

CLEOPATRA 53-52BC

Gold Is Where You Find It

~or~

Supersize Me!

Marian Marion Kebab

Foreword

In 53 BC, 16-year-old Cleopatra has been ruling Egypt for a year while her father enjoys early retirement. The country is in dire financial straits, although she was able to buy some time by exposing an embezzling Roman tax collector. There's a lot of gold and jewels buried with previous pharaohs and it's not doing them any good, so Cleopatra, like some rulers before her, decides to restart state sponsored tomb robbing, as well as anything else she can think of to raise funds, while engaging in covert diplomacy with the Roman empire.

Explore some tombs in the Valley of Kings. As a bonus, witness the possible origins of organized tourism, theme parks, franchised fast food, sports betting, ... and the chicken dance.

Humorous historical fiction. Not so much a *sequel* as a *continuation* of "Cleopatra 54 BC". Read that one first. There are just too many people and plotlines to rehash. As a refresher, the first appendix provides a brief summary of the main characters to this point. Adult humor and situations, nothing explicit.

A lot happens outside of the recorded history, but there isn't anything that **couldn't** have happened.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to my wonderful editor.
Sometimes what I thought I wrote isn't quite what the reader thinks they read.

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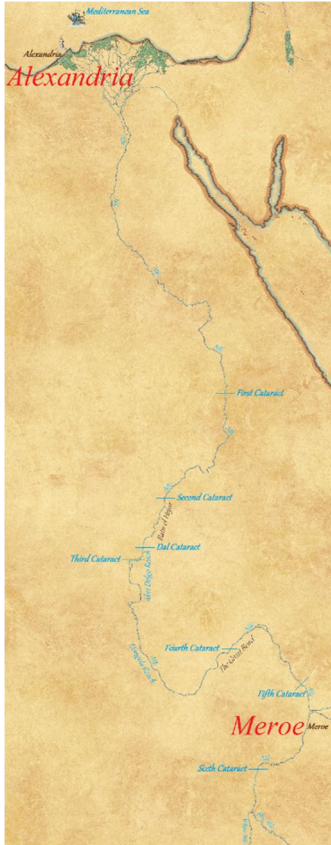
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Chapter I – Co-Regent



Ensela was beyond happy. She kept on showing her mother her belly, convinced it was swelling. Hatshepsut wasn't at all surprised when Ensela just turned out to be late. Ensela was crushed: no one had ever seen her unhappy, and the whole city of Meroe worried about her.

The experience with Orestes had changed her. When she wasn't helping people, she couldn't keep her hands still. She wasn't really "thinking" about it, her hands took on a life their own ... sewing.

"Ensela, dear? You know spider monkeys only have *two* arms, right?"

"Oh! They're too small? ... I don't know what to do. Everything I do turns out in threes ... I think I'm doing two's, and then another arm appears out of nowhere. I don't know what I'm doing ... I can't concentrate. I can't help thinking about babies. I can't control it."

"BABIES! Oh my goodness! I thought you were doing some kind of 'be nice to monkeys' thing, dear.

The temple has some excellent clothes makers. They OWE you. Just tell them you're making clothes for other people's children, dear. They'll teach you."

"I really miss him ... it hurts."

“We *know* he’s coming back. I’ve seen it in my visions many times ... *and* your children. It’s just a matter of time, dear.”

Hatti and Talakhamani had been comfortable with their lives when they just lived with Ensela, but the return of Dakka, and appearance of pseudo-adopted Kalek and Orestes, had changed everything. The house felt empty now. With the building of an Orestes-sized house a little distant, it just seemed to emphasize his absence.

Instead of telling stories around the nightly fire, Hatti would give updates on what was going on with Dakka, Kalek, and Orestes in Alexandria. Her visions seemed to feed on intense emotions and there were plenty to spare. Talak found it more interesting than the weekly “State of Kush” updates in the palace.

Hatti embarrassed both Talak and Ensela with the boys’ reunions with their priestesses, up until the crisis with a young child, which Dakka had saved. She was pretty sure they were all married, because they were all living together and had signed documents. There was a young girl who seemed to get a lot of respect named “Brinksess” who visited them as a friend, but they always kept a little distant from. It was quite a shock when she realized the name was “Princess”. Talak was astounded: he had been working in the Kush palace for twenty-three years and no one was friendly to *him* ... although the oldest Kush princess had been asking him about Orestes’ return.

Banafrit and Dedyet had come into Hatti’s realm of visions as well, since they were emotionally bonded to the boys ... and there were a few visions of Orestes (she didn’t describe these much to Ensela because they always seemed to involve fawning women). Dedyet was in charge of something and was teaching classes to young girls. Banafrit seemed to have her own administrative department with a dozen employees or more: she got respect from EVERYONE. Kalek seemed happy as a clam, working in his house, not being involved with anyone, walking Sagira to the zoo and shorelines. Dakka had what he dreamed: a medical practice in Alexandria with another physician ... *and* the Princess. It wasn’t clear what that meant.

There were many humorous events in their lives, and it provided non-stop entertainment to the Meroe family. Hatti had seen their pilfering of the royal palace kitchens, and Dakka’s involvement with Ashtoreth (when Baska was around, he pestered her for details). Hatti was puzzled by a small orange haired girl who appeared on the fringes, always out of focus.

Hatti had also described the tense family meeting where Dedyet was very angry, and Dakka was distraught. The faces and emotions all came in very clearly, but she couldn’t make sense of what was going on. Thank goodness it ended with Dedyet cuddling Dakka.

Then one-night Hatti was beside herself and was babbling half sentences. Baskakeren happened to be there, hoping to catch up with what he had missed while on the island, and he kept checking things to make sure she wasn’t ill.

Talak: “I’ve never SEEN you like this. Can I help? Wine? Hugs? Anything?”

Hatti: “I’ve seen something ... and I can’t talk about it.”

