a better choice for her protection.

Training her study on Ianthe helped to stop Jaida staring up at Seth. Even looking down to where her sister lay on the single daybed, set apart and lavished with the attention of servants, she could feel his presence behind her. She would have run to her sister, but no one approached the oracle, leaving her in isolation as they laughed, talked and ate.

Behind her, Seth shared the primary couch with Malichus. The prince plainly deferred to his mother's rank, and the niceties of etiquette demanded that he share the host's lectus so the queen would have her own. Lucius Aninius Sextius took the second prime position, and his wife elected not to share her husband's couch, but to take her own between where Sextius and Drusus ate.

Jaida had no appetite; the avalanche was rushing her toward disaster.

"Jaida," Seth said softly and she jolted at the sound. He leaned across the couch,

stretching to lie beside her, and the warmth of his nearness hummed along her body from head to toe. "The reading went well," he said, letting the chatter in the open hall cover his words. Discrete music had begun and the Nabataean guards, already relaxed from their hours of duty, were growing louder.

"Good." She looked down to where her sister lay. "Is Ianthe all right?"

"Yes. She's ready to do whatever she has to do. But you know that."

"Yes." The word trailed away. The thought of what would come and the choices they had made filled Jaida's chest and made breathing difficult. Her choice lay beside her and danger surrounded them.

She wanted to tell him she would follow him willingly, if his journey lay out on the streets, if this house fell to rubble and the sky itself failed. He had a dangerous line to walk, through people and intentions that were a mystery to her, but she would follow. If he asked her to.

"Surely you should be with your guests. These are important people, aren't they? Will they keep Drusus safe?"

"Not without good cause, no. But most people have a price at which they'll start to bargain." He smiled, not widely, but it touched her heart and she tried to return it. "And these people watch each other like hawks. If I talk to you for long enough, they'll come closer to get a better look."

"What have you told them about me?"

"Only that you travelled here with the oracle. The less I tell them the better. They make up their own fiction that way and everybody's happier. It makes their endless gossip so much juicier, too."

She found a more confident smile. "We all choose what we want to believe, it seems."

"Aquila! I've seen your new companions; is this why you've been hiding yourself away? Why haven't I seen you lately?"

Seth turned to sit upright, taking the hand of the woman who stood before them.

"Agrippina. How is your husband? He looks fit."

Agrippina laughed heartily, perhaps to draw the eyes of the room to herself, or perhaps because she was amused and didn't care who watched her. "Fit enough to raise a sweat, my dear."

She was older than Jaida had thought, and not pretty. Her face had the clear, open, classical lines she had seen in Roman busts, her brows thickly drawn and dark on smooth pale skin. Her eyes were heavy-lidded. Wicked.

"This is our oracle's companion? Lovely." She made her way around to lie beside Jaida, snapping her fingers impatiently for service. "Would you like to go to Rome, my dear? Do you think the oracle would like that?"

Seth laughed and Jaida looked to him for direction. "Are you going to the capital, Agrippina? What makes you think our hosts in Petra will let you take their priestess? And besides, Lucius wants the North African trade licenses. He can't take those to Rome, either."

"Not him, dear. Me. I'm taking a sabbatical. Leaving the colonies for a culture cure. Just a year or two." She turned to reassess Ianthe. "And what an impact I'd make taking her back to Rome with me."

"Indeed you would," he agreed.

Furniture scraped and servants scampered as Gamilath rose to her feet and moved toward the oracle's seat like a trireme under heavy sail. Agrippina laughed again. "Do you think she heard me?"

"What difference would it make? She knows what she wants just as certainly as

you do. All that matters now is what it's worth."

"Refreshingly direct, Aquila. It's what I like about you. One of the things I like about you. These people and their endless shrugs and handshakes. I know where I stand with you. How much do you want?"

"You offend me Agrippina. I can't sell the queen of the temple. And what do I want with gold?"

"What then? Lucius wants the African licenses and you want to sell them to him, so obviously it's more than that."

A terrified slave, no more than a child, skidded to a halt on the stones at Seth's feet, balling himself into submission on the ground. "Sir," he said clearly. "Our lady wants your attendance."

Seth stood and smiled back at Agrippina as he walked toward the queen. "Prepare your bid."

Across the hall Drusus had moved, invitation or none, to the place Seth had vacated. Both Sextius and Malichus were deep in very serious conversation with him and Jaida wondered how much he knew, how much he needed and how much influence he could wield. Confidence filled his every move. He seemed secure.

"Gorgeous, isn't he?"

Jaida looked at Drusus, then at Sextius in confusion.

"Not them. Aquila. With the goddess' fullest blessing you could keep your oracle if I could just have that."

"Aquila?" She could barely form the question.

"Yes. Look at him."

"You're married," Jaida said.

"Marriage is only a precursor for divorce these days. I'd drop my poor darling husband like a hot rock if I thought for a moment I could keep him."

Jaida looked at Seth and felt the blood suck from her face. She had wondered where they were, the noble women he should marry. And how many of them were there? Had he simply chosen to remain alone so far? What would stop one noble woman or another from holding him?

"He wants to marry," she prompted, trying to remember his advice. The less she told them the better.

"Does he? Is that what he told you?"

Jaida felt the woman's scrutiny burning deep into her marrow, but remained silent.

"Perhaps he does."

Jaida bit her lip and hushed herself, willing Agrippina to go on with her explanation. Sethos had been a slave and maybe no gold or robes of nobility would wipe that fact from his curriculum vitae. Agrippina seemed to study her for a long time, her dark probing reaching behind Jaida's eyes to read the secret thoughts she hid there, gauging how much she could share.

"I've considered it, you know. Marrying him. But don't tell him that. The stigma wouldn't be so bad if I stayed out here in the colonies. Or better, if I moved even further out. But I have family to think of, a name and heritage in Rome to protect. I could never bring that shame upon my family." Her view turned in and regret lined her face, making her seem older than a moment before, and her silence followed her reverie inward.

Jaida wanted to understand. Needed to. "Because he was a slave?"

"No!" Agrippina gave a loud cynical laugh. "Gods afire, Rome would have run her noble blood down the drain if we let something so common stand in the way of inheritance. No, Drusus didn't only free him, he adopted him. He has the name and the title and the whole hereditary fortune to call his own. He has more wealth in his own

right than Lucius does.

“No. It’s the scandal I couldn’t bear. I would have had to leave my children.

“They’re a breed apart, celebrities. Everyone wants to know them, and touch them and show them off to their friends, but no one would stand the stigma of a formal public association.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you?” A smile began across Agrippina’s lips, and widened as her thoughts grew clearer. “Drusus, ha!” She laughed again. “You don’t know, do you? He’s a sharp one, that man.”

A million ants rushed over Jaida’s skin, each with hooked feet and hot breath. They massed across her shoulders and moved in a solid line onto her cheeks, spurred on by her ignorance and embarrassment. What was this awful shame? How terrible could this be?

“He was a gladiator, my dear child. Aquila was his name in the arena, and he was very well known throughout the empire. Don’t you follow the games?”

Jaida shook her head slightly.

“He was a star. Lowest of the low, but adored by the plebs. Drusus doesn’t care that he’s a pariah, he has no immediate family anyway and he’s never cared what men had to say. He has no interest in politics and no seat in the senate to risk, so he just didn’t care. But no woman with status would ever be allowed to marry Aquila.”

Both women turned to where Sethos knelt, speaking earnestly with the Nabataean queen.

“It’s such a shame, but a prostitute would be queen before he’d be received in Rome. Well.” She batted her eyelids and rolled her eyes. “Messalina. There’s the proof. But you are a different story. You would be adored in Rome. If you were to convince your oracle to come with me....”

A loud command in Aramaic was snapped across the room, bringing the Nabataean guard to their feet and assembled in tight formation around their queen in an instant. Seth was ousted from the group; the young prince was escorted to them and insinuated into the protective mass in his place.

The music stopped and Zayed crossed the floor, meeting Sethos as he jogged back toward the door. “Soldiers are approaching.” Zayed tried to be discrete, but his agitation was plain, his voice several octaves too high.

“Juba!” Seth summoned the coordinator of his security to his side. “How many?”

“It’s not the eighth cohort, sir. It’s *Praefectus Castrorum* Axius Villius Cinna, and he has only a single squad with him.”

Jaida’s heart stumbled into a gallop and she struggled up, wanting without thinking to run to Seth’s side. Juba called instructions to his men and Seth turned to face Jaida. His eyes were dark and a frown crossed his smooth brow, but he smiled calmly enough to keep her in her seat. Then he turned to walk back to where the queen was waiting.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.

Two things were obvious when Axius Villius was directed into the banquet hall. First was that he knew the man he had come to arrest. Seth repeated the name to himself; it was familiar, but in the face of the concerns the prefect brought, he couldn’t place it. The second, evident in the way he turned his face down as he spoke, was that

he was saddened or embarrassed by the discharge of his duty. He took a moment, recognizing the gravity of the company he'd entered, before meeting the protocols directed by his presence among superiors.

No one in the room technically outranked him, but with Nabataean royalty and the chief commanding officer of the Imperial province's son as witnesses, he had no option but to enact his duties to the letter.

"Decimus Asinius Drusus," he announced formally to the floor at his feet. "Allegations were made today that you were involved in the overnight theft of slaves. Four men from the Third Legion Cyrenaica, Eighth Infantry Cohort, and an auxiliary cavalry officer of the Second Cohort Arabian *ala* were killed in the attack."

He drew breath and Drusus interjected. "You think I was about in the early hours killing Roman soldiers?"

The prefect did not allow himself distraction from the charge he had to press. It was ridiculous to assert Drusus was present at a robbery; just as it was ridiculous to deny he could have paid men to do it for him. "The survivor of the attack reported valuable slaves were stolen."

"I have sufficient slaves, Axius. Were these boys particularly handsome that I should want to steal them?"

"Centurion Marcus Ulpius Ishaq alleges several young female slaves were taken."

"Well." Drusus laughed and held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I have no need for female slaves."

"As a result of these allegations, a search was ordered by my superior officer, *Legatus* Titus Arius Lucullus Gallius, and conducted today at your residence." He looked up from the floor, a deep frown on his scarred and sun dried brow. "During the search documents were found that show your support for militant uprisings in Arabian and Judean provinces."

"Drusus, I'm arresting you on charges of sedition."

Drusus made no further attempt at humour. "Well Aya," he said quietly. "They weren't searching for evidence yesterday, they were planting it. You should have thought of that."

Axius Villius turned to Seth. "Sethos Asinius Drusus Aquila, I have orders to search your property, also." Looking back to the floor, he finished, "You can accompany us on the search if you choose to. Or remain with your guests; it won't matter in the end."

"I suppose not," Seth spoke clearly, "but I will accompany you." Ensuring the guests heard every word, he added, "You know this is chicanery. There's a history that goes with this and your centurions will end up on a spike for these allegations."

"No," their prefect answered. "I don't know that at all and it makes no difference what I think. As citizens of Rome you are entitled to legal support. Use it."

Bowing deeply to Queen Gamilath and her son, Sethos walked from the room, following Drusus and trailing a wash of household staff. Juba was among them, but Seth knew that there would be no armed resistance. As he had feared, Ishaq had turned the fight over to Rome, and the thousand men of *Legio III Cyrenaica* in Petra today, could turn to ten thousand in a week. And with charges of sedition, any sign of belligerent resistance would be cured by bloodshed. Ishaq may have hoped they would resist.

"Can I hope for house arrest, Axius?" Drusus asked, and Seth heard the rarest note of fear in his father's voice.

"No." With a step as precise and direct as his tone, the prefect led his squad, his prisoner and the others, unerringly to the study and to an empty case that had once contained trade licenses. "Open it."

Zayed turned the brass locking clip and pulled the free lid from its case, exposing the vacant interior. Axius Villius looked at the empty space for a few moments, before moving to the case beside it and making the same demand. "That one."

The result was the same.

"These." Impatient now, the prefect waved his hand at stacks of document cylinders and boxes. His men moved forward at his command, roughly seizing files and sheaves of parchment, discarding each as the articles they sought evaded their search.

"Step back," he ordered Seth and his associates, clearing a wider space in the open room for searchers.

"Your sources gave you very clear directions, prefect. How did they know exactly where these documents would be?" Seth expected no answer, and the growing agitation in the officer's bearing encouraged him to leave such questions for the court. Frustration made violent men unpredictable, and the fact that he obviously knew Drusus socially carried little weight if things here got nasty.

"Right. This house is too big for eight men to clear. Drusus, I'll escort you to the Habees cells. Drusus Aquila, you and your staff are confined to the *triclinium* pending further searches. I'll be back."

Only a week ago, Dec had wanted to walk his city streets. Now he would have to walk them further and faster than he would choose: in midday heat and in chains.

"My guests," Seth asked. "Are you going to order Queen Gamilath and Lucius Aninius Sextius into custody as well?"

The prefect shifted his weight uncomfortably. "No. They can leave when they choose."

It was done and this was Ishaq's end play. Looking to where Zayed stood, Seth was certain there would be no incriminating documents found on the premises, but the house was huge and the search would be thorough. He had no doubt his staff had known about the planted papers, both here and at Dec's house. When the officer left, with only First Cohort foot soldiers left to guard them, Seth took Juba aside.

"You're a guest so you're free to leave. Any of your men who don't go with Gamilath, take with you. We won't need them here."

"Get over to Abram and ask him to advocate for Drusus. Take him up to Jabal Habees and put a constant guard on him, too. If I can pry them out of Tamir's hands, I'll send him the documents they should have found here. It will give him some idea which way to argue Dec's defence. If we beat this charge, he will find our gifts extremely generous."

"Also, try to find out where Dawud is. If he knew what was going to happen here today, he could be anywhere. I'm trusting that he will turn up in the *bab al-sirr* with the priestesses before nightfall, and he has twenty of your best with him."

Juba rested a comforting hand on Seth's shoulder as they climbed the rising corridor to the *triclinium*. Together they would mount what defence they could. But in these distant provinces, best known to Rome for arrogance and armed resistance, sedition was a charge hard to throw off. No influence would suffice if the legate thought the charges had any grounding.

Dec was right, they should have thought of this. But then as now, his thoughts had been distracted. Then as now, his concern was as much for Jaida's safety as for his own.

His guests showed none of the agitation he expected, or that he himself felt.

Jaida and Ianthe sat together as they had so often in the short time he'd known them, quietly holding hands, peering silently at terrors they couldn't name.

The royals were decadently at ease, feasting on Zayed's opulent banquet as if this fiasco was beneath their notice. Sextius reclined with his ankles crossed, grinning as

Seth entered, as though he had just been handed the Rub' al Khali on a map.

Agrippina was making small talk with the Nabataean guard, but she stood when her host returned, moving quickly up toward the primary couches. "Sedition Aquila?"

"Apparently. It's a lie. The slaves they claim he stole were mine to begin with. Their papers are on route to Bostra now, seeking manumission. The charge of theft was just an excuse to demand a search for documents they'd planted there themselves."

He kept speaking to Agrippina, but he turned to Queen Gamilath, imploring her to hear the sincerity and security of their dealings with the Nabataean state. "We knew something like this was coming, we just didn't know what. All our business and private documents were in storage at the *Curia*, and yet they allege we'd leave proof of treason lying about the house. And what could he gain? Drusus had plans to leave *Arabia Petraea* for Rome in the next day or two. It's preposterous."

Gamilath shrugged noncommittally. "It's a precarious position to find yourself in, Aquila. You have no room to move."

"If Legate Lucullus Gallius approves this charge and hands it on, it will go before the Governor," Seth said gravely, facing Sextius as he spoke.