Both Talak and Baska were speechless. Hatti “talked” ... all the time, non-stop ... and her favorite thing to talk about were her visions.

Hatti: “I think ... I think ... it’s a state secret.”

Talak and Baska just gave her some time.

Hatti: “Dakka got involved in something, maybe against his will ... but he *seems* to be handling it ... I don’t see how it can possibly turn out well.”

Φ Φ Φ

“Watcha doin’ back there *Daaakkaa*?”

“I’m kissing your shoulder ... What does it *feel* like?”

“It feels like there’s some nibbling going on, too.”

“... Maybe.”

“It kind of tickles ... please continue.”

“As you wish, your royal Highness, Lady of the Two ...”

“**NOW** you’ve stepped in it.”

“... uh oh.”

“Say it ... Say my name ... the way I like it.”

“... *Cleopatra* ... MMMmmphhh!!”

Φ Φ Φ

“Dios, how are we **ever** going to get her out of bed?”

“You’re the Fertility Arts expert, Hentaneb. Why are you asking **me**?”

“I’m getting desperate.”

“What did you tell her when the scribes and priestesses got back together the first time?”

“Let the Fates decide.”

“... and how’s that working out for you?”

“Shut up.”

<she punched him>

“The Pharaoh stepped in for her in court. He’s a bit rusty, but he’s congenial and wastes a lot of time chatting, so things shouldn’t get too muddled up ... but I think he’s getting bored. He keeps giving me ‘looks’.”

“I suppose we could get Dakka out with a medical emergency. Anyone on your list we can throw in a pigpen ... or to a hippo?”

“**THAT** was uncalled for Dios! I’m distressed. Do you really want to make me angry?”

“Just teasing.”

“Not very well.”

“Well, how long does it usually take for a sixteen-year-old girl to get bored?”

“In **BED!** ... are you **serious**?! You’re not helping at all.”

“Maybe the Pharaoh could help?”

“What now?”

“What if he just walked into the small house and ... uhhh ... **requested** her to come back?”

“What if it was **you**, Dios? You go to someone’s house ... to drag your daughter out of someone’s bed ...”

“A **married** man’s bed ...”

“Oh! Thank you so much for that ... to make her go back to work?”

“She **likes** her dad, right?”

“What if she’s making noises? I hear it’s pretty constant over there. The guards wear earplugs.”

“That’s all I’ve got Hentaneb. Maybe his distaste for court will overpower his embarrassment for his daughter. He’s not exactly unfamiliar with such activity, you know.”



Dedyet wasn’t surprised at the Princess’ behavior with her husband, but she didn’t have to like it, and it felt a lot worse than she had anticipated. It was her idea and it had saved their lives, but now she had to deal with the consequences. She had been sleeping on Banafrit’s bed in the War Room to get out of the house, but enough was enough.

Dedyet wanted her own husband back, but if she did the wrong thing, she might wind up dead. Hopefully, the Princess had calmed down a bit. Dedyet was ready to try.

Dedyet waited for the breathing in Dakka’s room to be slow and regular, then she slipped into the bed and embraced whatever parts of Dakka were available. She knew he was awake and whispered in his ear:

“You are **mine!**”

Dedyet awoke early, but remained still, just to see what would happen. Eventually, she heard the Princess kissing and moving around Dakka, then hopping out of bed.

“I’m getting some fruit and something to drink. Can I get you anything, Dedyet?”

“No, Princess ... I’m fine ... thank you ... ?”

“I think I’ll clean up, too ... you can have some time to yourselves.”

“Thank you, Princess.” <Isis’ Great Teat!>

Dakka was on Dedyet in an eye blink.

“Easy husband. There’s no time for what I want. Besides, I’m giving my body a break ... as **you** suggested ... I’m skipping the root this cycle ... and I don’t think we need to complicate our lives with babies right now.”

There was a terribly sad noise from Dakka.

“You’re not worn out by your other **young** wife?”

“I want **you!**”

“Silly husband ... just hold me ... tight.”

“Dedyet, I’m **so** sorry ... I never wanted to ...”

“Goddammit! Just shut up and kiss me!”

When the Princess came back, they just changed places. It took a lot of effort for Dedyet to maintain a cheerful face, and she wondered a bit if the Princess was doing the same thing. She made it as far as the doorway, then her feet wouldn't move. She was fighting a battle with herself: she desperately wanted to leave, but she thought that the best way to get the Princess out of her bed was to make sure the Princess knew what she was doing ... so she could successfully entrap someone else when the empire needed it.

It would be so much easier if it wasn't Dakka ... **her** Dakka.

Dedyet took a deep breath, held it, then let it slowly out. She put all her effort into turning around with a pleasant face.

"Princess? ... Try small circles ... the *other* way ..."
"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!"

Φ Φ Φ

Divine Horus, Lord of the Two Lands, left his entourage outside the door and walked into the small house. It happened to be Dakka making noise.

"Patti? ... **PATTI?! ... CAN YOU GIVE ME A MINUTE?!**"
"It's my **DAD!**"

Dakka was gasping for air, and was in no shape for a response of any kind. The Princess wrapped herself up in a sheet, and did a quick stumble to her father. Her face was beaming and she hugged him tightly.

"WOOOF! ... nothing mean, but you could use a wash ... you smell like ... uhhh ... never mind." <He crinkled his nose.>

"**Daddy!** It's so **amazing!!**"

"Yes, yes ... I know little monkey ... it's not a dad/daughter thing, OK?"

"but, but, but ... I **need** to tell you about ..."

"No. No, you don't. I know we're Ptolemies ... but we're not **that** kind. Please? Save it for your friends ... your little family **here.**"

"OK, daddy ... just ... I didn't know it could **be** like this. I'm so happy."

"I'm pleased for you, little monkey ... I really am ... but we need you back."

"But, but ... I just **got** here!!!"

"It's been almost three weeks, little ferret."

"**WHAT?!!!!**"

"I've tried to manage things, but I'm just not competent ... any more ... if I ever was. I signed a bunch of stuff I should've read more closely, and there's some kind of real estate thing between the temple and governor in Abydos ... apportionment? evaluation something? ..., and I've been keeping some foreign ministers drunk so I don't have to deal with them. I need you back Patti,
PLEASE?!!"

She half-turned, looking at the bedroom door. “But, but ...”

“Your empire needs you.”

“It’s not **FAIR!**”

“No, it isn’t. Not fair at all ... **Co-regent.**”

“What now?”

“You heard me. I told you I was going to do this. It’s done ... the ceremony is just for show.”

“Daddy, just a little more, **PLEASE?!!**”

“I’ve got some engineers breaking through walls, building you a passage from my palace right through the wall of this house. When they break through, you need to come to court with me ... just for a few hours. Then you can come back without anyone noticing. You don’t have to give up your nice doctor ... just let him rest a little. It’ll be a couple of days from now.”

“Oh, **THANK YOU** ... daddy ... daddy ... *daddy.*” <she was hugging him>

Before her father reached the door to leave, the Princess had started up Dakka again ... the Pharaoh just shook his head with a little chuckle. Kalek came tearing in through the door and bumped into him without realizing who he was.

“AHHH!!! ... umm .. Pharaoh! ... uhh ... your Majesty! ... ahhh ... I’m so sorry ... Majesty ... I ..”

“Calm down, Kalek ... it’s alright. We’re all friends, here.”

The Pharaoh had his hand on Kalek’s shoulder ... **touching** him. Then he just walked away.

“Uhhh ... Pharaoh? ... Your Majesty?”

“What, Kalek?”

“Would you like to go fishing ... sometime? ... Majesty?”

“We’d love to, Kalek.”

MY dad used take me fishing in the marshes. I wonder what Kalek has in mind.



Everyone awoke to a great hammering on the other side of Banafrit’s and Kalek’s bedroom wall. The dishes on the table were dancing around with each stroke, and some cups had fallen off a shelf. By the time they had all left, the sound of small rocks hitting the floor had been replaced by full size bricks. Astarte came in as if on cue. The Princess had given her the responsibility of finishing off the doorway. Astarte, of course, knew exactly what it should look like, having seen it hundreds of times in her dreams.

Near the end of the day, Astarte walked into the War Room and straight up to Banafrit, completely ignoring Kalek working close by. She signed and mimed that she needed Kalek to interpret to the workmen for her. Banafrit gave her Kalek, but even though absolutely nothing untoward had happened, there was still something about Astarte she couldn’t put a finger on that bothered her.

In Astarte's absence, the workmen had quickly cleaned up and tried to flee. She was hopping mad ... literally "hopping." She was signing furiously and assaulting the last man trying to pass through the opening.

Kalek: "She wants a door. A big thick one with a full bar across it. She won't let it go. She'll bother you for days. She'll chase you home ... you **know** how Phoenician girls are."

To be fair, none of the workmen actually new "how Phoenician girls are", but the way Kalek said it, it sounded like a legitimate threat. Besides, now that someone who could talk had shown up, they couldn't claim they didn't understand. Having dealt with fussy palace types before, it would just be easier to do the door and be done with it. They found a suitable door in a storeroom of Ptolemy VIII, and repurposed it.

Astarte lowered the oversize bar into place. She had rigged up some pulleys and guides to make this a one-handed operation. She crossed her arms, nodded at the door, and smiled at Kalek.

"Good job, Astarte!"

Kalek reached forward to pat her shoulder, but she ducked under his arm and hugged him ... hard enough to last her until the next opportunity. Kalek was gasping a bit for air when she let him go.



There were two thrones now, with Cleopatra seated next to her father. Her own throne had a step built-in so her feet didn't dangle (she had used a stool on her father's seat). She was doing her best, but it was clear her mind was elsewhere. It wasn't until she read a document with some greasy lawyering that she snapped out it.

"Do you take us for **FOOLS?!!**"

Everyone stopped breathing ... including the Pharaoh.

"Thank your gods we are in a magnanimous mood today."

She started drawing lines through the text, and making notes in the margins.

"Do it over. If you add something else, or twist our directives, we shall take it as a direct **insult**. Get out."

That's my girl!

"Rough three hours at work, my little Princess?"

"Shut up ... and attend your Highness, peasant."

"As you wish, royal co-regent, Lady of the Two ..."

“You’ve stepped in it AGAIN ... Say it ... the way I like.”

“... *Cleopatra* ...aaaIIIIYYYY!!!!”



Cleopatra was in the Throne Room, in a break between diplomats. The High Priestess knew what her frequent lapses into a dreamy expression meant, but all in all, she was getting hold of herself and getting back to normal.

“How do people EVER get out of bed, Nebby?”

“Most people have to earn a living, take care of children, feed themselves ... ‘life’ sorts of things, Highness.”

“The coupling was wonderful, but the Fertility Arts scrolls hadn’t prepared us for the ... ***everything***.

A tiny movement against Dakka, and every nerve in our skin fires. The feel of him, the way he looks at us, the way he touches us, the things he says, his breathing, just lying next to him, ... it’s like another world.”

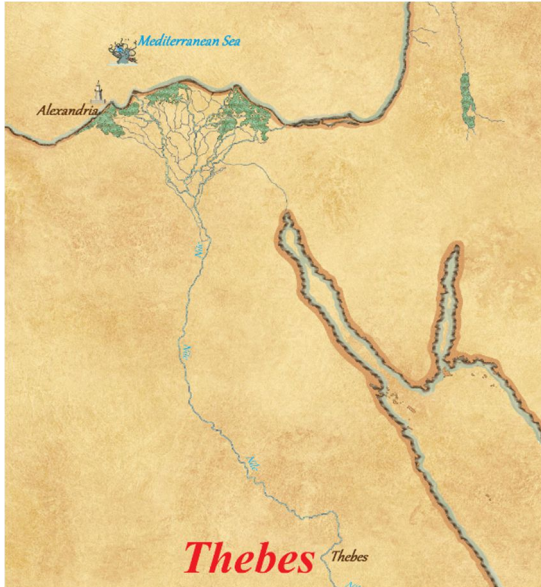
“Now you understand why it bonds people together so tightly, Highness.”