The smile Sextius turned was that of a man out of his depth but unaware of the fact. If détente was less important, Seth would have wiped the smile from those lips and altered forever the sharp curve of his nose. "My father will hear the case sympathetically, Aquila. But he has his own seat to think of. This province has always attracted suspicion. We're too far from Rome, it makes us seem secretive."

He raised a hand to Agrippina and then moved it toward Ianthe. "My wife values the oracle. My father would also value her advice in matters like this. As for me, Aquila. I would value trade routes through the Nafud wastes."

"They are not his to sell!" The explosive riposte shocked everyone in the room, and Queen Gamilath stood with more grace and agility than Seth would have suspected. "One word from me and the licenses, the caravans and all the routes he uses will be nothing more than patterns in the sand."

"You thought you'd bring me here today and haggle over what you could gain for the favour of the goddess. Here is what you gain. I will leave here now, with the oracle. There is an end to it. If that is not acceptable to you, you will be unwelcome in Rekeem by sunrise."

Seth flashed a questioning glance at Ianthe, praying to the gods Jaida swore stood around them, that her answer at this moment would be right. She had no way to judge the powers sparking through the room, but he prayed her instinct would guide her.

In an instant, every mote Drusus had worked for had been piled onto the scales, and his life, and Seth's life, hung on what the priestess said. "The oracle is, and always was, free to choose," he said, holding his breath and bowing low.

Ianthe was lost and afraid, he could see that, but if all her years of training had taught her anything, it was grace in the face of terror. She had drawn herself taller and the robes she wore loaned her authority and stature.

The balance of power should have been plain. The Romans, for all that they represented the largest empire in history, were small beside the Nabataean dynasty that had reigned for a thousand years and watched the empires come and go. "Your Majesty," she began. Her eyes jumped for an instant to Seth, pleading or apologizing, before she said. "I am honoured to serve the goddess under your protection."

Relief blew hard through Seth's lips, and his knees were weak when he bowed to the priestess. Without looking at her, he could feel the fear in Jaida's eyes and feel her heart breaking as she watched her sister take her first tentative steps toward another life.

"We will leave now," Gamilath announced, sparing not even a gloat of satisfaction

as she reached for Seth's arm and strode toward the exit. "Have the oracle's goods sent to my residence when this debacle has been resolved."

But the oracle herself, the queen was taking now. There was no risking the winds of change; she was leaving with hard currency and damning those who stayed behind to care for themselves.

For the second time that afternoon, Jaida watched Seth leave, but this time he was taking Ianthe with him.

In all the horrors and upheavals of their life since Babu died, Ianthe had been the only constant and the only soul she could rely upon without question. Watching as she walked away, her face turned back and tears welling in her dark eyes, she reached out a hand to plead for the impossible.

Her sister was going. To safety and luxury, Jaida hoped. But she was going, and taking her heart. There had been too many tears; the well was dry. When the party turned from sight and fled down the shadowed corridor toward the main house, Jaida turned back to her couch and allowed herself to sink into its softness.

The smug self-confidence Sextius had shown was gone. He strode the length of the balcony, swearing roundly and kicking at planter urns and threatened obstacles. Agrippina had discovered a thirst, collected a large ewer of wine and a goblet and had taken a seat, ignoring the army of temporarily captive household servants who were filing into the rear of the hall.

Juba came nearer, drifting so as not to attract attention, and he didn't sit, but leaned discretely to Jaida's ear, as if he wanted only to share a fond farewell. "If he survives until I get my hands on him, you know that you can trust Tamir," he whispered. "You know one way into the *bab al-sirr*. If we are right, Dawud will have your sisters there in the safe room by tonight."

Juba stepped back, his soft, feminine eyes, with their thick lashes and promise of tears, held hers and he stroked a finger down her cheek. "We have all done what we can to keep you safe here, for Sethos, priestess. You are very dear to us all. But do not doubt for a moment that if you betray him now, I will have the perfect skin flayed from your body." With a single movement of his hand, Juba had the Nabataean guard assembled at his back, and he left the *triclinium* and Jaida alone with the furious Roman and his wife.

Betray him? She could never betray him. If she could find him she would wrap herself around him and pray not ever to be parted from him, but the chance seemed much too far away. Everyone who moved in this shadowy world of deceit had motives of their own, and she could easily speak unwisely. With no other hand to hold hers, Jaida closed her eyes and prayed to her goddess to hold her firm and give her all the words she would need. Seth was beloved of the goddess, and she screwed her fists into aching balls trying to force conviction into her words of supplication.

She needed ritual. She needed to bathe and to dress and the ritual of prayer. She needed, she suspected, the goddess' special incense. She needed now more than ever, direct input from Isis herself. What did the goddess want?

"Come on Agrippina, we're going too. There's no point waiting here, he has nothing to offer us and he'll be *persona non grata* by morning."

Agrippina was less inclined to move away. From all she had said before, it seemed Seth was already unrecognized by their society. His money and his family name had been sufficient to give him grace, but now the fickle world was taking back its benevolence.

The queen had her oracle and she'd given leave for Seth to solve the dilemmas. But if his allies in the Roman world refused to support Drusus, his money and his title ceased to suffice. And yet Agrippina remained, sipping thoughtfully on her goblet of

wine.

Jaida stood, straightening even though one knee threatened to buckle, and she forced herself to move quietly to where the woman sat. She had never known the thrill of gambling and if this was how it felt, she never wanted to know it again. Still she made herself move, clinging to the one thing she knew for sure. The goddess wanted her children safe.

Reaching to place a cool hand on Agrippina's, Jaida said very softly, "My sister is not the only oracle."

"Wife!" Sextius snapped. "We're leaving."

"Leave me alone, Lucius. Here, eat. Have a drink. Go on and let me speak to my friend here for a moment."

The promise had caught her attention at least, and Jaida swallowed hard and tried to smile. "There are others. They're on their way here now."

"Others?"

Jaida nodded. "We've travelled a long way and the journey hasn't been an easy one, but by tonight, with the goddess' blessing, there will be five women trained in the secret rites of the temples here in Petra."

"Drusus said..." Agrippina started, then she paused as the smile Jaida had seen before spread over her face. "He is a fox." Her eyes darted back and forth, counting up possibilities and assets. "And I can have them?"

"They're free to choose," Jaida said. "But you can certainly see them. No one else has, or knows that they're here. If you were to offer them your guidance in Rome..." Jaida thought of the complexities Seth had shared, of the expenses and dangers that existed for servants of the temples.

Agrippina was wealthy, jewels glittered at her throat and ears, but not in the same league as Seth or Drusus. And the biggest motivator in all these machinations, Jaida realized, was money. And Drusus had money, if it could be protected. "If one oracle was to go with you to Rome, it would be spectacular. Imagine if others, if all five were to choose to follow you." She paused, "But the cost would be enormous. Just getting them safely to Rome would be a nightmare. Only Aquila's gold has kept them safe so far."

Heavy lidded eyes studied Jaida again, searching out duplicity and judging risks and rewards. "Drusus is going to Rome?" she asked.

Jaida nodded. "If he's released. You know, he could have taken the oracles with him and enjoyed the acclamation. Imagine, not only a priestess of Isis, but of Diana, Minerva, Ceres, Vesta and Venus. He could have chosen. But perhaps he would be happier now if they travelled under your name? Under his protection, of course, but in your name."

"Why should I trust you? You might be as slippery as Drusus himself. You might disappear as soon as my back is turned."

"I could swear it on my life, but that isn't worth very much to you. So I'll swear it on Aquila's life. That is after all what you hold in your hand." If Agrippina would once have given all she was to have him live with her, Jaida prayed that she would do all she could to have him live.

"I believe I will have to leave after all; my husband has an urgent essay to send to Bostra, to his father." In a whispered aside, she said, "They'll be here by tonight, you say. I'll come back then to meet them."

Jaida forced herself to breathe and swallowed the nausea that threatened.

"Tomorrow would be better. They'll need to rest after their journey."

Agrippina stood, straightening her gown and the pendant at her throat. "On Aquila's life," she hissed, then aloud, "I will pay a call on my good friend, *Legatus*

Lucullus Gallius. You'll be sure to tell Seth what I'm doing." And she moved to take her husband's arm.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN.

There was too much sweetness in Agrippina's farewell and too much determination to be gone. Seth considered her position as he walked, ignoring the silent Roman soldiers that dogged his heels. He had nothing concrete left to offer her and they were not staying to haggle. He would need other allies. In the *triclinium*, the household staff had been gathered, a mass of people standing quietly, waiting, most of their faces familiar to him.

"Eat," he called to them as he passed the heavy trestles of the banquet. If they had not been dragged into custody like this, they would have taken what they needed from the leftovers. Being up here needn't change that fact. As an afterthought he turned back to his Roman guards. "Help yourselves," he offered without looking or caring whether they complied.

A quick scan of the shadows in the vast hall showed no sign of Tamir. Jaida sat on Ianthe's couch, with Zayed standing stiffly at her side. She was exquisite. How anyone who sought a goddess could look past her, was a mystery.

His people were moving quickly to the trestles now and beginning to feast. There was no evidence of fear of an uncertain future, more a determination to eat as if this meal might be their last. When he reached the day bed and turned to sit, he called, "Music," and Zayed moved away to give direction.

Jaida raised her flawless face to him, questioning. "Music? You want a party now?"

"No. I want privacy and diversion is the best I can hope for."

She smiled, and he could have fallen to the floor at her feet. She asked, "What will happen next?"

"I wish I could tell you. They won't find anything incriminating here, that I know. The *Curia* has everything important held in trust. Drusus was leaving the colony, so he's an unlikely candidate for insurrection. Ishaq has named himself in direct association with the priestesses, and their paperwork will already be in Bostra with the Governor. If need be the girls themselves can testify on our behalf.

"In all, their case is tenuous. But Drusus has more enemies than friends. And exoneration isn't worth much once you're dead."

"Can he buy his way out of trouble?"

"We are putting every denar he has into it now. If we can buy a reprieve, we will, if it costs everything. What matters most is keeping the case inside this province. If the legate throws his weight against us, if the idea of sedition is raised outside this city, we're sunk."

"I hope he still has money when he is released. He'll need it to survive."

Seth looked at her, unsure of where her thoughts were leading. He had no idea who she'd been speaking to or what she'd heard. If Tamir had filled her ears with poison, she might even wish Drusus harm. "Are you thinking of his enemies?"

"Tamir said a rich man can survive bankruptcy, but not if it comes with scandal. Are you scandal enough to ruin him?"

What had she been told, and by whom? Tamir. Zayed? Unlikely. Agrippina? He

shuddered at the picture of sex and excess that this particular lover might have drawn of his past. “No, I don’t think so. Dec has a history more colourful than mine and he’s weathered it well enough. And now, almost everything he owns is mine. His gold is in Rome. He hasn’t too much left here to lose.”

“Good. Because I promised Agrippina that he would pay to keep my sisters if they went with her to Rome.”

The stone floor and the cliff face and a thousand years of building in the rose stone city fell away to nothingness beneath him, as he stared at the woman beside him. “You did what?”

“Agrippina was going to leave. Queen Gamilath had taken the oracle and forbidden you to sell her husband the licenses he wanted. You had nothing. They were going to leave. So I told Agrippina about the girls. That they were travelling here tonight, and no one else knew of their arrival.” She looked at him with eyes that seemed to swell from her face in sheer terror at what she had done. She was a ghost, with barely breath enough to form her words, and without the blood to colour her cheeks or delicate lips. Only her eyes shone, huge and pale, pleading for absolution. “She’s gone now to visit the legate. Her husband is writing to his father. She’s coming tomorrow to meet them.”

She was matchless. Elegant, transparently naive and without equal on any plain of existence. The sheer intensity of her fear made him want to laugh out loud and to hold her close against him while he thanked the gods and goddesses who’d brought her to him. The best he could do was to close his eyes, to hold her face in gentle hands and kiss those perfect lips.

When the emptiness around him began to reform into stone, and his heart resumed a fractured beat, he looked into her eyes and said, “You might have saved us all.”

For a moment he concentrated on breathing, then on what her confession would mean. He rested his face in cupped hands, clearing his thoughts. “Do you think they would consider going to Rome in temple service?”

“Why not?” she asked, smiling slightly, drawing confidence from his. “What choice do they have? If they refuse, they will be alone and destitute on the streets. Even if Drusus survives, without Agrippina’s support he’ll have no means left to support himself, or them. If she will consent to help him reduce and isolate the legal struggle, he might have his freedom and his wealth. And if they go, they can learn. They can stand in the sun and watch the world and learn. We’re not stupid, you know.”

“I never thought you were.” She hadn’t seen her sisters and she had no idea how badly they’d been treated, or how many harms they suffered at their captor’s hands. “I just hope you can convince them you are right, this time.”

He needed word from Juba. He needed to get up to Jabal Habees and give Dec this news. But first he needed to know where Dawud was.

“Sir,” Zayed leaned close to whisper. If the gods were moving among them, they chose black hearts for their pieces. Following Zayed’s glance to the entrance of a utility room, Seth met Dawud’s eye, caught a nod, and watched him disappear back into the shadows behind him.

The Roman guards were by the trestle, talking to staff as they piled platters high with luxury food. Seth looked to his *promus*. “Zayed. Make sure the guards are kept busy for a moment.”

He took Jaida’s hand. “Your sisters are here,” he whispered. “I want you to go to the second door from the end, there. Dawud is in there, he will show you the way down to the safe-room.”

“Jaida, I don’t know how well they’ve been treated,” he warned. “But keep them

there, keep them safe until someone comes for you. When the search is finished I'll send for you. I have to go to Jabal Habees, and I hope I can take their decision with me."

He expected her to rise, to start toward the doorway and her sisters, but she gripped his fingers tighter and pulled his hand into both of hers. "You offered me a choice," she whispered, leaning so her words moved against his cheek. "The life we had known in the temple or the riches of the life you could provide."

"I want to tell you, the life Ianthe has chosen is not the one we knew. That life was without sun and without hope. She has those things, now, and luxury. You gave those things to her and I hope my sisters will choose them, too."

"But I didn't choose them. And I didn't choose the luxury you offered or the riches that come with giving Drusus heirs, either."

Her fingers were trembling and her voice was grainy with emotion. Her eyes were dark and searching, her breath ragged over moist lips. But the silence of her pause grew so heavy Seth felt it as surely as if chains of iron were draped over his shoulders.

"I want you to understand that. Do you understand?"

He wanted to yell 'No!' To stand and pull his hand from hers and scream frustration at the sky above. No, he didn't understand. It made no sense at all. There was no other choice for her to make, no safe place, no certainty outside the temple or the walls of his house. Had all she'd been through showed her nothing? Were they back to a fight between freedom and bondage, and the value of virginity? Back to fear and prejudice?

Whatever she'd learned about his past, it had fleshed out her image of life here as one continuous orgy.

Patience, he told himself, and ground the fury that had formed the thought between his back teeth. More patience. A little more. For the moment he should turn his thoughts to Drusus and his prison cell. After that he'd find a way to show the lovely priestess here, that he could promise her more than gold and debauchery.

"I understand," he said, ashamed of the threatening tone that rose with the words. He took his hand back quickly, and said more quietly, "Go. While the guards are eating. I'll send for you."

Jaida fled across the floor, resisting contradictory urges. One longed to run with all the speed in her body, to the door and the secret way down to her sisters. The other ached to turn and rush back to where he sat.