“Mmmm ... and I think I understand my father a lot better, now, too.”

“Tummy trouble, Highness? You’ve been chewing on mint leaves all day.”

“No. No, no. It reminds us of Dakka. He keeps mint leaves by the bed. He’s a great kisser.”

Chapter II – Nefertari



This was a good day. Nefertari had finished two clients by lunch, and had two more to fill out the afternoon. She wasn't just "a" bookkeeper: she was "the" bookkeeper of Thebes. When the tax collectors examined books and saw her stamp, there were no audits, no questioning, ... they just copied her figures, picked up the tax, and moved on. She didn't work "for" the government, and that was the beauty of her business. She used every corner of the law to save a client money, but never exceeded it. In her five years of operation, not a single client had been fined. The government liked her because she saved them time. Her clients liked her because she saved them money.

The front door was open, and Nefertari did a quick knock and strode in ... to see three grown men cowering in a corner, fighting to be the one with his back against the wall. In front of them was a full grown, eight-foot-long Egyptian cobra, its head and full hood swaying while it examined the men.

For its part, the cobra was tasting the air, and was wondering if any of the men were carrying any small rodents in the folds of their clothing ... or maybe a tasty black rat.

"Oh, for crap's sake! Can the three of you just grow a pair? ... You big whiny babies!"

Nefertari stepped back out through the door and selected a stick from the half dozen leaning against the wall. They were pretty much all the same: a relatively straight five-foot stick with a "Y" on the end. She walked back into the room.

"Cooooossss, coos, coos, coos ... coooooossss, coos, coos, coos."

The cobra excitedly turned to see what kind of food it was going to get, and Nefertari pinned its head to the floor with the “Y”. She grabbed the snake behind the Y with both hands and dragged it outside. The building next door had a low wall and she pulled the snake over to it. With some effort, she kicked the tail-end to middle of the snake over the wall, then tossed the head-end over with a great heave.

“Hey! HEYY!!! Anyone there? Ya got a runner!!”

When Nefertari got back, the men were still cowering in the corner. One had wet himself. Another had done something else.

“Is it gone, Tari?”

“You call yourselves ‘men’? What the Hell is wrong with you?!”

“It was a POISONOUS COBRA!!”

“That a child could have handled, you big frickin’ babies!”

“It surprised us! It just appeared out of nowhere!!”

“Out of nowhere my ass. They BREED them next door you idiots. What did you think the sign ‘Sacred Cobra Nursery’ meant?”

“We can’t read Egyptian.”

“... said by someone trying to do business in the heart of Egypt. Does your mother know you left home? Why did you think this place was so cheap? Didn’t you wonder about the *smell*? Frickin’ MORONS!”

“Will it come back?”

“Probably not. I scared it. There’s nothing stopping its brothers and sisters, though. I would strongly advise you to go next door and have them show you how to handle a stick. Goddamn stupid halfwits ... WHAT are **you** doing, jackass?”

“Errrrmm ... I’m ... closing the door? ... so they won’t come in?”

“Never, EVER close the door. They WILL get in a hundred different ways in this rat trap. Always make sure they can LEAVE! How did you guys ever get this far? That snake has more sense ... You’ve got records for me?”

“Oh ... yes, yes ... right here. There’s not much.”

“Poor sales, I’m guessing? You two, please get changed, the smell is pretty bad ... and you, watch for snakes ... Don’t just stare at the front door, moron. Keep your eyes moving around the room ... look for movement. Isis frickin’ mother of us all, what a bunch of clowns.”

The books were done quickly.

“You’re not very good at this. Perhaps you should do something else, or move somewhere else. No matter what you do, your very next step should be to learn how to handle snakes from your neighbor. I’ll bet you a copper you get two more before sunset ... Lord knows how many in the night. You might want to sleep someplace else.”

Stupid empty headed Greek merchants: the Med isn’t big enough for them? They have to come HERE?! Scared of a stupid snake. What next?



“Hey, Tari! You *know* I could show you a good time ...”

“How would I *know* that? Your girlfriend says you’re a bit substandard.”

“Hey, baby! Don’t be like that ...”

He put a hand on her shoulder. She put her fist to his jaw. He went down like a stone.



“Hey, Nebo. I’m so sorry to hear about Hatti.”

“Twenty years ... twenty years ... at least I’ve got the kids, Tari.”

“She was a good woman. I liked her. ... Ooof! ... those cinnamon rolls? I beat up a guy once to get one.”

“You serious?”

“C’mon! It was the LAST ONE.”

“Errmm ... they WERE pretty good.”

“Let’s get the books done, then we can reminisce ... you’re my last stop today.”

“Here.”

“Great Mother of Ptah! What happened? Your books used to be ... ‘pristine.’”

“Hatti did the books.”

“Oh ... no,no,no ... YOU did this?”

“Yes?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“I’m doing the books now.”

“Great Mother of Ptah. What’s this? Is it ‘ξ’ or ‘ζ’?”

“Errrrmm ... can you tell by context?”

“What the Hell are you talking about? Numbers don’t have ‘context’ ... they’re numbers ... How much do you usually sell a ... phwotnik? ... for?”

“There’s no such thing.”

“YOU wrote it!!”

“That’s not what I meant to write.”

Tari took a deep breath to steady herself.

“... and what, perchance, did you intend to write?”

“I have no idea.”

“Who did you sell it to? Do you know a guy named ... Grglwump?”

“Did I write that?”