She would curse every man and woman in the room to blindness, if she could tear off the wealth that hid her skin; to struggle out of these rich clothes, and throw away the gold and jewels and the weight of all they represented. Bare and brave and naked, with the touch of his lips still warm on hers. If she could go back now and rip the precious stark white linen from his chest, she would cover his skin with kisses, and see and know his body in all of its naked glory.

Her thoughts made her stumble and she quickened her pace, away from the burn of his eyes on her back and the heat in her cheeks.

The filthy spy sat on a small stool, cramming his mouth full of flaky golden pastry, and he grunted when she walked into the room. "Aquila said you would take me down to my sisters," she said, pausing by the door with the burning desire to stay there and look back.

He said nothing, but flicked his head to indicate she should follow and he pulled aside a hanging and slipped in behind it. The way down was little more than a steep, unlit chute and Jaida cursed the fine shoes she wore as her feet slipped and skidded on the slope. She dropped gracelessly from the opening in the wall into the half-light of the

access tunnel. Tamir was waiting to help her to her feet.

"Have the fates been kind, child?" he asked sadly, knowing it seemed that Drusus had given up nothing in this battle with the gods.

"Seth has some hope we can save Drusus. It might cost a great deal, but that will be all right in the end." She couldn't help sympathy for the old servant. "What will you do if he survives?"

"Whether he survives or not, child, I have nothing left here. I'll go to find my lost family and tell them stories of my life since I saw them last." He had moved away, shuffling along the fissure, leading her to where her sisters waited.

Seth's concerns about their safety seemed well founded, as she peered into the *tutus caverna*. They were in rags, dirty and miserable. Sitting against one wall, Eshe caught Jaida's eye for the bizarre stillness in her posture. She was stiff and as pale as alabaster. Oseye paced an arc before her as if she was tethered there and unable to move more than half a step away.

"Jaida!" Rhea pounced on her sister and wrapped her in a warm embrace, laughing and sobbing on her shoulder as the other girls joined them. They were babbling and laughing and crying hysterically all together, so that Jaida couldn't make sense of anything they said.

"Are you well? Were you hurt?" She tried to step back and see each of her sisters, touching and holding and drawing back into the warmth of their hugs.

"Where is Ianthe?" Shemei asked, smearing grime over her cheek with wiped tears.

"The Nabataean queen has given her protection as private oracle to the royal family. She was here until a few moments ago. But she knew you were all safe. Seth told her he'd found you all."

"Are you unhurt? Were you safe here?"

"Yes." Jaida felt a sting of guilt at how gently she'd been treated. Lailah had been brutalized, and Eshe's bloodless lips were still. Oseye had not moved into the throng of welcome, either. "Were you? Eshe? Oseye?"

"No, we weren't safe," Oseye growled. "He was right; there is no safety out there."

"There is," Jaida rushed forward to take Oseye's hand, but when she pulled her sister into an embrace, she was stiff and cold and unyielding. She stepped back. "There is safety, and freedom. But we have to take the time to learn. You couldn't have known you were going to run headlong into the man you were fleeing, but you should have stopped and listened. If only you had waited."

"I don't want freedom, Jaida. I want revenge. I want to kill until their blood washes away some of this rage. I don't want to learn to live among these men. I want to kill them."

The simple passionless statement, lit as it was by the fierce fires of Oseye's eyes and murmured in the rich silk tones of her voice, was too appalling to be doubted.

"What happened?" Jaida asked, afraid of the answer.

"Jaida," Rhea stepped closer and took her sister's hand, turning her back to where the others stood. "Where are we now? When can we leave here?"

Zaliki spoke, "Where can we go?"

Zaliki never doubted. She was fearless and determined. But their days in Ishaq's hands had driven all the hope from her and her confidence had vanished.

"We'll be sent for. There's a long story and I'll tell you all every word. We are in the cliffs behind Aquila's house. Once it's safe we can go out. And then you're free to make a choice. Again. It's the same choice, the streets or the temple, and again, you have to make it blind."

"I don't want freedom, Jaida!" Oseye raised her voice a fraction, but not enough to explain the resonance that seemed to shake the very air around them. "I want revenge."

"Let me explain," she begged. "Let me tell you all that's happened and what's at stake. Then I'll let you all make your choices."

"You will let me, will you?" Oseye's voice had dropped again to a dangerous whisper.

"Yes. And this time I will tell you and you will shut up and listen. You will wait and hear what you need to know. And you will not risk everybody else's safety with fear and anger and vengeance. I've seen what that costs, and so have you."

Oseye turned away to share Eshe's bench. She'd said all she wanted to say for the moment. Too excited now to sit, Jaida paced the narrow room as she told what she could of the time since they'd left her. At times, Rhea broke in with excerpts of the days of fear and darkness they had known. And worse.

When Jaida had explained what she could of the precarious situation that had arisen, and where it left the sisters, she waited through their silence.

"I will not be their plaything," Oseye said simply. "I will not be their victim anymore."

"Then take up the power we were raised to," Jaida pleaded. "We were raised to power, even if Babu didn't know it himself. We were trained in the rites of the goddesses. Don't be a servant or a victim. Be Venus, Minerva or Diana herself. Be the goddess you were born to be. Oseye this is power. These are the rights we were born to. The goddess will not have her children hidden by men in cold stone and darkness."

"You can choose. So choose. Go to Rome under a woman's care. And use the power you've been given to control the men who kneel before you. If you'd seen what I've seen in so few days: the lies, the secrets, the power plays. You can learn, and the woman who will take you to Rome is a fine one to learn from."

"Will we go back to where we've been? Or worse?" Rhea spoke up to support Jaida. "On the streets with nothing we are dead meat and no more than that. Oseye, there is no choice in this."

Jaida felt giddy with simple relief. "It is time that's important, Oseye. This position may not last forever. You might fail eventually, or tire of it all. But you will have the time to find another way. This is not subservience, it's power."

They had argued this before. The words and hopes and fears were all the same as they had been the day Seth first made his offer. What had changed was time and the experiences it had brought to each one of them. What had changed was the confidence Jaida had found to stand and not be cowed. She could take up this cause for hours, for days, for years if need be. But Seth would send for them when the searchers were done, and she wanted to give him the answer he needed. If the search took hours, she would use every one to try to convince her sisters of the wisdom of this choice.

And she did.

When Zayed finally entered the safe room, Jaida walked quickly to where he stood, anxious to follow him to where ever Sethos waited. "Ladies," he said, bowing tentatively toward the group of women. "You must come up to the guest wing. The baths are available and food and clothes have been prepared."

He moved aside, his usual frosty stiffness even more evident as he directed the group into the dark fissure and out toward Kartikeya's lair. Through behind the boulders that obscured the entrance, the sky had shed all light, and the house was brightly lamplit when they entered. It was not the door into Seth's annex that they took, but further along and onto the walkway that led to the guest wings and on up to the *triclinium* above.

The familiar *atrium*, with its tiled orgies and naked goddesses stood open before her, lit by torches and scented by clusters of flowers and oils.

“Zayed.” Jaida paused, while her sisters filed past into the opulent suite where a number of female servants stood, faces down, waiting. “Where is Aquila? He said he would send for me.”

“He was summoned to the tribunal on Habees.”

“He didn’t wait for word of my sister’s decision?”

“I dare say he had more pressing concerns.”

“Dare you say?” Jaida felt the hairs rise on her neck. She had done nothing to earn this man’s contempt, but the small challenge that straightened her spine was as much as she could muster. “Has he been gone long? How long were we left down there, waiting?”

“He was called to the barracks shortly after you went down to the *bab al-sirr*. We brought you out as soon as it was possible.” He turned away, obviously intent on more important duties.

Jaida firmed her voice. “Where is Tamir? Can I go to the suite he prepared for my sister and me last night?”

The butler ignored the first question and bowed his head as he answered the second. “Aquila has asked that the priestesses be made comfortable. Everything you need is in here.”

“I would like to speak to him. When will he be back?”

“I couldn’t say. These are complex matters; he could be gone all night.”

“Then why would you have come for us, now? You are expecting him soon or you’d have left us down there to moulder.” She met his icy stare, her stomach churning violently with the audacity of her stand. “Please send someone to tell me as soon as he returns.”

Zayed nodded, bowing stiffly.

Jaida let him go, pressing her hand over her heart to calm its racing. Seth might come for her himself as soon as he was able. For now she should help her sisters find their way through bathing, eating and dressing. For all they’d talked, they still needed to decide how they would present themselves to Agrippina. Jaida had gathered tips from watching Drusus school Ianthe, and her sisters had been chosen for the impact they made as a group. Their work was mostly done. They just needed to create a range of oracles, each one individual and each indispensable to the whole. Each an aspect of the divine.

And they needed to find words for their pain. Whatever came in the morning, they needed to know what the goddess would have them say.

Seth lay watching the full face of the moon drifting through the sky. Sleep was impossible yet again and hope, although it eased the grinding dread from his belly, couldn’t ease the tensions in his flesh. It clamped his hands into fists at his side and clenched his toes in the sheets at his feet.

He was relieved. Agrippina was worth her libido in gold, and her greed for status had served them well. She had bought them time.

Drusus would be released tomorrow pending this inquiry; provided he could have the priestesses testify before the charges were formalized and the proceedings begun. Being a wealthy Roman citizen had its rewards. Technically, the girls were still slaves, but manumission was only days away and it paid to have superstitious men in power.

It also paid to have Drusus’ lover’s son a prefect here in Petra. Axius Villius Cinna, he knew he’d heard the name. He was the reason Dec and Quintus had met, and if

Drusus was ruined in a scandal like this, charges of sedition would also stain Quintus in Rome. And his son, here in Arabia, would go down with them. Thirty years of military service ending in disgrace.

He was relieved. Profoundly relieved.

But across the aisle from his bolted door, Jaida's suite stood open and empty. She had not answered his summons, but followed with her sisters to the guest wing below, and every article of clothing and jewellery and cosmetic had been scoured from the room next door with grim finality.

A stiff breeze rushed in licking the night's heat from his belly and thighs and he dragged the silk sheet up irritably, shielding overwrought nerves from its touch. His mind's eye watched white silk ruffle and fall from the body of a sleeping goddess, with moonlight staining her golden skin in silver.

What did she want? Time? Space? Isis herself, standing at the bedhead giving direction?

Patience.

He flung the sheet back and strode to the balcony, peering down at the moving water, his hands gripping the balustrade so hard the sandstone surface turned to grit under his fingers. The scent of honeysuckle carried images of Jaida; her lips soft on his, her eyes dark with desire, her naked skin by candle light.

She had not chosen the temple as her sisters had. She had not chosen the wealth and luxury he offered. What else was there? The vast moon had no answers. The waters of the fountain that threw back its light were silent on the matter, too.

His bare foot kicked the carved stone in frustration and he instantly regretted the move, hobbling back to his bed, groaning. Throwing himself back onto the soft pallet, he pulled a cushion over his face. What else was there?

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CHAPTER TWENTY.

As sun lit the guest wing, things were not peaceful. Oseye was no less determined and the strain of sleeplessness showed clearly in her eyes. She moved through piles of discarded clothing, walking over anything that didn't serve her purpose, gathering the items which best fit the image she had formed in her mind. Frustrated by her sisters' insistence on chattering over breakfast, she carried on her hunt for small accessories, searching out a blade that had an edge.

Her plan for Eshe was a simple one. She had selected a gauzy cloth, stained blood red at the edges, and fading through oranges and golds to a near transparent cream in the centre. In a simple shapeless linen tunic, Eshe would sit silently beneath her veil, a heavy gold mesh head dress holding it in place like a shroud. She could see out well enough, but her own lovely face would be covered, her scarred spirit shielded from the eyes of strangers. That at least had given her some comfort.

She herself had an ornate leather chestplate from a set of child's armour strapped over her tunic. The leather kilt that went with it was shorter than she would have had it, and it was certain she would choose another as soon as it was possible. Grecian greaves in tooled bronze covered her shins, and a crested helmet gripped close over her cheek and jaw. It would do.

Rhea laughed nervously over her crusts. She was excited and terrified in equal measure, and she needed to distance herself from Oseye's focused rage. She could not

quite share Jaida's confidence, and the past days left her with a creeping dread and burning need to secure herself a safe place. She felt safe enough for the moment, and hungry, and relived to see the faces she loved smiling back at her over their meal.

She was petite, choosing a *tunica* and filmy *stola* in greens that suited her colouring, and to fill her arms, sheaves of new wheat to match the golden flecks in her eyes.

Shemei watched Oseye, nodding her approval and tacitly agreeing to wear a costume almost identical to the military ensemble her sister had chosen. The variance would be in the detail, but the overall look was sound. Their leanness and their small breasted muscularity suited the gold embossed leather cuirasses, and the dark gloss of their thighs under the short white tunic and black leather kilt would draw every eye.

Zaliki, of all the girls, was most exquisitely comfortable robed in her own golden skin. She tilted her head back, letting honey drip into her mouth from a chunk of waxy comb. She was still wearing the loose robe she had pulled on when she woke, but she had no qualms about appearing in the costume allocated to her. With a long, beaded shawl of coarse linen in mottled blues and sea greens tied low on her hips, she would stand proudly with her heavy breasts bare but for a pearly sheen of cosmetic dust. A jewelled skull cap and loops of beads at her throat would suffice to suggest the spume of an angry ocean, and she emerging perfect as Venus.

In the corner of the room, almost fading into shadows, the old servant who had supplied their choice of treasures sat alone, eating figs from a small tray and smiling to himself. Nodding.

When Agrippina arrived, several hours early and in a state of nervous agitation, she paid no heed at all to the manners of convention. "Aquila, where are these oracles? Have you got them for me? Are they ready to leave for the capital?" As she spoke she cornered Zayed, backing him across the floor and helping herself to his platter of oozing nut-stuffed pastries. "If I am to be their exclusive matron, I want to see what I'm getting."

She paused and a young hand maid who had been racing in her footsteps held a bowl and cloth for her to rinse her sticky fingers. "There won't be any trouble though, will there? With the oracles." She moved to stand behind Seth, daring him to renege on her deal with Jaida.

"You're early, Agrippina. Do I rate so high on your daily agenda that you'd interrupt my breakfast?"

"Always, my dearest." She smiled, and dipped her lips to his cheek. "I haven't slept. I realized I hadn't had your word, or Drusus' for that matter, in any sort of binding agreement. Foolish of me, I know, to let Drusus have any span of faith. But I hope my little friend has told you of our plan? Where is she?"

"The oracles are here. I haven't spoken to them this morning, but I'm assured they are willing to go with you, as your guests."

"As my guests, at Drusus expense."

"His or mine, whichever you prefer."

"And their companion, Aquila? Is she also my guest?"

Seth was unsure. "Unlikely, I'd guess." Unlikely, he hoped. "But then, who can know the will of a goddess." There was no conviction in his words, and Agrippina laughed. "Sit," he ordered, waving his visitor toward a couch. "Dec isn't released yet and Juba isn't here."

“We’ve got other business this morning and it will have to take precedence over your holiday arrangements. I don’t even know if the priestesses are ready to see you.”

“Oh nonsense!” Agrippina waved a hand disparagingly. “If you’re talking about getting them costumed and painted, darling, I’m not concerned. I’d as soon see them fresh from their beds and judge for myself the effect they might have in Rome.”

Even knowing the importance of the role she would play, Seth couldn’t help the irritation that he felt, hearing the offhand way she referred to these girls. They had been made so powerless, their lives no more than tokens on a board when he had wanted freedom for them all. “These are not toys to dress and display, you know. They are oracles, and women who could wield at least as much power as your beloved husband. And yet they’re children. If you offer to chaperone them, you should understand how serious your responsibility to them will be.”