“Get a lamp and sit down Nebo. This is gonna be a while. I’ll do this out of respect for Hatti, otherwise I’d walk out.”

It took hours ... and every ounce of client-patience that Tari had. It became very clear that Nebo could almost read, but couldn’t write to save his life. He had just, sort of, “gotten by” scanning for words he knew and depending on his wife. His books were almost useless, and Tari had reconstructed most of them by getting him to remember transactions.

"I can't do this again, Nebo. I think it's bringing on the demon."

"Oh! I'm terribly sorry. Anything I can do?"

"No, I'll manage ... but I can't go through this again. How old is your oldest son?"

"Eight, I think."

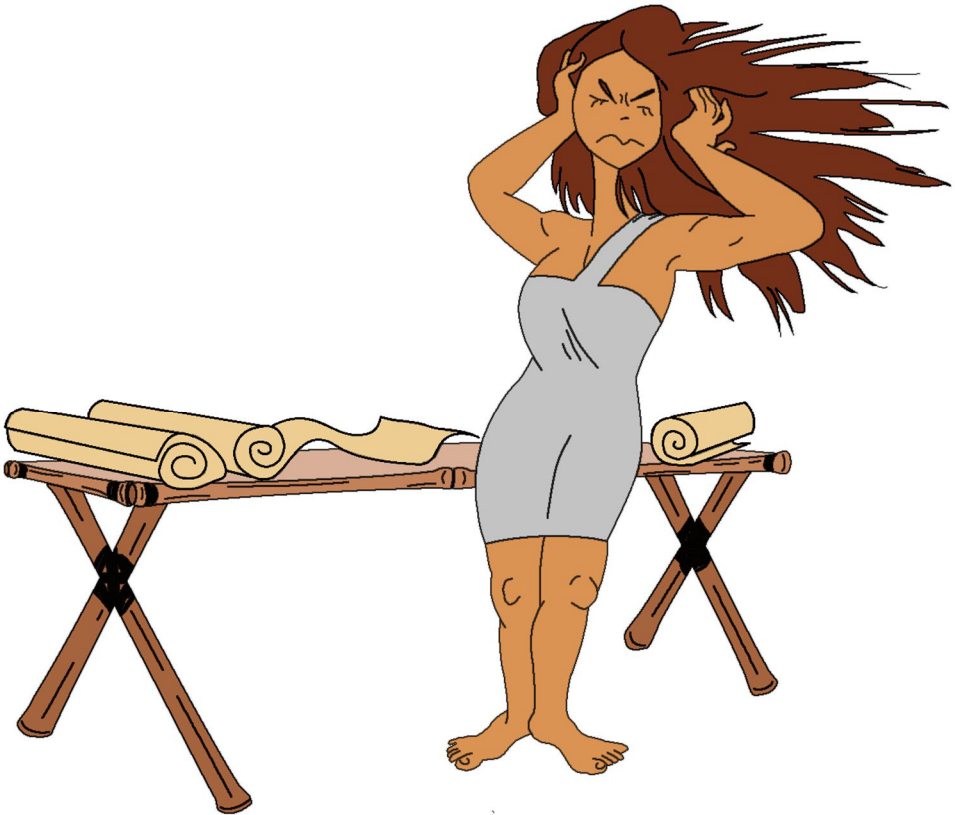
"You 'think'? Typical dad. He's a little young, but send him to the House of Life at the Isis Temple.

Use that money I found; the money that guy never paid back. Turn your son into a scribe. He can help you, and it'll give him an alternate career if something goes sideways. In the meantime, you'll have to pay a scribe to help you. I just can't do this again Nebo."

"I understand, Tari ... I'll do as you say. Thanks for all your help. Tax guy comes this week."

"Yeah, I know. Let me know when you have decent books and I'll come back."

"Thanks, Tari."



Tari was in the middle of the street when the demon struck. It was the hours squinting over lamplight, then the setting sun cutting through her eyes, which she had hoped to avoid by leaving earlier. At first, it seemed like just the edges of her vision were wavering, then it expanded across her whole field of view. It was impossible for her to focus, then the vertigo appeared. She usually didn't get both. This was going to be a bad one. She carefully plodded towards a tavern, swaying a bit,

trying not to fall in the middle of the street ... or appear as vulnerable as she felt. Then, someone grabbed her arm.

“It’s OK, Tari. It’s me.”

“Thank God, Felix. This is a bad one.”

Felix ushered her to a chair in a cool dark corner. Tari just sat back, closed her eyes, and tried to relax. Felix had helped her before and made her a tonic. He dug out a mortar and pestle from her bag and ground up some of the roasted Ethiopian beans, then dumped them in a mug of boiling water from the tavern. While it was steeping, he fished around for the ground willow bark, and added it when the cup had cooled a bit.

“Two doses, please, Felix.”

“Done ... I gotta go, Tari, you gonna be alright?”

“I’ll be fine ... I’ll get my sight back in twenty minutes or so. I might wobble, but I can get home.

Thanks. You really helped me this time. What’s on your schedule?”

“Well, I just got done handling today’s catch.”

“I could tell.”

“Oh, crap ... I’ll have to wash ... after I haul some garbage ... then I bartend until ten ... then there’s a private party gig.”

“Oooh ... what kind of party?”

“The kind of party that can afford musicians and dancers ... golden belt dancers.”

“*Naughty* party. Greeks love that ancient stuff. Is Ki going? I hear she’s really good.”

“She is ... and she is. It’s really good money, and Aristarchus keeps his guests under control.”

“Aren’t you worried about going home late?”

“Ram’s meeting us.”

“Throw him an insult for me.”

As she had expected, her vision eventually cleared, but her balance was still off. If she closed her eyes, she couldn’t walk without falling ... she needed visual cues. There was nothing for it but to try and get home. She couldn’t wait any longer. It was already darker than she was comfortable with.

“Like an escort, Tari?”