“Oh I do, darling. I do. I wouldn’t have it any other way. And they’ll have their own chaperon with them, she will decide to come. I’m sure she will keep me in line, aren’t you?”

The idea didn’t appeal to Seth. It was a role for Jaida he hadn’t considered. A choice he hadn’t thought she could make.

Juba entered the *cenarium* as Agrippina paced impatiently. Seth stood quickly, taking his hand warmly in both of his. “Have you spoken with Decimus? Is the inquiry satisfied that he can safely be released today?”

“Well...” Juba raised both hands and shrugged.

Seth turned to Agrippina, kissing her lightly on each cheek and said, “Excuse us. There are things we need to discuss. You know your own way around; the girls are in your suite. We’ll speak again shortly.”

Seth considered the information Juba had been able to gather. Ishaq had used real dissent to flesh out the charges he had levelled against Dec; small skirmishes, most notably in Judea, and which alone were no more than murmurings in a fractious state. But lumped together with the suggestion of an overarching intent to reignite the insurrection, they could be made to sound more sinister than they were.

Their only hope was to portray Dec as a loyal, even entrepreneurial citizen of Rome, and to turn the suspicion of the court onto the accuser. It would not be hard to show how the men involved would be rewarded by their action. There was no question that the slaves, the priestesses, were stolen by Ishaq himself, and his reasons for that were also self-evident.

The actions of the men at his command, and under the command of his brother centurions of the eighth cohort, would become a matter for army discipline and Seth preferred not to contemplate their fate.

The officers would be executed: flayed, or crucified, or perhaps impaled. But the men they commanded might well be decimated: a tenth of their number drawn by lot and beaten to death by their own compatriots.

If the charges could be turned.

That would depend on the priestesses and the testimony they gave, and on Ishaq himself and just how desperate he had become. Like his father before him he had decided to wager everything, including his life and the lives of his men, and there was no longer any way for him to win.

He might destroy Decimus; he might bring Rome down upon the heads of every merchant in *Arabia Petraea*; he might even send a new wash of blood across Judea and Egypt, but there was nothing he could gain. The girls and his father’s dream for them were far out of his reach. His fatuous charges, the claim of theft and the death of the legionaries were patently calumnious. At very least his military career was finished.

So, how desperate had he become? Seth tapped his fingers together. He had the priestesses gold, now, which was more than he had planned on having. But Ishaq was now fighting for his life, the best he could hope was to escape with his skin intact; and if he no longer really held that hope, if he believed he faced death and dishonour anyway, then what might a desperate man do?

"He might run." Seth answered his own question aloud. "Juba, do we have anyone watching the southern fort? Where are Ishaq and his friends now?"

"No, I haven't had him followed. He was at the inquisition last night to press his charges, with a dozen witnesses from among his men. I let them go." Juba waved a fist impotently in front of his own face. "I didn't even consider the chance." He stamped a foot just as uselessly, before he mastered himself and put his thoughts in order.

"I have Dawud here, and a squad of irregulars. We need horsemen, and they are the best we have." He frowned. "They may still be here and there will be no problem. But if they have decided to run..." He was already moving out and down the hallway, calling orders as he went.

Jaida met Agrippina as she crossed the guesthouse atrium, using her body to bar her way. "I'm sorry I have to stop you. My sisters aren't ready to be seen."

"Your sisters?" She looked past Jaida, taking her by the shoulders and moving her enough to clear a way through to the couches. "What has Aquila found here?" she mused aloud. "An Egyptian princess? Greek, are you?" Tall and lean, Agrippina rested one knee onto her *lectus* and stretched, grinning as she settled comfortably. "Sit, sit." She smiled. "And tell me how it is you have so many blessed sisters?"

Nerves were rising in rashes of sweat, itching as they went and Jaida tried a small smile, clasping her hands tightly together. "My sisters," she straightened her spine, pulling her shoulders back, "are children of our goddess. We've come a long way together, and now, if they choose, they will go on from here with you." A little of the terror slipped from her throat as she smiled again. "I told them you were a good woman, strong and capable. I told them you would teach them about the world outside of the temple."

"Did you? Yes, well, that I can certainly do. But first..." She opened her palms, grinning excitedly. "Can I see them?"

"Yes. Yes, you must. As soon as they are dressed." These people might well play with money and power, but they would not use her sisters' lives as baubles in their game. From the swirling wash of near panic in her head, she continued. "But this is not a costume party, madam. There is nothing my sisters do which is without purpose. If they are to speak for the goddess, they will do so in her vestments."

Agrippina nodded, agreeing it seemed, to try for a show of patience.

"What will happen today if Drusus is released?" Jaida asked. "Does that guarantee his freedom? Will he be able to travel with you immediately to Rome?"

Agrippina screwed her mouth and weighed possibilities, aware at least that there were problems to be solved before she could take charge of her bounty. "He'll be released to house arrest today, I'm almost certain of that. Sedition is the only charge that can hold a noble Roman in custody in any of the provincial jurisdictions, and there is more than enough evidence to suggest it is a malicious charge.

"But sedition is also the only charge which will stop a Roman demanding their right to have their case heard in Rome. Rome doesn't like wealthy armed merchants in distant and dissenting provinces like Arabia and Judea.

“Governors and legates don’t want to appear to have been complicit, either. They invariably choose to err for caution. That means Drusus is still firmly under the sword.

“Today, Lucullus will come to the house. He is a very devout man, our legate, and I believe your sisters, if they are as convincing as we all hope, will sway him to Drusus’ support. And I’m sure Sethos will offer him some fine and rare gifts of appreciation. If he is not moved, he’ll refer Drusus to the governor in Bostra. My father-in-law is a devout man too, but he’s also ambitious.

“So.” She shrugged. “We’ll have the oracles speak of their experiences and give their advice to Lucullus today, and then we will all pray that your goddess really is mother to her children.”

“And if it goes badly?”

Again Agrippina shrugged. “If it goes badly Drusus will be executed and all his goods and properties seized. Or he might fall on his sword. We have to pray, then, that the legate doesn’t consider Aquila compromised. Sadly, that is unlikely.”

Jaida nodded. It was as she feared. But the goddess had not brought them so far to desert them all now. Her sisters had prepared and would speak with conviction.

And she would pray for all she was worth.

There was more to occupy Seth’s morning and it seemed to be slipping away too fast. Once again Zayed would need to produce a feast fit to impress the local dignitaries. *Legatus* Titus Arius Lucullus Gallius was a hard man, renowned for bravery in battle; and just as renowned for delighting in flesh away from the field. He prided himself a gourmet and never stinted.

Gifts would be needed, grand enough to engage his goodwill and subtle enough to be simple gifts, not bribes.

He would have heard, at very least through Agrippina, about the reading of the Oracle of Isis, and he would expect the mysteries to be just as spectacular when enacted for him. What the girls said and did today would be the key to their success or failure. He had to hear what they planned, maybe even coach them though as Dec would do.

Before he could walk from the room, Zayed bowed. “Sir,” he deferred, bowing deeply from the doorway. “Axius Villius Cinna, *Praefectus Castrorum* of Petra, and a squad of his men are on their way as we speak. I believe they are an escort for your patron on his return.”

“Thank you, Zayed. Where will you put them?”

“I have the small *cenarium* prepared, and I have had the baths lit and perfumed.”

“And Lucullus?”

“The *triclinium*. The women have moved up into the hall and are preparing themselves for his arrival.”

“If Dec is on his way, the legate won’t be far behind him, will everything be ready?”

Zayed’s eyes cast the briefest shadow. “Yes sir.”

“What?”

“Nothing to concern you, sir.”

“What is it? Now.”

“Tamir is dead, sir. He ate poisoned figs with his breakfast this morning. The young slave, priestess, is upset, but the Lady Agrippina has everything in hand.” He did not look up as he spoke, and there was no mistaking his deliberate slur on Jaida. It would persist, Seth had no doubt, until manumission made her a free woman.

“How upset?”

“As I say, the Lady has it all in hand.”

Seth straightened and resigned himself to the mores of culture. “Just bring Dec

straight through to me when he gets here.”

Whatever Tamir knew of the plots he had taken with him, but he had cared for the girls and for that Seth would have forgiven almost anything. He either knew in advance, or no longer cared how the fates would treat Drusus.

For his part, Drusus was drawn and too quiet for Seth’s liking when he did arrive. He smiled and made his welcomes warmly enough, but he had not been taken to his own house and the robes he wore were creased and grubby.

“Will you eat, *mi pater*? Or bathe?”

“Yes, both, soon.” He sat heavily into deep cushions. “I am too old to have come to this, Aya. Much too old.”

Axius Villius sat too, but awkwardly, sitting on the edge of a couch with his hands clasped between his knees. He was wholly uncomfortable, a fighting man with an aversion to politics, and Seth had no way to know how much could be said in his presence. His squad positioned themselves outside the studio, out of sight and mind for the time being.

“Are you free to move about the city? Do we know yet if these charges will be heard?”

“No and no.” Axius spoke on Dec’s behalf, almost apologetically. “I can see no good reason to proceed with this,” he said, “but I don’t have to answer for the security of the state.” His agitation was plain; the urge to pace tightened the hard muscle of his thighs. “I don’t want to have to answer for why my men have behaved as they have, and our legate isn’t a man tolerant of melodrama. He prefers swift and decisive action, and I’ve petitioned the gods to have him pause to consider all his decisions very carefully today.”

“We have the gods with us here, today.” Dec smiled, and only deep familiarity revealed any cynicism in his words.

“Are your centurions in custody? If they’ve been shown to have brought false charges of theft and are known to have stolen themselves, are they liable to be held?” Seth leaned into the question, urging the prefect to reassure him that Ishaq was under guard somewhere in the city.

“No. They weren’t found with the women, and until the charge can be brought forward formally, you have only the word of slaves and the word of an accused traitor.”

“Those slaves are the oracles who will speak today for the legate. And their documents of manumission were sent ahead to Bostra days before any charges were brought against Drusus.”

“If and when charges against my men are brought forward formally I will act upon them.” His tone was becoming less apologetic, moving towards threat.

There was no point in antagonizing any of the players in this game, and Seth left the questions where they hung, turning instead to Dec. “Come down to the baths, *pater*. There’ll be food, but get yourself clean and it will be easier to face whatever comes next.”

Agrippina took the legate’s hand as he stepped past Seth and entered the *triclinium*. Incense fogged the room, heavy enough to catch in the throat, but it served to dim the brilliance of the hot morning sun and heighten the atmosphere.

“Titus, my dear friend, I’m so glad you could make time for us at such short notice.” Her voice was syrup, and the legate’s eye’s shone with a light close to adoration as he touched his lips to the back of her fingers.

“My lady, how could I do anything else?” He faced Seth squarely, coldly. “If the word I hear of the oracles given at this house is true, you have high expectations to meet. But we all know there’s a gulf between the words of a goddess and the musings of a group of slaves anxious to save their master.”

His words suggested threats and recriminations, but they seemed to amuse Agrippina. “Oh, now you know I would have invited you to the first reading, but how could I have guessed someone as inconsequential as Decimus Asinius Drusus would have found such a rare creature?” She had taken his arm and was leading a march toward the centre of the hall. “And no one could have guessed at what he didn’t show at the first reading, but here you are, exclusively, to see that for yourself.”

Not for the first time, Seth smiled at the elegant ease with which this matron manipulated men of power. Whatever it was she did, she did it effortlessly.

“Once you see these priestesses, and hear them, you’ll know who got the better opportunity. Here, sit with me.” She sat, and then reclined gracefully onto a couch, patting the space in front of her hips.

If anyone in the empire could bend Titus Arius toward a sympathetic hearing, it was this woman, and Seth settled on a couch further back from the dais, with Dec lying stiffly to his right, alone and exposed. He had no more comfort to offer his father, and only a trust in Jaida and her foresight to hold for himself. And he couldn’t see her.

There was no sweetness of hash in the incense around them. Jaida had chosen to forego the goddesses’ special blends and only frankincense perfumed the air. She had also foregone the altar, using the inlaid cedar panels to form a rough semicircle behind the girls, like the wings of a stage, focusing the viewers’ eyes onto the stars of the show. The girls needed no more augmentation than the flesh the gods had given them.

If Babu had lived to see it, he could not have been less than amazed at the fulfilment of his dream.

Under her veil, Eshe’s pale face was just visible; the light of Vesta’s flame before her teased movement and shadows that danced wraithlike across her face. For all purposes, the watchers might have sworn an errant breeze would carry her from them and back into the smoky ether.

Beside her, standing forward protectively, Oseye became Diana, with her sword drawn and ready for blood. The fires of Apollo burned in her dark eyes, as if her twin had ceded his birthright to the sister he adored. The cheekplate and browguard of her helmet hid all but the heat of her glare, and determination or impatience firmed the long muscle of her thighs.

Just as joyless but more relaxed, Shemai reclined on a blood dark couch, her Grecian armour more suggestive of Athena than her namesake, Minerva. Perched above her, wide eyes alert to every movement, a grey Pharaoh owl scoured the audience for any sign of threat. When Diana stepped up, he flared his wings in sudden alarm.

“Men of Rome,” her voice was as thick and resonant as ever; quiet, yet demanding the attention of every listener in the hall. “What is it you have come to hear?”

Smiling condescendingly, Lucullus turned to Agrippina. “Surely the goddess will tell....”

“Silence.” Oseye did not raise her voice. “That was not a question. If you have come here for amusement you have been misled. The words of the goddess are plain and they demand blood. Do you stand on your authority to act, or do you sit in anticipation of light theatre?”

The smile had gone and his eyes narrowed, but Lucullus was devout enough to stomach an insult, even from a slave, while he held the hope it might truly come from the gods. Slowly and silently he nodded his head, acknowledging the woman’s right to

speak, willing for the moment to suspend his doubts.

"I can tell you first that you know the truth of this matter; that and centurions Ishaq and Basim have brought false charges against this man." She raised her sword to indicate Drusus. "You know the truth of this matter, but it suits you to pretend otherwise."

Agrippina moved uncomfortably and shot a look across at Sethos. He was silent, his face down.

"It suits your purpose to protect the men who have beaten, raped and murdered the children of the goddess.

"You think you are secure, and that the appearance of vigilance will be rewarded by Caesar. But I'll tell you, I will turn on you and your family line. I will annihilate you. I will murder your descendants in their beds. I will clear away your fathers and your sons until there is no memory of them in the world.

"I will seek the men who committed these crimes and I will crush out their lives. I will find the men who stood behind them, and beside them, and their blood will be on my hands. People will speak in whispers, saying 'The Gods took their revenge,' but no one will mention their names.

"I will come upon this city and its men like a storm of wind and fire, there will be no refuge from my wrath." The fire that she threatened burned red in her eyes, and the quiet magnificence of her delivery left silence in its wake, with each ear straining for the warnings she would give.

Lucullus looked uncomfortable, but to Seth he seemed as likely to make light of Oseye's rage as accept her divine revelation. Seth had no doubt she was capable of fulfilling every word. She was filled to brimming with rage, a rage he understood too well; a rage against frustration and injustice and the utter indifference of those with power.

Eshe whispered only one word, echoing her sister and her goddess. "Fire." And in the silence of anticipation, it carried the force of a commandment.

"We bring you the choice." Shemai rolled forward, not leaving her couch but leaning out, holding a pomegranate toward the legate. Her voice had none of the force or certainty of Oseye's, and her anxiety was written clearly in her eyes and lips, but she held Minerva's offering steady. "Take the blessed fruit, if you will. Its juice will flow as blood, if that is your judgment."