“How much did you pay Felix to let you know, Ram?”

“The usual.”

Tari let him hook her elbow with his. The additional support really helped. She didn’t have to look to know he was grinning from ear to ear.

“It’s really kind of creepy that you keep me under surveillance.”

“You know it’s not like that. All our friends know I want to help when you need it. I just incentivize the process ... Heard about the snake.”

“Morons! Get a place right next to a temple nursery and don’t know what to do with one measly snake.”

“You know, Tari, *most* people weren’t trained like us. *Most* people are a little iffy with snakes.”

“Goddamn frickin’ overgrown babies.”

“You should really try to form opinions about things ... What set off the demon this time? Do you know?”

“I think it was squinting over Nebo’s hen scratchings combined with the setting sun right in my eyes.

I suspected that might happen, but he just lost his wife ... That’s what I get for being nice.”

“Hey! You nearly fell that time. Put your arm around my waist.”

“... and you’ll do the same? You just never quit, do you?”

<She nearly fell ... again, and did as he suggested>

“bastard.” <not really serious>

Ram: “Evening, Hatshepsut. I’ve brought you your lovely daughter.”

Tari: “Give it a rest.”

Hatti: “Thanks, Ramesses. Looks like the demon took her legs this time. Put her on the couch please ... sit right next to her and I’ll get you some beer.”

Tari: “MOM! Butt out!”

Hatti: “He’s hauled you back from where ever. It’s the least we can do.”

Tari: “Fine, but stop trying to glue us together.”

Hatti: “Stop trying to fight him ... Heard about the snake. Everyone’s talking about it. It’s the joke of the day.”

Tari: “Frickin’ morons.”

Hatti: “LANGUAGE! ... stay for dinner, Ram?”

Tari: “MOM!”

Φ Φ Φ

“I don’t know why you fight so hard, Tari. You will **NEVER** find another man who loves you as completely as Ram ... who will support you ... who will take care of you.”

“I think I fare pretty well without anyone. I don’t NEED anyone.”

“... and what about a family?”

“I don’t need babies right now.”

“... and what about when you do?”

“MOM! Just drop it!”

“You know that betting pool at the tavern just keeps getting bigger.”

“That’s just a stupid rumor.”

“You’re lying to yourself. There’s over six month’s pay in there now ... all to the first girl that bed’s him. They’re ratcheting up their game.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You don’t think other women are interested in him ... just for fun?”

“Shut up, mom.”

“Have you really taken a good look at grownup Ram? He turns women’s heads.”

“Just shut up.”

“Your lovesick childhood playmate has become a very handsome, very lonely man with eyes only for you. Some woman will find him when he’s most vulnerable, most lonely, and you’ll never see him again.”

“WHAT’S HER NAME?!!”

Chapter III – *Dragonfly*

Ramesses and Nefertari were raised together. The families had a shared business, and their mothers had become pregnant at nearly the same time. While their fathers were busy robbing tombs, the children played in the desert under their moms' supervision. They napped together in the heat of the day, slept together under the same blankets at night, learned to handle the dangerous desert creatures, and were taught the trade as they grew. Their mothers dreamt of their marriage from birth, naming them after Ramesses the Great and his favorite wife to push the Fates along.

Their fathers had a minor falling out in their teens. Ram's father was feeling his age and no longer felt the risks of the business were worth it. He decided to go "legitimate" and sell knock-off copies of tomb goods to Greek tourists, with a few dealings in authentic antiquities done on the sly. Tari's father continued being active in the desert, mostly selling through Ram's dad, but it wasn't the same partnership. Tari's father was always a little miffed because Ram was so good underground, and now was a mere "merchant." In his view, Ram's father had taken him away. Tari's father had died in a work accident. Ram's father had died of mummy cough, picked up from one of the antiquities.

Ramesses was killing time, waiting for Felix' and Ki's party to wind down. He was minding his own business in a tavern, gnawing on a hunk of brown bread and drinking beer. It was a slow night, and the working girls were clustered around his table ... all trying to outdo each other in sweetness ... or seductiveness ... or playfulness. They hadn't quite found the right wedge they needed to crack him. There was a sizable sum of money for the girl that got him to give in. As each girl spoke, the others gauged his reactions to see if there was something they could use.

"I know what you won't do. That's all right. We could just play and kiss all night. Nothing frisky. Just come up to my room, Ram. I get lonely there."

All eyes were on Ram's face, looking for tells.

"You're very sweet, Cinnamon ... but I can't stay, I have to meet someone."

"Just a little? It's just play. I've got some Sicilian wine and a pile of Tobek's cookies. I'll show you how they kiss in Gaul."

"It's different?"

"Curious?"

"No ... no,no,no ... just no time. Sorry, Cinnamon."

"If you're short on time, I know something we can do quickly."

"I'll bet you do, Coriander ... and would I survive?"

"Let's find out, shall we? I'll be gentle ... more or less."

"I know a game we can play."

"Saphron! Please put that back on."

Ki and Felix were in the street, leaning up against the wall of the house they had been in, waiting for Ram. Felix was holding his hands against his chest like upturned claws. The Great Crocodile in the sky told them it was near midnight.

“I noticed when you stopped playing. Are they bad, Felix?”

“Yeah ... they REALLY ache. I can barely move the fingers now. It’s a good job I can sing or I would’ve lost out on a lot of tips. You do OK?”

“Better than OK. Especially after I gave that big fat guy a black eye. Aristarchus gave him an earful, then gave me a sack of coins ... in addition to my pay and other tips. It was a really good night.”

“Oh! I missed that! Did he paw you?”

“He **TRIED** ... but I let him know that wasn’t acceptable. Some of those Greeks go absolutely nuts when they see a dancer only wearing a belt and wig. Go figure. It was funny to watch their wives reining them in.”

“You were really good ... really sexy and fun.”

“Only because you played so well. We make a good team ... were you WATCHING me? Thinking of switching sides?”