"Or take mine." Zaliki stepped from smoky shadows, another pomegranate held in her right hand, her left hand cupping her own heavy breast. "And accept life, joy and abundance."

If Titus Arius Lucullus Gallius was a soldier, a man for whom cold blood and warfare held a fascination, then he was also a man of lusty flesh, for whom hot blood and passion were equally welcomed.

He did not salivate, but his tongue touched his full lips more than once in the moments he studied the form of Venus. The sash tied at her hips dipped low enough to show her soft, hairless *mons veneris*, the enchanting pillow of her belly just above. The fruit, for all its bright scarlet and gold, with juice dripping over the pale hand that held it, was charmless beside the warm cream flesh she offered.

Not blood and death, but milk, warm and sweet on the tongue. Her skin shone in the moving light of Vesta's flame and a dark smile touched her lips and eyes. In the symmetry of her face, and the soft fullness of her body, Lucullus could imagine surrendering to all carnal pleasures. She was desire, just as the moon warrior beside her was death, and he would rather the show focused more on Venus. When her petite sister slipped between the goddess and the legate, he moved his head in imitation of the owl,

trying to clear his sight.

But Rhea spoke for Ceres clearly, her direct gaze demanding his and rewarded. “Would you risk the wrath of the virgin goddesses in the name of a longing you can never fulfil?”

She was smiling, a threatening curl in the soft skin of her lip. “Would you risk prosperity and abundance?” She threw down her sheaves of grain and walked over them to take the pomegranate from Venus’ fingers. “Will your pride and arrogance guarantee our blessings, or Caesar’s, if you ignore the warnings of our sisters?” Twisting the fruit sharply, she opened it and held it out to the audience, moving as she did toward Decimus.

“Only we can offer you life. Only by our word can it be sustained.”

“Or we can take it from you.” Oseye sneered.

Seth watched Lucullus. The priestesses were going too far; he could read the irritation in the legate’s face, and it was hard to watch in silence as words and actions beyond his control impacted his life.

He should have made the time. He should have given them carefully worded statements. He rubbed tense fingers over the sweat and stubble on his top lip, and cursed his lack of preparation. Their attitudes could make the difference between life and death for Dec. Now there was nothing he could do, but wait in silence and try to defend against whatever arose.

Oseye turned her back and walked into the smoky arc of the stage, but Rhea carried her sacred fruit to where Seth lay, handing half to him with a smile. The second half she held out to Decimus, bowing slightly as he took it warily from her hand.

Seth stared at the ruby balls, tightly packed beneath the wash of juice.

When he looked again to Titus Arius, Oseye stood before him, her smile more a threatening sneer as she held Shemai’s fruit for him to take.

The irritation slipped from his features, and the nervous dart of his eyes from the warrior and her sword so close before him, to Sethos and back to the fruit, spoke of superstitious dread rising. His throat worked convulsively under its burden of chins, and his hand was far from steady as he reached out.

Before his fingers touched the sacred fruit, Oseye brought the blade of her sword down slowly but firmly through its flesh. The halves fell open, and lying amid the ruptured sacks of juice was a small red carnelian *tyet*.

The Knot of Isis. The amulet was buried deep in the flesh, and Lucullus pulled his hand away from the gift with the speed of revulsion. Wet with juice, the charm seemed to be formed in blood itself, and his fear crystallized into action. Sliding sideways away from the goddess, he stood, quickly putting the *lectus*, and Agrippina on it, between himself and the sword.

Laughter began quietly on Oseye’s mouth, but she had never needed volume to make her point clear. “The goddess wants her children safe, master of Rome. Would you do as she wills, or would you die in your arrogance?”

Still laughing softly, she turned from her audience and strode back to the stage.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE.

In the clean air of the *cenarium*, Agrippina rested a comforting arm over the shoulders of the man who lay in front of her. Distress was becoming agitation now that

there was a safe distance between him and the slave woman, agitation that threatened to become resentment and violence.

“A stupid trick, a prop wedged into fresh fruit by women desperate to shock.” Although he stretched across the couch, there was no hint of relaxation in Agrippina’s admirer. He thrust a chunk of charred flesh into a sauce boat, splashing flavour out across the table. If the reading had made him feel ridiculous, the best remedy would be blood. That blood might well include Agrippina’s priestesses’, and she considered them well worth the fight to save.

“Hmmm,” she ruffled cool fingers through the hair at his temples as he crammed the meat into his mouth. “It’s hard to see what they might gain, though Titus. For slaves to speak so boldly....” Twisting her long legs down and turning to sit, she risked one short desperate glance at Seth, then stood to walk around to the table in front of where he lay. “There was so much bloodshed in the Judean uprisings, and even though he had restored peace and executed the rebels, Governor Quietus was murdered by Caesar for his trouble. I think there is a lesson to learn in that.”

The *Prefectus*, Axius Villius Cinna, rocked uneasily on the edge of his couch, not joining the feast and not commenting on the reading.

Drusus too remained silent. His life, his wealth and his reputation were caught up in the beliefs and prejudices of this one man, and he could be saved or damned on an impulse.

Seth tried to give support to Agrippina, hoping to move the balance of his fear from panicky superstition that urged him to kill the messengers, to the more concrete threat of a Caesar who tolerated popular allies as poorly as cantankerous subjects. “True,” he said. “Hadrian won’t risk another rebellion; remember, he brought men from the far corners of Rome to repopulate these colonies, and I wouldn’t want to be the man responsible for spilling all that new Roman blood. He was Legate of Syria himself only three years ago, he knows how fast an idea can catch out here and he will rain fire on all the southern provinces if he hears any hint of unrest.”

“Of course you would say that!” Lucullus turned sudden fury on Seth. “You keep these *Trivias* and you direct their *defixiones*.”

Sethos opened his hand and showed Oseye’s little red amulet lying in his palm. “This is no more than a slip of stone, Lucullus. A trinket for their goddess, Isis. There is no inscription on it, no curse. It is easy enough to deal with.” Carelessly, Seth threw the *tyet* over his shoulder. A vitreous note rang hollow as the gem hit the smooth stone of the wall and bounced, skidding back across the tiles to rest by Agrippina’s foot.

“Ah!” Lucullus sat upright, his face rapidly darkening with rage. What he had eaten of his meal was hardening into a lump which burned in his gullet and made breathing uncomfortable. “You’ve had long enough to coach these slaves to any lie you choose, and I’d be a fool to believe you would do otherwise. But you had another girl here, a proven oracle, endorsed by the queen herself. I don’t know what to make of this, and it seems to me there are too many threats in the air of this house.

“I’ll go to the Oracle of Isis myself. Now. I will speak to her alone, and then, only if she will give me the assurance of the great goddess herself, I’ll consider the words of these slaves.” He thumped his chest, growling in an attempt to move the burn. “Drusus, no nobleman I ever met had such peril mired into his skin. If this has been a trick, whether I find you have been conspiring against the state or not, I will see you eat your own balls.” He turned to Seth. “And you with him.”

The Legate of *Petraea Arabia* was moving, now, with violent purpose toward the door, and staff and servants rushed over the tiles in an attempt to anticipate his needs before his wrath came down upon them.

In the silence that remained, Seth pressed his hands hard over his face and listened to his own breath. When he'd rubbed what stress he could from his eyes, he looked up at Drusus, then to Agrippina. "Where's Jaida?"

In the guest wing, Jaida knelt by Tamir's pallet, her forehead resting on his forearm, his cold hand clasped in both of hers. Silently she moved through her prayers. Practiced years of meditation held her mind in a calm and steady trance, as she worked her way through the litany of petitions. She had prayed to Isis, mother of all, to keep all that Seth loved safe. She had recited every adoration and invocation to the three virgin goddesses, begging for their favour, and directing their indignation toward Drusus' enemies.

She had promised sacrifices to Ceres, and full dedications when the dark months began. And she had thrown her heart and soul open before Venus: Isis as lover. Sister wife and lover. Isis who had watched her make these painful choices, all so her sisters might be safe. Isis who had chosen Sethos, and who loved him as much as she did.

Her knees ached against the cold tiles of the floor, and in her hands Tamir's worn fingers grew stiff, returning her grasp. She called for him to remember her while he journeyed to the otherworld; she waited with him, to be his comfort until he found his long lost family. She prayed that he would bring their case before the gods, where ever he travelled, so her sisters might be saved from slavery and death. If he hated Drusus, he had loved the girls. Perhaps when he had all he loved returned to him, he would see the pointlessness of revenge and he would say what he could in defence of the priestesses.

Ianthe lay on a gold trimmed couch, watching water fall into her private *nymphaem*, here within the walls of her own suite of rooms. Past the marble baths and fountain, her bed sat on a raised floor, with jewelled curtains and mounds of silk cushions. The vast rooms were open planned, with light falling over every surface from the wide eastern balcony.

She had asked the legion of servants to leave her apartment, unable to bear their silent subservience, and she lay alone in light and riches, begging the fates for a single chance to see her sisters. From somewhere below her patio, the laughter and chatter of children made heartbreaking music on the air.

Her heavy doors moved inward, surprising her from her laments.

"Oracle!" The queen's *wazir* entered, bowing deeply as he crossed the floor, a wash of servants flooding in his wake. "Her gracious majesty requires an audience. The matter is urgent."

Ianthe stood. Her feet were bare, her hair falling in loose ropes, and she was wearing only a light linen shift.

Following her eyes down over her clothing, the *wazir* said quickly, "Let me suggest a heavy *palla* and a veil. You might slip on some sandals, but there will be no time for your girls to work on hair or makeup."

She bobbed her head, thankful for the clear direction, and jogged across the floor to her racks of clothing. Quickly she wrapped a midnight blue damask over one shoulder and under the other, as a servant lifted a filmy veil over her hair.

"There is some trouble brewing. The Roman legate has arrived uninvited and demanded an audience. Since our queen has not demurred, I think it must be a matter of grave importance. The little I heard raised the question of you having sisters. There is the mention of curses read, and it is all to do with Decimus Asinius Drusus."

The sandals were low sided and took only a moment. "Did you hear what the curse

was? Or from whom? Is the queen enraged?"

"No. Quickly, quickly. No, she seems to be calm enough, but the legate is not. Perhaps it is him who is cursed. Who are these sisters he fears?"

Ianthe's eyes were wide in confusion, and she pushed several gold bands over her wrist as they were handed to her. "My sisters. Priestesses. How could I know what they've said or done?" Long strings of amber beads were hung over her shoulders, looped and hung again, and she tried to pull the veil from under their tangling weight. "Decimus Asinius was the man who freed us all. He was accused of sedition as I left the household with our queen."

"Yes. Yes, well. It's as much as we can know, I suppose." He stood back, surveying the oracle, ensuring the queen would be pleased with her ensemble. "More," he said quickly, and heavy gold earrings were hung over her ears, each with a carnelian *tyet*, a heavily beaded silver pectoral was tied across her chest, and she took up her short golden sceptre. Looking for approval that came with a curt nod, the Oracle of Isis lifted the weight of her costume as she followed out the door with unseemly haste.

In the anteroom she paused to gather her dignity, was announced, and walked slowly and soberly to stand before the monarch of *Petraea*. She didn't speak, only nodded her head very slowly to Queen Gamilath, a small bow, and she moved sedately to a couch and sat upright.

Lucullus was agitated, and Ianthe studied his discomposure for any hint she could capitalize on. His eyes were wide, narrowing fiercely as he leaned in close to her and scoured her presentation, then he bowed and moved back to sit uncomfortably on a couch. Behind them doors were closed and shutters drawn so the room darkened almost immediately.

"Oracle," Gamilath spoke solemnly. "Our legate stands for Rome today and brings me word of death and fire for our entire province. Curses were read in the name of Diana and her virgin consorts. Do you know these oracles?"

The air had grown too thick to draw, and Ianthe hid the trembling of her hands in the reams of stiff blue fabric. "If the word has come through Sethos Asinius Drusus Aquila and the people of his household, then, yes, I know these oracles."

"Then speak for your goddess, if you are able. Tell me why the goddesses have threatened our home. Why has Isis turned, in one day, from mother and protector to bringer of death?"

Ianthe didn't know. Her mouth was dry, her knees jittering under her robes, and she searched the dark corners of the room for inspiration. She knew Drusus had been charged with sedition. All she knew of her sisters was that Sethos had brought them home. And she knew Jaida had chosen him.... "The goddess is angry, my lady."

"Angry," the queen was drawing up, her volume increasing as she puffed with air. "She was not angry yesterday, and nothing has been said or done to cause her great concern. What fault has she found with my kingdom?"

Swallowing, Ianthe repeated the quiet mantra that had freed them from the shadows. "The goddess is angry because her children were crying. My sisters were stolen by cruel men who wanted only to profit from their gifts and their vision. She chose Sethos Asinius to bring them out into the light, and now those men want him destroyed." There was no way to know what she should not say. There was no direction in the queen's questions that gave her any further clue to the threats or the curse.

In trying to draw a deeper breath, Ianthe pulled her shoulders back, and the heavy sceptre slipped from her shaky fingers. She watched in horror as the top heavy rod cracked onto the tiles at her feet, shattering the ivory of its handle, and freeing the golden orb to roll crookedly toward Lucullus.

Her whine of embarrassment was drowned by the cries of the legate as he leapt from his seat and kicked the golden pomegranate away. He was shaking, his face grey in the shadows, and his eyes wide. His mouth had formed a drooling arc of utter terror and he dropped to his knees, begging, "What is it I have to do? How do I show my choice?" His whimpering made Ianthe uncomfortable; her first urge was to reach for his arm and to make him stand. But she was lost in blind confusion. Her own terror froze her on the spot as she tried to find something, anything, to say.

"I will order them scourged," he promised cryptically and her fear moved closer to panic. "They will all be killed. Now. Today."

"No." She almost yelped. She needed to know who it was he intended to scourge. "Not yet." Fighting the rise of hysterical tears, she said, "You must give your answer to Diana. You must ask her her will in this. She is the one who must name the price you will pay."

"I can't," he whined, lost from the world around him, unaware of just how profoundly he had unmanned himself. "I can't face her, not when I refused her and doubted her word. She will wipe me from the earth."

"You must." She had no other way forward, and the light of inspiration filled her mind with the sudden clarity of crystal chimes. "I will accompany you." She shot a hopeful glance at the queen. "If our majesty allows."

Fear still moved in hard tremors in his neck and shoulders, but the small hope seemed to help him master himself. Nodding, swallowing, he peered around, realizing he was on his knees, and he stood with as much decorum as adrenaline allowed.

"Your slaves have damned you, Aquila." Axius Villius Cinna spoke softly, but his face was lined by sadness and disbelief. "Drusus. My father, too. All the years I have worked and bled to carve myself a place. Gone." At the door, his *contubernium* stood at perpetual attention, deliberately hearing and seeing nothing that went on around them.

Seth had risen and was pacing, anxious to move to the guest wing. They were caught now in the wash of events they could no longer control, and he wanted to wait for death or deliverance where he could see his priestess. Whatever choices she had imagined for herself, if Lucullus returned today with a guard and a warrant, neither he nor his father, nor any slave in their household would be choosing their own futures.

He wanted to see her. To explain. But the prefect was consumed by the implications for himself, and he wanted to hold the blame up before Seth and Decimus.

Agrippina was watching her one chance at celebrity slipping, and she took the opportunity to excuse herself to go in pursuit of her oracles while they still might be hers. If Decimus was charged today, she would argue that the girls were near to manumission. Even if, at worst, Aquila was taken down beside his father, she would find the money on her own to take her prize to the capital. She chewed her fingernail as she jogged up to the *triclinium*. If worst was worst, she could always discretely auction off the favours of one of her lovely virgins.