“No. It’s just the whole atmosphere. I don’t think the other girls put as much life into it as you do. You make EVERYONE want to get frisky. It was a great party.”

“Thanks. You couldn’t have said a nicer thing. Back atcha ... where’s Ram?”

“Something must’ve happened. I don’t feel like staying exposed like this ... we should go.”

Ki and Felix started walking home. In the wealthy part, they stuck close to the walls, and walked in the shadows. As the homes and buildings got smaller and had more alleys, they walked in the center of the street so they wouldn’t be surprised.

“I think we’ve got trouble.”

Ki had heard movement behind them. With quick backward glances, she saw three figures in the shadows ... furtively closing the distance.

“Here.” <She gave Felix one of her daggers, from a scabbard on her thigh.>

“Nice leg, but I can’t use this.”

“Just force your fingers closed on it ... and bluff. I know it hurts, but don’t make a sound. Stand up straight ... don’t look vulnerable.”

Ki grabbed two of her other daggers. When she thought the distance was right, she whirled around, took a solid stance ... and watched the three figures flee down an alley. Another figure was running up to them.

Ki: “Ram! Thank goodness.” <she hugged him> “It was about to get dicey!”

Ram: “From what?”

Felix: “You didn’t see them?”

Ram: “See who?”

Ki: “It must be nice to have a scary reputation. What happened?”

Ram: “Some outsiders try to roll me.”

Felix: “Roll **YOU**?! What were they thinking?”

Ram: "Outsiders ... they pulled knives. It got messy. I felt bad leaving them to bleed out, so I had to find a cop."

Ki: "Another day in the life of Ramesses the Great."

Ram: "Shut up ... What were you going to do with that dagger, Felix? It looks like you can barely hold it."

Felix: "Ki said to bluff."

Ram: "You'd be a lot better off just whacking them with your harp."

Felix: "My **HARP?!!**"

Ki: "Give me back my dagger, please."

Ram: "Nice bit of leg there, little girl."

Ki: "Why thank you kind sir ... Wanna see more? ... *Big boy?*"

Felix: "Get a room."

The first stop was Felix' house. Ram busied himself heating up water in a pot for Felix to soak his hands. Ki got him some ground willow and wine ... and made him a sandwich. When they heard the rustle of armor outside the door, they knew his partner Magnus had returned from some military patrol or other.

Ki: "We were at a party and he played his fingers out."

Magnus: "Thanks for helping. I've got him now." <He walked up behind Felix, kissed him on the head, and started rubbing his neck and shoulders.>

Felix: "I did really well today. Check out my purse!"

Magnus: "Let's get you feeling better, first. Thanks again, Ki ... Ram."

Ki+Ram: "No problem."



"How's your dad, Ki?"

"Alright, I guess. He gets a little worse as time goes on. The Temple herbs seem to be helping him deal."

"You OK for money? I can help a little."

"We're doing OK for now. You're a good friend. When I need help, I'll ask ... OK?"

"OK. Don't be shy. I don't like any of my friends to struggle."

Ki: "Oh, daddy! You're still up? ... It's like ..."

Ram: "Around 3 ..."

Senenmut: "I had to get up to ... you know."

Ram: "I got something for you ... here."

Senenmut: "These two daggers are ordinary crap, but THIS one is *very* nice. The jewels are singing to me ... they're crying to be free. Get my tools, would you, Ki? No point making them suffer."

Ram: "I thought you'd enjoy them."

Senenmut: "Thanks, Ram."

Ram: "While your dad is busy, could you help me with something?"

Ki: "Of course."

Ram: “How serious is *this*?”

Ram dropped the top of his tunic, and revealed a strip of cloth tightly bound around his middle. The part on his back was blood stained.

“Get in a knife fight, be prepared to get cut.”

“The blood has dried, Ram. Let me sponge it off, everything’s stuck to everything.”

“Take your time. I don’t want to come home bloody. It upsets mom.”

“It’s not very deep Ram, but it’s long ... you need stitches.”

“Damn. There goes my night ... what’s left of it.”

“Temple is closed, isn’t it?”

“Not for me. We have an arrangement.”

“Of COURSE, you do! *WHAT* was I thinking? *Everyone* bows to Ramesses the Great.”

“Shut up.”



“Whaaaa? Who? ... What’s going on? It’s the middle of the night! Why are you waking me?”

“Priestess, you said to let you know the next time Ramesses showed up. He’s here. Waiting in the House of Life. I think he’s hurt.”

“Good girl! Off with you now. Don’t tell anyone else.”

“Yes, priestess.”

It wasn’t exactly the “middle” of the night. The Great Crocodile was gone from view. It was only another hour or two to sunrise. The roosters were lazily rousing, scratching the ground and promenading. For someone used to getting up long after breakfast, it was pretty much the same thing.

Meryet smelled herself, did a quick wash, arranged her hair, did her makeup, put on her most engaging perfume, and put on the sheath dress that fit her the tightest. She hiked up the skirt so she could run, and dashed to the clinic in the House of Life. She settled herself and her dress before walking in.

“Ramesses! So good to see you again, how can I help?”

The perfume hit Ram like a club. It was difficult to remember why he came.

“Uhhh ... Meryet? Ummm ... oh! My back! I might need some stitches.”

“Let’s see. Just take the whole thing off, the fabric is getting in the way.”

“OK.”

Meryet wasn’t just examining him, she was lightly stroking him around the wound. Her perfume was closer, stronger ... she was making little feminine “mmmm” noises. It was overwhelming.

“It’s not too bad. A little cleanup, a little sewing, ... good as new. Just don’t strain it for a while or you’ll rip out the stitches.”