"We don't have a decision yet, Axius. Let's wait until we hear before we start on each other." Seth offered a tight smile. "You are a godly man; you heard the warning. Aren't you ready to give some trust to the gods you petition? They might still have it all in hand."

"I am not Lucullus. He is a general, a veteran of a thousand bloody battles, and he is not a man to threaten. No, he'll be back soon enough, and he can't do anything but find Drusus guilty. Any other path will leave him looking foolish."

Zayed stepped quietly up beside his master, leaning to whisper. Seth placed a hand on the *promus*' shoulder and smiled. "Thank you. Well, we haven't long to wait. The queen and her entourage, the legate and the Oracle of Isis are all on their way here, as we speak." He turned back to the *promus*. "The *triclinium*, I think?"

Zayed nodded.

"Gentlemen." Seth directed his guests toward the walkway, taking Dec's arm in his, as they began what might be their last walk together.

As they played at making themselves comfortable and readied themselves to wait, the noise of raised voices and jostling bodies carried faster than the sounds of running feet. Zayed burst into the dining hall, but made it only far enough in to turn and drop onto his knees and face as the Nabataean queen entered in a wash of slaves, civil servants and muscular guards. Behind her, although the queen herself walked, a small richly decorated *lectica* was carried in and settled to the ground.

Lucullus entered more sedately, scanning the room for the faces of the oracles, and blanching when he found them.

"Aquila!" The queen was in no mood for civilities. "There is a threat to my land and my people and it's rising around you."

Seth was on his feet, bowing deeply before the queen. Decimus took a place a few steps behind his son, bowing just as gravely, but it was hard to know what anyone could say. The great lady was in an uproar and her rage might take aim at any quarter.

"What is this?" Behind the gilded mesh of her veil, her eyes were fierce. One long finger jabbed at the girls, and men ducked beneath the power of her demand.

From where she sat, beside Eshe, on a lush daybed in the centre of the hall, Oseye stood, and answered, "A warning."

"A warning?" Gamilath repeated incredulously. "A warning?"

Oseye nodded, walking a few steps closer as she spoke, her steady glare meeting the queen's without blinking. "This man," her sword selected the Roman prefect, and Axius straightened, "and this man," Lucullus, "have protected the Romans who tortured my sisters. Now we have come into the light, with the power of the goddesses, to demand justice."

Struggling from between the curtains of her *lectica*, Ianthe stood, moving quickly into the debate, saying, "Majesty, these are the sisters who were stolen from me. They too are priestesses, oracles born and raised. Aquila has given them a chance to speak for the goddesses," scanning her sister's outfits, fighting tears as she looked to each lovely face, she listed, "Diana, Vesta and Minerva. Ceres and Venus. The many faces of our goddess, Isis."

"I wasn't told of ten oracles, or twenty."

"We believed them dead, majesty. Murdered. But the goddess chose this man to free them and return them to the light." It arose again, the issue of *The Oracle*, and Ianthe quickly turned the focus of the debate. "Goddess." She spoke clearly to Oseye. "This man has heard us speak and he has come to rescind his doubts. He has come to ask what price you demand to turn aside your anger."

"I will not turn aside my anger."

Seth felt the hopes he had begun to nurture shrivel and fade. For all her rage Oseye would not have the chance to strike out against Rome. Agrippina stood beside her huddled priestesses, wanting to plead, but having no ground on which to stand. Drusus turned, found a seat, and let himself sink, resigned, into its cushions.

Over the balcony, echoing up from Kartikeya's lair, men shrieked foul mouthed curses in Aramaic, and Sethos, Axius, Lucullus and a number of the queen's Nabataean guard rushed to look down on the scene below.

Dawud stood in the afternoon shadows of the tiger's yard, bloodstained and laughing, leaning to gather momentum as he spun to throw a gory bag up over the stone balustrade. His gift hit the stone floor with a bone crunching thud, and rolled, leaving a red-black trail over the flags.

With him were five of Juba's irregulars, recognizable only by the weight of their weapons, and another group, seven men, with their hands bound and bags over their heads. There was gore enough on all of them to speak of violence and death. Seven remained, and a disembodied bag, but there was no way to know how many had begun the battle.

"Aquila! Here is your adversary. Which bits of him will you keep?" Dawud shoved the shoulder of one captive, sending him staggering. "We found them in the wastes of Paran. Some we left there."

Laughter followed, and Axius Villius visibly shook as gripped the hilt of his sword and ordered, "Bring them up here."

Kartikeya twitched his tail and grunted as he smelled the inviting new opportunities brought before him, but Dawud and his mottled crew shoved their prisoners toward the gate and onto the walkway up.

Jaida finished her prayers. She had murmured and sung every word she had ever learned, and now, a little nauseous with anxiety and an empty stomach, she carefully pulled a cover over Tamir's corpse and sighed. She had done all she could.

She had heard the guests move past her door and back up to the *triclinium*. She had heard the uproar as new guests arrived, but she had been in no position then to turn from her litany. When fear began to twist in her gut, she tried to cling to her core of faith. Sethos was beloved of Isis. He was her Jupiter, her Osiris, flesh of her flesh.

It was time now to join them and hear the worst. Only the goddess could know who she would favour in the end. Jaida wiped sweat from her shaky palms. All of her wanted to run now to his side, but all of her wanted, too, to hide from the fear of what the new night might bring.

In the atrium she paused, looking at the mosaics as the clear daylight began to fade. Her fingertips burned with longing to reach and slip over the coloured tiles, to feel the flesh painted there, to know that touch. His whispered words were echoes in her memory. "This gift of touch, of comfort, of divine peace; you don't want it. You want something of much greater value. So do I."

But he hadn't sent for her. Through the sleepless hours as she'd worried over the hows and whys of what her sisters would say and how they would present, always there was the hope that word would come. A summons. An invitation.

But he hadn't called.

She had chosen a simple ochre tunic, something that might let her slip back into the shadows while the will of the gods played out across the stage. Let her sisters have every eye so their words would touch every heart. Jaida no longer wanted any part of the roles of a priestess. She had chosen her place in this life. It only remained to be seen if the fates would allow.

As she moved to the door, Dawud's guttural curses and the rush and push of his band passing scared her back. She peered after them as they climbed the rising walkway, intuition naming the man whose face she couldn't see.

Soft staccato sobs kicked at the back of her throat. Ishaq. They had brought him here? She wanted to pray again, to beg, but she had exhausted every prayer. There were

no more words. She gathered what she could of her courage, drew three slow deep breaths, and stepped timidly onto the walkway up to the *triclinium*, where Sethos and all she hoped and fearer still waited.

Dawud kicked Ishaq to his knees, ripping the bag from his bruised and bloodied face.

Violent hatred, cold and fierce, filled Seth's vision with a blood red rage. His mouth twisted and his fists and shoulders clenched with the need to smash the kneeling man into pulp. For an instant the austere company, its protocols, and the weights that hung on every word and action, became nothing in the face of his burning need to end this worthless life.

But Lucullus stepped into the space between them. "Paran?"

Dawud answered in fractured Latin. "That's where we found them."

Ishaq was silent. He was not in uniform, and the blood soaked tunic he wore was of high quality, with embroidered seams and suede reinforcing. When he had chosen flight, it was obviously with the hope of a rich retirement, but there was no sign of the priestesses' gold. The Roman officers knew nothing of it and Dawud's men had nothing to say on the subject.

"Centurion," the prefect called, striding across the floor, asserting his own authority. There was reassurance in action, and relief in the familiarity of duty. "You left your post. You are out of uniform." He glanced at the other men, their bowed heads still covered. "How many squads of my men were with you?" Anger was an easier burden than fear.

When Ishaq remained silent, Dawud smacked him hard up the side of his head, but he held his balance and said, "Two."

"Two? Sixteen men from a vexillation of five hundred?" Axius Villius spat, easing the burn in his throat and venting contempt. "That's all?"

"On my life, sir," Ishaq dropped his face, his words a desperate plea for the lives of the men of his cohort. "Only two squads."

"Your life? I'd demand more than that's worth for the crust on a turd. You!"

Pointing to one of his own guard, Axius passed along the line of prisoners, stripping the covering from each face as he went. "Find out who's in the bag." Verging on apoplexy he hissed, "Get on your knees." And the line of prisoners dropped to the hard stone. Four legionaries and one auxiliary horseman had been reported killed when the original charges were brought; the chance that only two squads were involved was too slim to be believed. The lives of five hundred men, the entire eighth cohort, dripped onto scales already heavily weighted with suspicion.

Drying blood sealed the sack, and the legionary grimaced as he tugged at the fabric, then rolled its contents onto the floor. Basim's scream was frozen on his mouth, the deep cavern black and clotted where his tongue would have been. His eye sockets, too, were blank black scabs.

Seth faced the dead man squarely. His wounds were sickening, but knowing he had lived through the torture revealed didn't move any part of his heart toward pity. This man, and the cowed faces that knelt before them now, had marshalled their combined strength against one defenceless girl, and her wounds had been no less horrific.

Ishaq too had been beaten, but he could see, and he could speak. Just like his father, he had gambled more than he could afford and lost. Now, one way or another, he had to make good his bets.

"Tell them." Seth closed on the captured centurion. He had no weapon, there was nothing near to hand that he could use to grind his frustration into blood, but his hands were willing. "Tell them what you've done."

“Fuck you.”

Dawud stepped between Seth and the prisoner, grinning crookedly as he used his body as a block. “Not yet, Aquila.” The words were whispered. “I have promises to keep.” The hand he pressed against Seth’s chest was bloodstained; chips of dried blood fell into the folds of cloth, but he was looking over to where the sisters stood.

His eyes tracked closer, and Seth turned to see what was holding his attention. His grin was for Oseye; she was crossing the hall with slow and deliberate intent. Tension trembled through her arms, and Diana’s sword was no longer held loosely in her long strong fingers. Her grip on the leather bound hilt was fierce as she advanced on the kneeling man.

Seth started to move. As much as his own instinct was to throttle the prisoner, Ishaq had confessions to make that would clear Dec of any suspicion, and the priestess clearly had no time for talk. All the pain of her life was held here before her, defenceless and beaten, and he was watching her through bruised and swollen eyes as keenly as she watched him.

Titus Arius Lucullus and Axius Villius Cinna both stood between the priestess and her goal. Sethos and Dawud, too, stood to her left in front of Ishaq, and from behind that line, his confidence was higher than it should have been. Sneering so a split lip bled, running unnoticed in a thin line down his chin, he fixed her with his dark contempt, goading her with silence.

“Priestess,” Seth began, but she turned on him with a vicious snarl, hissing like a cornered beast and raising her sword in his face. Lucullus sidestepped, his hand on the prefect’s shoulder, moving them both out of her way as if they were no more than frightened boys, or awestruck devotees.

Seth moved again, cracking his elbow down onto Dawud’s arm, and sliding past as his weight shifted. “No. He’s a dead man, Oseye. And you are a slave! He will be court-martialled.” As he spoke, he raised both hands, trying to calm her, to break through her mesmerism. “He will die, but you cannot touch him. Leave him to his superiors.” Even with Ishaq here on his knees, the girls had no right to act. They were slaves. They had no choice but to hand their tormentor to Rome.

“I am no one’s slave.”

There was no doubting her confidence, but the truth was against her. If she raised a hand against Ishaq, against any free man, she would damn herself to death. Seth eyed the legate warily, looking for any sign that he, or the prefect beside him, might move to stop the angry young woman.

“Will you stop me?” She raised her blade, sighting Lucullus down its length as she continued forward. “Or you?” Axius Villius looked more inclined to demand subordination, but given his superiors silence in the face of her question, he stepped back, looking at Ishaq as a means of avoiding her eyes.

“I speak for the goddess.” Oseye raised her voice. It was unnecessary, but it left no one doubting her intention to act by divine right. “I speak for every goddess, and I speak for every woman, every slave, and every victim.” With the last word she slashed her sword down, its tip catching in the fabric of Ishaq’s tunic and slitting fine skin over his chest.

“Will you stop me?” she demanded of her superiors again, as Ishaq slipped an involuntary whine of pain, and bent slightly under the fresh flow of blood.

Seth caught the wrist of her sword arm as she readied a backhand slash, and tried once more to reach her through the fires of vengeance. “They don’t have to stop you. They can let you do their will, and watch and give approval, and then they can have you put to death. Oseye! You are a slave!” He was pleading, but he had seen the fear in the

eyes of the legate. Here and now there was theatre and spectacle and the momentum they brought. But in the quieter hours when Lucullus was left with only the memory of a woman, a slave, who had threatened the very memory of him, then she would be left with no more protection than her courage and her faith.

Gamilath spoke to Ianthe from behind her cordon of men at arms. "Oracle, is this woman your sister? Does she speak for the goddess?" Ianthe nodded, afraid to speak, afraid to remain silent. "Then who among you calls her a slave?"

The Roman officers responded with tense silence and questioning looks passed back and forth, the prefect willing to defer to his commander, the legate encouraging his prefect to take responsibility. When Axius Villius bowed his head and took a single small step backward, he left his superior with the full weight of Rome.

Lucullus was still plainly wary of facing the oracle himself; she had already taken far more notice of him than was good for any man. And his rank gave him no great status in the eyes of the Queen of Nabataea.

From behind him Agrippina spoke, her words a rush of encouragement and support. "Titus, remember these women were owned by Sethos Asinius. He granted them freedom days ago, and their manumission is already under consideration in Bostra. I know that my husband's father is sympathetic to their claim. It is a matter of days, that's all. Days until they have proof of their right to act as freed women."

"True." Lucullus began warily, feeling out his own safest path. To Axius Villius he said, "Is there any cause to believe your centurions and their men were under orders in the wastes of Paran?"

"If that's where they were," Axius answered just as warily.

Dawud swore and spat at the floor, walking from the middle of the conflict to the buffet where he helped himself to food and drink, signalling with a nod of his head for his men to join him. He was done with Rome. Their arguments and procedures from here were of no interest to him.

The queen remained adamant. "You have called the wrath of the goddesses down on my kingdom, and you still quibble over points of law. Give this man to the oracle and have her turn her anger away. Are you fools?"

Oseye remained pressed hard against Sethos, her sword hand held tight between them, her burning eyes scouring his face.

"Don't do this," he whispered, his words moving breath. "Don't kill."

In silence just as harsh, she pressed her lips against his ear and hissed, "I have not yet begun to kill."

"Release the oracle," Gamilath ordered when it seemed neither of the Romans would take the initiative. "If the men of Rome have no courage to follow the will of the gods, then I will be the one to rule in their place."

"Release her." Lucullus' words leapt from his lips, afraid the queen had usurped his right to mollify the goddess and her blood bent oracle. "Consider this his court-martial and execution. Hand him to this oracle and the will of the goddess."

Air left Seth's chest in a rush of regret as Oseye twisted her wrist, fighting to free her sword arm from his grip. "And Drusus?"

"I will proceed no further with the charges. I find them to be *calumnii* brought against him by Centurion Marcus Ulpius Ishaq, a coward and deserter, and not worthy of action."

"Is that witnessed?" he demanded. "Is that the judgment of Rome?"

"It is the judgment of Rome."

Seth held the oracle's wrist and her eyes for one more moment, pleading silently for her to reconsider, but all the powers of *Arabia Petraea* had given her their blessing,

and she intended to use it to the full. It was not for her victim he pleaded, but for her.

From where she stood in the shadows of the entryway, Jaida called, “No!” and moved quickly toward the line of prisoners. She was never going to make the distance, though. Between them stood the queen and her retinue, and Ianthe tried a restraining hand, reaching swiftly for her arm as she passed.

Stumbling through and past them, shrugging off the touch, Jaida came up to Axius’ squad, lined behind the kneeling prisoners. Before she could run the length of their line, and find a clear path to Oseye, Sethos and Ishaq, her sister had freed her arm and hacked her sword up and across Ishaq’s face, opening a gaping wound in his cheek.

“No, Oseye, please,” she cried.

Seth stepped between the sisters. Pulling Jaida in against his chest, he turned, shielding her from the bloodlust at his back. If Drusus had no more to fear from Rome and the charges of sedition, then he had no reason or inclination to defend Ishaq from her rage. Oseye had chosen her course herself, again, and if it was to be a river of blood, then he would at least shelter Jaida from the view at close quarters.

The Oracle of Diana towered over the kneeling man, her sword raised in both fists. A jolt from her knee, up under his chin, pushed his head back. As she slid the tip of her short blade into his mouth, she released a cry of such brutal torment that Seth closed his eyes, turning his head away. Summoning every ounce of grief and pain and loss, she rose on her toes, and shoved down, driving the blade through the back of his throat and spine.

Oseye screamed again, her pain and fury filling the stone hall and echoing off walls. She pulled up hard, wrenching her blade free, and screamed again: at the sky, at the walls, at the gods. Tears streamed down her face, but she was still as Ishaq crumbled and fell to the floor at her feet.

The men of the Third Legion shuffled nervously, drawing their *gladii*, looking to their commanders for direction, for fear the screaming Djinn might move next toward them.

When Sethos looked again at Oseye, her sisters had rushed to join her, with the exception of Eshe, who remained seated beside Agrippina, Ianthe who stood behind her queen, and Jaida, who gently pressed her hands against his chest, moving back to free herself from his hold. She was warm and soft, peering up at him with a pitiful mixture of fear and sadness darkening her pale eyes. He would have dropped to his knees there to plead, if it meant she might stay in his arms.

Releasing her slowly, he stepped back and she moved shakily toward her sisters, looking down at the body of their tormentor.

Dec had not moved. His face was flat and his eyes full of grief too profound for tears. He had been reprieved, and yet he sat, silent and still, as the shock of so few days moved through old bones. Seth walked carefully around the small group of women and took a seat beside his father, a hand on his shoulder. His movement signalled a return to arms, Lucullus and Axius Villius were shaken from their brief inactivity into a barrage of official protocol.

“On your feet,” Axius demanded of the prisoners, his squad sheathing drawn swords and stepping into line ready to escort the bound men back to the cells. One man gathered Basim into his bag; two moved back reluctantly to where the priestesses stood, and hefted Ishaq.

Lucullus moved closer to the queen, anxious to demonstrate his affiliation with the queen’s own oracle, and to distance himself from the unpredictable wrath of Diana’s augur. “These men will be questioned at length. Anything we find in investigating their desertion that relates to false charges against you will be dealt with appropriately. You

will receive any fines accrued.” He spoke more softly, waiting until the enlisted men filed from the room, as he added, “And you have my apologies, Drusus. I spoke harshly, and without cause.”

Seth helped his father to stand. “Majesty, will you be dining with us?” Trying to keep up civilities in the aftermath was taxing but he managed a smile, glancing around the walls as he did, looking for Zayed.

Gamilath looked hard at her oracle, then at the cluster of girls and the bloodied sword. She had not missed Lucullus’ sidling attempts to avoid the group, and his fear piqued her curiosity. It was a powerful woman indeed who had the *Legatus* of *Arabia Petraea* nervous. But the Empire taught men to stand close to the strongest, and he had chosen her oracle, her side, and that seemed to reassure her. She studied the pallor of illness under Agrippina’s greased white face, the stress of dread, the fear of losing something precious, then looked back to the girls.

Precious? Maybe. “Oracle, where are your sisters from and where are they going?”

Ianthe looked to Jaida, pleading. She had no idea what plans had been made or how to answer safely.

Jaida twitched a sickly smile, bowing slightly. “Rome, Queen Gamilath. These oracles are promised to the various temples of Rome itself.” She stepped nearer, gathering courage. “As the goddess has directed her own oracle into your care, so she has sent these others on to Rome.”

There was heat in her royal scrutiny; on one side the tinny costuming of the many, and beside her the richness and studied grace of her own oracle. Turning her face sharply, she seemed reach her conclusion and answered Seth. “No. There is nothing more to do here. Not today, anyway.” She looked again, studying each of the girls carefully, before she moved her retinue directly toward the door, with Lucullus in tow. Ianthe made one small gesture to her sisters, a movement of her fingers, before she was shuffled into her *lectica* and away.

Agrippina sagged onto her couch with an audible groan of relief. “Tomorrow, Aquila. I am leaving here tomorrow with my priestesses. If our queen is going to change her mind, I want to be crossing the ocean and planning my homecoming party when she does.”

Eshe turned a soft, barely visible smile toward their matron, nodding gently in agreement.

“And me, Aya. I am older even than I thought. I don’t have many days left to be happy. I’ll leave tomorrow for Rome and civilization, too.” Dec looked around sadly, adding one more weight to the burden he bore. “Juba hasn’t come back?”

“No.” Seth frowned. He pointed briefly toward Dawud and the militiamen, still eating greedily from the buffet. “He did send his best after Ishaq, which was just as well. But friendship won’t stop a man bleeding, *pater*. What could we expect? He did what you would have done in his place.”

Decimus nodded slightly, rubbing fatigue or tears from his eyes with slow fingers. “I want to go home, for now, and rest. I want to go home. Come with me, Sethos. I can’t eat tonight, but you can talk to me, and tell me how you will keep my golden memory alive.” He gave a small snort of laughter, shrugging and opening his palms as he said, “No more goats, my darling. We nearly choked on this one, you and I. Eat only the best of the fat lambs and calves. No goats.”

“No goats,” Seth agreed.

Not ten steps away, Jaida stood with her sisters, staring silently at the bloody sword that hung from Oseye’s limp wrist. The fire that had clenched every muscle into knots of rage had cooled from her eyes, and her face was relaxed, free from any sign of

anxiety or guilt. If her actions had shocked others in the room, they were of no concern to the girl herself. If she had wiped her blade clean across her thigh, it would not have seemed out of character.

None of the girls seemed to know exactly how to approach her. They had drawn nearer, converging and supporting their sibling, but they had not managed to find words for their shock. Jaida's back was toward him, her hair pulled into a loose braid that fell down her back, a simple tunic dropping in loose folds from her shoulders. She stood straight. There was none of her habitual timidity visible. She seemed, even from behind, surer, more certain of herself and of her place.

Watching her, studying the tiny movements that trembled in the soft fabric that ran over her skin, Seth wanted nothing more than to take her hand, to lead her out and away from the day and all of its horrors, and to find a quiet place to talk. The girls would leave. In the morning, before the sun rose, Agrippina would have her booty stowed and she would be running, crossing sand in pursuit of glory and notoriety in Rome.

He had to speak to Jaida before she could make decisions that would affect his life as profoundly as those already made today. If, as Agrippina believed, she intended to travel with her sisters, not in the role of priestess, but as protector and advisor, then he had to make her listen to his pleas. He had to make her consider his proposal one more time.

That would be the crucial point, would it not? If he could take her aside before the sun rose on a new journey and a new life, then he could make a proposal, a full proposal of marriage and safety, with all he owned and all he was laid before her as a gift.

He had to take Drusus home and help him recover from the strains he had endured. First, that's what he had to do; there was no question of priorities when it came to Dec's distress. And if all of Jaida's gods allowed, he could use the time, whatever hours he had, to decide just what it was he was offering. She had refused gold and luxury. She had refused the temple service she had been raised to. And she had refused him, whatever she believed he was; she had stopped, held his hand and his attention, to tell him plainly she had not chosen him.

There was nothing else. Her choice had to be as Agrippina had said, to leave for Rome and a new life with her siblings. She had nothing else to choose. Well then, if there was nothing left, he had until dawn to try once more to change her mind. But, truly, he had nothing else to offer.

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CHAPTER TWENTY TWO.

Oseye paced the dark suite; an omen moving softly through the shadows.

Her restlessness had not woken Jaida, but she listened as the slow measured tread sounded through the night like a heavy heartbeat. The other girls were sleeping, dreaming of the life that was yet to open for them. Dreaming of freedom, and luxury and power. If Oseye had been dreaming, it would have been of blood.

Jaida listened, caring nothing for wealth or power or bloodshed. She lay staring at the dark mosaics on the walls, unreadable at night but all the more intriguing for their obscurity. They were scenes of love, of sex and passion, and they told stories Jaida ached to hear. She understood no more than the basics of the acts the pictures described, but her body knew their rhythms instinctively and her flesh pulsed with warm, wet longing.

No word had come, again. Seth hadn't called for her. And where they were, here in the guest wing, they left the main house to go on with its business undisturbed. He

might not have returned; there was no way to know. He had gone from the house with no more than a cryptic look, and she cursed the life that had given her no insight into such subtleties.

Her heartbeat rose to choke her as she thought again about going to find him herself. She wanted to give him her decision, her promises. Surely it mattered to him. And she wanted to know him, to see the place he kept for himself, the private place in the midst of so much luxury.

What would it say of him if his suite was lined with gold, and gemstones crusted the posts of his bed? Did he dress his walls with pictures of lovers? She would have followed him to a bed in straw, a stable or a sty, but it would do just as well to lie with him in fragrant silk and beaded splendour.

An image of his lovely hands washed pleasure and impatience through her. Those hands had brushed fire over her skin in night-time dreams and daylight fantasies, and she longed to feel their touch. But he hadn't come for her, and shivering anxieties chilled her skin and bone there in the warmth of her bed.

Strong hands, capable. Warm. And his wrists, long, strong arms and broad shoulders. And beneath his clothes? Only Jupiter came to mind, his milk-white marble belly and a rash of messy curls over a small jutting organ, cold and disinterested.

Slowly, with elbows weak from terror at her decision, Jaida pushed herself upright and pulled a light robe up her arms and over her shoulders. There was nothing cold and white about Seth's chest. It was tanned golden, heavy with muscle, perfected by soft swirls of silky hair and hot and hard against her.

She bit her burning lips as imagination moved them down the centre of his chest to the contoured plains of his belly. His skin was smooth and fragrant, the muscle beneath it hard. And she longed to know how the gods had made him. How the body of a man would feel, deep inside her. And how the body of a woman was made to take pleasure from a man.

But he hadn't called for her. In the darkness Oseye paused in her endless circle, watching Jaida in silence, making no sound or judgment. Finding courage in the silence, she forced her legs to straighten, to stand. Glancing one last time at her sister, she moved to the door.

Intermittent torches lit the sweeping arc of the corridor, and she stepped out cautiously, half afraid to be seen or stopped and questioned by a guard. But the way was clear, the walkway silent except for the whisper of her own bare feet.

She had no risk of being lost; the curtained serviceway that ran through to his garden was unmistakable. Gravel bit into her soles as she crossed the *peristylum* and she dipped her hands into the fountain, cooling her wrists and wiping damp hands down her burning throat. His door was open, soft light from the main rooms flowing through the *tablinum* as she stepped up onto the tiled floor. At the bottom of the stairway up, she paused to catch her breath and gather her courage.

Laughter crashed against her and scared her half to death, as guards assembled in one of the small rooms noted her presence and shared their ribald comments. She understood none of their words, but their meaning wasn't lost. It spurred her on and no one tried to stop her. Her knees were rickety but she made them climb.

In the inky darkness of the walkway between the suites, she trailed her fingers lightly along the cool stone wall until they slipped onto the rough wood of the doorframe. She readied herself, placed her hands silently on the door, and pressed.

There was no give. The door was bolted from inside and she stood in the darkness, peering at the dark shape of the door that held her out, unsure what to do.

She couldn't knock. And she couldn't turn and retrace her steps down past Juba's

men.

Seth sat on the edge of his pallet, listening to the laughter of the men below. The moon was full, the night moving on toward dawn, and he had not found any words that might convince his priestess to stay. She didn't want his gold, and he had nothing else.

Stretching back, straightening so he could breathe a little easier, he considered, again, going to her. He should have gone directly to their suite when he arrived home. But he had stalled, bathing first and soaking so long in the cool water that the night had slipped away without an answer to the questions he asked himself. Now he lay alone in the moonlight, nursing an emptiness that tasted like despair.

As Jaida's eyes adjusted, she turned to the slightly-less-dark space behind her, where the wind found its way in from the garden. The door to the suite she and Ianthe had shared was open and light was slipping in through the fretted wall and the balcony. She breathed again and stepped into the rooms, quickly past the dressing room and washroom to the large bedroom.

The pierced walls had been thrown back and moonlight flooded over the bed where she'd slept. Its veils were spread wide as they'd been when she lay beneath them, naked and longing for his touch. In the silence around her, her breath whined shakily and she looked to the balcony where she had pictured him standing.

She followed the moonlight, standing a moment outside to look back at where she'd been. The teasing wind caught in the soft silk of her loose robe, brushing it softly over nipples that burned and a hot wave of pleasure stabbed deep in her sex. She hoped he was near, now as then and a longing as fierce as the fires of Gehenna burst in her blood.

Forcing her legs to carry her, she moved silently along the balcony to the open walls of the next suite and the man who, she desperately hoped, slept behind them.

Moonlight painted the scene pale, washing out the warm golds of his skin, but no god in stone was ever made so perfectly. He lay with his arms crossed over his face so his eyes were shaded from the light pouring over him. A slip of silk shone white against his flesh, flowing carelessly across one thigh. There was no god so perfect, and a tiny groan slipped from her lips.

The sound might have been a trumpet blast for the speed of his reaction. He sat bolt upright and Jaida's legs jarred under the weight of desire shocking through her. She couldn't speak, her chest clenched and shuddered over every breath and hot blood throbbed through her trembling flesh.

She had frozen, but she forced her fingers to the ribbon that tied at her throat. He hadn't spoken and she fumbled at the fine silk cord, tugging nervously at the tie until it slipped and gave.

The desert breeze still played through the wall, sucking and lifting the light fabric, teasing it away from her shoulders. Gooseflesh rose under the soft hairs as silk slipped down her arms and she stood before him naked and vulnerable.

Her blood pounded to the hard rhythm of drums, drowning out all thought but him and this exquisite terror. He was still and silent but his gaze brushed her skin with the warm weight of a touch, moving slowly over her bare breasts, down her stomach and thighs and she shook as she watched his face soften in appreciation.

"I," she tried, but the words died in her closed throat, and she leaned toward him, stumbling forward to keep from overbalancing.

His hand came up to meet hers and she grasped it, letting heat and strength and courage flow between them as she tripped closer, and closer.

The desert moon and its wilful breeze seemed to shove from behind, its million eyes seeking secret places, its million fingers tingling over bare nerves, and she raised

his hand hesitantly to her breast. A sob of pleasure broke from her mouth and she closed her eyes, as her world became the burning trace of his fingertips rolling over an aching nipple.

And there against her hip, her belly flinching hard at the brush of his hand; and there, the heat of his lips on her breastbone. Jaida held her hands back, as though their uncertainty made them unfit to use, as his feathered touch and glancing lips climbed her chest, climbed her throat, and her cheek and he stood before her.

“Priestess,” he murmured, soft against her ear. The warm palm of his hand cupped her cheek, his fingers slipping through her hair. “Goddess,” he said, and a hot thrill rushed up through her body, arching her back so her breasts pressed hard against him. Her heart hammered against her ribs, and every breath held and stuttered from her mouth. She reached on tip toes, stretching for his mouth, melting into his skin, fainting with relief.

His lips were soft on hers, moving slowly, stirring animal urges hidden deep in her flesh. Her spine carried the movement down her body, her hips rolling in time, sliding her bare skin against the tickling hair that patterned his.

Her back and shoulders came alive under his touch. His fingertips were heat and her arms slipped around him, pulling him closer.

There was no divine peace in this. Her body burned like a naked coal, her bones were on fire, and every nerve, from her centre to her skin, screamed with the pain of arousal. There was desperation and an urge for violence and stark terror. Her skin began to stick against him, wet with the heat of her own desire and she made herself step back, freed her mouth to pant after air she couldn’t find.

Lust boiled heavily, low in her gut and under her skin and fire throbbed in her groin. She didn’t know the words for what she needed, or how to move so his body would touch the painful longing growing there, but she wanted his hands on her. She was afraid of the desperation that drove her. And confused by contradictory desires. She wanted to lie, silent and submissive, to stretch back in the safety of his arms and to trust herself to his strong knowing hands.

And she wanted to wrap her arms around his neck, to rake her fingers in his hair and force his mouth hard against hers, to wrap her thighs around his waist and feel his lust driven hard into her, to scream at the fires that seared her soul.

“I don’t know what to do,” she gasped, the words catching roughly like sobs.

In the moonlit heat of the desert night he shone, and she wanted to cry for the beauty revealed. She lifted fingers, trailing them over the smooth muscle of his chest and down his belly. But she dared no further, raising her face to his, finding his eyes burning darkly from the shadow of his brow.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered, turning her gently into the breeze so it licked the sweats from her tender breasts. Standing close behind her, he moved her arms back so her hands rested on his buttocks and thighs, and her head lay back into the curve of his shoulder. His lips touched her neck and she whimpered, instinctively pulling him harder against her as his hands swept up over her exposed belly and ribs.

Jaida bit her lip as sobs of pleasure burst from her throat. Her breasts ached for his touch, her nipples throbbing in the night air with the hard pulse that raced through her. His mouth was fiery on her neck and shoulder and his lips brushed her ear with a hot breath that threatened to buckle her knees.

Kisses swept over her cheek, his chin rough on hers, and he caressed the softness of her breasts, catching their tips under slow fingers. Touch bloomed into ecstasy, with every inch of her skin screaming out its need. Her stomach twitched and her breath stuttered roughly over her tongue as his hand slipped down over her belly and her hip,

down to her thigh.

In sudden fear, she grabbed his wrist, her grip weak and febrile, air sucking sharply at the back of her throat. He paused, and his lips nudged her cheek, so she turned her face up to him, leaning back to find his kiss.

There was nothing to fear in this warm bright night. This was the man she had chosen over any who might have chosen her, and with him she had nothing to fear. Slowly she loosened her hold, until it was no more than a touch on the back of his hand when it skimmed her inner thigh, raising goosebumps, and slipped into the shadows.

Even in her dreams his touch had not been so exquisite. His fingertips slipped easily between the delicately made folds of her sex, gathering the dew of her arousal and sliding over swollen flesh with slow and wonderful precision.

Jaida rested back, her weak knees sending waves of trembling up through her. Her breath became a soft moan, as she hung on the strength of his arm, consumed by the fires he stoked in her body. Sobs broke from her lips, her hips moving slowly against the bright white pressure of his fingers.

In the days since his presence had first awakened these fierce desires, her own efforts to clear his touch from her dreams seemed suddenly crass and clumsy. He reached to stroke secret places deep inside, his fingers gently urging past the resistance of chaste flesh, and she clung to him, sobbing her pleasure.

The desire to turn into his embrace grew excruciating as nature demanded it's ancient due. Knowledge past thought ached in her burning flesh, craving penetration and consummation. But his firm grip held her steady as his fingers stroked and stroked, sliding wetly, slipping, moving until the tight ball of heat and pressure he'd nurtured burst, sending ripples of pleasure out through her belly and shudders of relief down her legs.

Seth caught her fall as strength left her thighs, then relaxed his hold as she slowly straightened and turned against him. Need more painful than anything he'd ever known screeched along raw neurons. There was no space in his chest for breath, the sharp burn of lust stabbed and clutched at his diaphragm, and his gut spasmed painfully. In his hands the soft curve of her bottom was hot and seemed oddly fragile, as if the fear of hurting her had heightened his sense of touch.

He forced his spine to straighten, pulling thick air deep into his lungs as her lips and tongue sought his. Against the heat of her bare belly, the hard pulse of his erection pounded, kicking back into his gut and beating hot at his temples. Moving without clear thought, he let her weight take him back a step, and down to sit onto the plain firm bedding behind.

For just a moment Jaida stood before him, the sweet flesh of her breasts at his lips, his tongue teasing the hard pearl of her nipple. Shaking, as adolescent urgency strained against everything he'd ever learned of self-control, he reached to pull her to his lap.

His hand trembled as it brushed the length of her thigh, drawing her down. Wet fires slipped over him, the luxurious softness of her body closing tight around him as she settled. He closed his eyes and let hard air seep from his mouth, overwhelmed to have such beauty in his arms. He would have laughed aloud for the pure joy of it, but he had no breath to spare for laughter.

Sotto voce pleasure slipped from her mouth as she rested her cheek down against his shoulder, and her lips moved slowly across the tense muscle to his throat.

"Is that right?" she whispered. Her teeth were hard, nipping gently at the soft skin under his ear, and his breath caught sharply, her mouth closing over his before he could answer. His hands moved instead, gently lifting her hips, coaxing her toward innate rhythms and she pressed her mouth harder onto his as instinct and desire moved in her

flesh.

If she felt any discomfort, passion burned the sting away and the cries she made were cries of pleasure not of pain. When he opened his eyes to watch her, the flash of a wild thing taking flight lit her pale eyes and her lips were blood dark, hot and swollen when she leaned to press them to his.

Hands he barely owned slid up and down her sweat slicked back, and his breath came hard in racking gasps that lost themselves in hers. In moonlight, on the desert breezes, she became a force of nature, drawing life and love and breath into her own flow and crying them out in ecstasy at the power she had found.

Jaida was the novice and her flesh was new to the tenets of love making, but in this she was in control and Seth could not have taken it from her to save his own life. He could only breathe and ride the waves of blistering heat that rose through him. Relief, when it came was painful in its intensity. Muscle and sinew seemed to tear deep inside and an echoing rush filled his head with shards of crystal light.

When his vision cleared, Jaida slumped back, hanging her weight from hands that clasped behind his neck. Her body still twitched against his, and she was shaking. The eyes that had been alight were closed, and she drew short sharp gasps, her cheeks dark with the flush of pleasure and exertion.

"Yes," he whispered, when he found the breath. Pulling her close and lying back onto soft silk sheets, he held her tight. "That is exactly right."

Jaida woke in Petra's shadows, hidden from the morning sun by ancient canyon walls. Her body, when she moved, was tender, stirring smiles at the memory of excess, but she had no desire to move at all. This was the peace he'd spoken of. Divine peace that weighed on her like gold, pressing each breath into a small contented sigh. Seth slept, his slow breath warm in her hair, his arms and legs around her like the promise of safety. And as he dreamed, his lips moved softly on her crown.

Under her cheek was the smooth arc of a scar, but she'd found others. The day would come when she would hear the story of every one, and lay her lips against them, and heal the pain that remained buried deep in the flesh beneath them.

"They will be preparing to leave," he whispered, startling her. "Drusus. Agrippina. Your sisters."

Jaida nodded, unwilling to move her thoughts from this cocoon of peace and safety.

"And you?"

She flicked a mute questioning look up to his eyes.

"What have you chosen?" In the murky light, his fingers trailed a gentle line down her cheek and he studied their progress, as though with the touch he could commit every shadowed line of her face to memory. "Why are you here?"

The question seemed bizarre. "Why?" She had told him plainly once already. She had chosen to follow her heart, to put him above her service and her training, and chosen him regardless of the life they would lead when everything was settled. She had done as she must, as her heart decreed. "If you didn't know, shouldn't you have asked me that last night?"

Seth laughed softly, holding her closer. "Last night I wouldn't have risked asking anything in case you changed your mind. Last night I didn't dare. But now I'm afraid to move from this bed, to let you out of my sight, unless I understand what it is you want from me. What you need."

“Need?” she echoed quietly. “I don’t need more than this.” Her hand moved softly over the strength of his arm, and down onto his chest. “And my choice? I have no choice, no more than you do. We were chosen because we had to follow our hearts.” In this world, at least, Jaida had been shown the greed of men. A man who would do as his heart demanded, who would make nothing of power and throw mountains of gold to the winds, was a rare creature indeed. If Jaida and her sisters were alone in the empire, then so too, was Seth.

“Jaida, please. You have insights I simply can’t share.” Confusion creased his brow and shone in the shadows of his eyes, and he took her hand gently in his. “What your goddess says and means, and who she chooses and why, these are mysteries to me. I am asking you as plainly as I can: why did you decide to come to me? What have you decided for your future?”

There was fear in his confusion, and Jaida smiled to see how completely their roles had been reversed. Now she was the one with confidence and certainty. She had, for the first time in her life, the satisfaction of knowing this one thing without the slightest doubt. “I came to you,” she smiled, “because you didn’t send for me. I came to you because I knew without question that this was the place I belonged. I came to you because I don’t care if you are dressed in fine linen or in the rags of a beggar.” Stretching to reach his lips, she kissed him lightly. “I came because you are my future, where ever you are.”

He shook his head, the barest movement. “All night I’ve woken, time and again, checking and rechecking and checking again that this is true, that you are real. You are, and I could not have hoped for more.” Again the slightest shake of his head. “That will be enough for now.” He grinned. “When I understand even a part of your world, I’ll ask you again.”

Moving back, he slipped his arm from under her, and rolled away to sit and stand. Blue shadows moved like silk over his lean muscularity as he walked to his shelving and selected a long, loose *khameez*.

Jaida propped onto her elbows to scan for her robe. The room around her was not anything she might have imagined for her beloved. Her mind’s eye had painted golden walls and jewels and glass and rich fabrics. But here she found a simple, firm bed, with softest linen and a silky sheet.

Behind her, the wall carried a line of crenellated turrets for lamps, and a single wide cloth in vivid colours. A tree spread its branches wide across the top of the painting, carrying a host of creatures, birds and reptiles. Below in its shade, tiny figures twisted and coupled. And sitting at the centre, eyes closed, smiling, was a single man, larger than the rest and full of peace.

It was fitting.

-THE END-

About the author:

Letitia Coyne is alive and well and living in Australia. She writes, paints, draws, sews, plays with old wooden furniture, revives jewellery and sings very loudly. She also feeds animals and adolescents. And sleeps.

Discover other titles by Letitia Coyne at Obooko.com:

Britannia – Book One.

Maia and her step-brother Cilo were raised in an opulent but isolated villa in the Seine Valley. At fifteen Cilo escaped to the army in Britannia, leaving Maia alone and afraid.

Lucius, Luc, is commander of an auxiliary cavalry unit of *Legio XX, Valeria Victrix*. The son of a Caledonian mercenary who joined Rome, he and his four brothers are soldiers of renowned ability and bravery. At twenty-five he has served ten years, has another fifteen to serve, and has had enough of killing. Exhausted and battle fatigued after the brutal AD77 Cambrian campaign, he has been weighing up his chances of survival as a deserter.

As a matter of convenience, Maia is married off to her stepbrother, and once again abandoned when he returns to his post. Seizing her one chance to escape, she joins an exclusive group of travelling prostitutes on their way to Britannia. With them, she finds herself moving through a complex web of lies and deceptions, where everyone knows more than they will say and everyone she meets has their own agenda.

If she can trust Lucius, he will take her to her husband. But everything she knows about the world will change -- if she can survive the journey.

Hispania – Book Two.

Although the siege of Numantia in 133BC marked the end of organized resistance to Rome, the Celtiberian tribes of northern Spain maintained their heritage of warrior elites -- and their hatred of Rome. They accepted the comforts, infrastructure and the benefits of Empire, while remaining independent tribal city-states under the control of noble families.

Marella was the daughter of one such family.

Falsely accused by a vile and corrupt Druidic high priest, she is set to be executed. Her rescuer is Marcus, a Roman deserter from Britannia who has made his home in the Gallego valley above Caesaraugusta.

Finding no purpose in the life he leads, bored and frustrated, he relishes the chance to face the challenges that come with saving the life of this young noblewoman. Her best chance of survival lies in travelling across the province to Numantia, and her only chance of survival is to do that with Marc.

Somehow they must stay ahead of High Priest Leucetius and the priests of a Romanised and corrupted temple; Marella's noble brother Taran and his standing army; and the army of Rome itself.

Away from the capital, the Roman world was a complex, sometimes bloody, blend and clash of cultures. The people were not stereotypical Roman ladies and gents consumed by the politics of Caesar's court. Hispania is a glimpse into the less well known lives of Rome.

Caledonia – Book Three.

By AD83 the Romans in Caledonia held a line of glen-blocking forts, (now known as the Gask Ridge forts, from Glasgow to Perth) and the three active legions, XXth, IXth and IInd, were split along this defensive line.

Calgacus was one of a number of first century Pictish barons -- part of a landed class in northern Celt society with access to slaves, money, men and arms. He fixed on

the plan to unify the Caledonian Celtic tribes against Rome, beginning with the tribes of the Forth-Clyde area. After a crushing defeat at a fort along the Roman line, Calgacus tried to bring together all the Pictish tribes and rallied an army of perhaps sixty thousand men (and women) for the Battle of Mons Graupius.

Once Calgacus' lover, Eirbrin has been sent north to her family lands on the Gleann Mor above Inbhir Nis. Fanatical dedication to the fight to free Caledonia from Rome has been her only way to deal with the deep and disabling shames of her past. When she meets Antony she believes she has found a mystic, a man of power who can help her to overcome the demons of guilt and shame.

He is a spy, a *Natione* -- native Britons conscripted to the Roman auxiliary army -- used extensively by Agricola in the Caledonian wars where the Celt's guerrilla tactics and harsh terrain made Roman success near to impossible. Everything about him should warn Brin of his deception, but her longing to atone, her need to be free of shame, and her growing desire for him allow her to deny or justify any doubts that come.

To him, she should be no more than an enemy, and with her ties to the leader of the Picts, a formidable source of information. But as they move through the Caledonian midlands toward the gathering battle, her beauty and courage, her innocence and the unfaltering faith she places in him draw him into an impossible situation.

Trapped between an irresistible love and an immovable duty, he must find a way to untangle his web of lies, or return to a life of service, to live or die alone.

[Touchstone.](#)

"You are the fool, boy. How long have you believed your war would end and you would bring that midden home to me? How long? Really, I want you to tell me. Because I want you to think carefully about how long it is you've loved her while she never loved you back."

From the author of *Britannia and Petra* comes a brand new historical tragedy...

War is hell. Then it starts to hurt.

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For Freya, there is no life worth remembering before the army, and none worth imagining after. Born to the lowest caste of a brutally bigoted society, she's found no more horror on the battlefield than she knew on the streets.

And she's earned a lot more respect with a sword in her hand.

As a young man, Dragan was blooded on the rush of adrenaline and sated by the euphoria of victory. With Freya beside him as his partner, he was indestructible. But age and mortality are gaining ground, and cracks have started to appear.

He's had fifteen years of war and he's earned his retirement.

Together they survived the war. But can they survive peace when it means different things to each of them?

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