Ram just laid on his stomach and relaxed, while Meryet did all the doctoring. He just sort of “floated” in her touch, in her scent, with her sounds. She started massaging parts of him that weren’t affected and weren’t even near the wound.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re so tensed up, Ram, I’m afraid your skin will pull itself apart. I just came back from classes in Sais. Let me try this technique on you. I’m not sure it’ll help, though. None of my patients had this much muscle. It’s hard to get my fingers in. It’s like working on a concreted rock wall.”

The floating sensation increased. Ram felt like she was disconnecting him from his arms and legs. He barely noticed when she rolled him over and continued on his front. He was barely conscious.

Meryet **HAD** him. She hiked up her dress to her hips and straddled him.

“**MERYET! WHAT** are you **DOING** to that poor man!!”

“I’m trying to relax him ... *completely* ... Isetnofret.”

“Get off ... GET OFF OF HIM! ... if you want to do that kind of therapy, you’re in the wrong department.”

“Goddammit ...” <Meryet imagined the tavern jackpot flying away on wings.> “... so close.”

“Ram? Ram? RAMSESES?! You there?”

“Mmmmmmmmmmm. What hap-pened? ... What’s going on? I’m all disconnected.”

“Meryet was a little too enthusiastic ... I’ll put you back together.”

If there is such a term, Isetnofret did “reverse massaging.”

“What just happened, Isetnofret?”

“It’s that damn tavern pool. Meryet must’ve have joined.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Has it occurred to you that all this nonsense would end if you just take a girl ... any girl ... to bed?

Just once? You can have your pick of all the single women in Thebes ... and some of the married ones too.”

“My soul just isn’t in it.”

“I don’t think it’s your soul they’re after.”

“What do I owe you for this?”

“Nothing, this time. It’s on the house.”

“NO! No,no,no ... I know that tone. Let me pay, PLEASE!”

“This comes from the High Priestess herself. We were going to do this anyway, you just saved us the trouble of finding you.”

“Oh, come ON! You’re taking advantage of me. I took *two* orphans last month!”

“... and we hear they’re doing very well. Just one this time. An adorable little girl.”

“I’m not that good with girls. Why can’t you keep her here? This place is FULL of girls.”

“She’s deaf and mute ... and terrified of her own shadow. We’ve tried to let her fit in, but she just can’t handle any kind of group. She can’t communicate. We can’t give her the attention she needs. She needs a small family to bring her outside of herself. She NEEDS you.”

“Every single time I come near this place you have an orphan who ‘needs’ me. You’re shameless with me.”

“Get on your game face ... here she is.”

A little six-year-old girl was escorted into the room. She had the dark skin of the desert people, and was wide eyed, terrified, and cringing. She clung to an almost shapeless doll.

“Hi ... oh, um” . **Hello** ... “My signing is pretty bad, Isetnofret.”

“That’s OK, I’m not sure she can sign either ... you’ll learn together. I knew I’d get you when you saw her.”

“You’re just plain evil. This is above and beyond the call. I want something.”

“What?”

“Free care and meds for Senenmut.”

“Ki’s dad? Done ... as if you’d refuse her if I said ‘no’.”

Ram knelt on the floor, tried to make himself small, and offered her his hand. She shrunk away.

“Isis Great Teat ...”



NoName didn’t have a name. If she had been given one at birth, no one had ever given her a clue what it might be. She obviously couldn’t have known her father had tried to kill her when he discovered what she lacked. It was her mother who saved her, and paid for it.

NoName was beaten many times for not doing things she had been commanded, but had no way of comprehending. Her mother was abused too: she figured it was just something that happened in life. At the end, she watched her father beat her own mother to death, and she had escaped before he had come looking for her. She was able to hide in the baggage of a caravan for a few days, before they found her ... but they weren’t a cruel people. They realized her problems and simply had no resources to take care of a non-productive member. They abandoned her outside of Thebes.

NoName observed beggars getting alms and she tried that, but she was unable to even beg for pity. Desperate, circling an aggressive street dog for a crust, she noticed people giving temple food offerings. She was small, and able to hide in the shadows, and when she thought everyone had left, she darted for the nearest edge of food.

This sort of thing was not unknown in the temples, and NoName was caught right away. Had this been one of the male deity temples, the priests would’ve probably just thrown her back in the street (too small for a beating). By luck, she had chosen an Isis temple, and they cleaned her up and put her in the slave quarters.

From NoName's perspective, every day presented a new obstacle that she didn't know how to deal with. Everything was new and strange: she'd make an attempt to deal with it ... then it would change. She couldn't fight with the larger girls for food, and was trying to survive from table scraps. The woman that brought her here, took her to another, bigger room. All the young girls were dressed in clean tunics, and appeared to be chatting and laughing. She was allowed to eat as much as she wanted ... AS MUCH AS SHE WANTED!

NoName stuffed herself to the point of pain every meal for the next three days, then thought that maybe this part WOULDN'T change. She didn't know what to do during the day. She followed girls around to different jobs, but she couldn't follow instructions and they eventually treated her like furniture: they'd take her places, but stick her off to the side or in corners.

Then the man appeared. NoName was afraid of men, and she was nervous because they had gotten her out of bed apparently just to meet him. The adult women in the building were nice to her, and the young girls certainly weren't mean ... they were just busy. She didn't like the thought of being with a man. She felt safer *here* than she ever had.

No man had ever bent down to her with a kind face. NoName didn't know what it meant, but she had felt what a man could do with an open hand. The women took her to the front of the temple and just watched the street. The early morning people were going to their various tasks with the first rosy rays of the sun. After a bit, they pointed to a man taking a puppy on a walk. The puppy had string tied around its neck and the man was jerking it around, trying to control the dog. They watched the pair until they walked out of view.

The man who had crouched to her, and had the open hand, tied off one end of a long leather thong around his neck, then gave her the loose end. What was she supposed to do with this? She tugged lightly, and the man responded as though something very heavy had knocked him off his feet ... his eyes were wide, practically popping out, his arms were flailing, he was tipping in various directions. She did it several times, each with a slightly different performance ... just about to fall, then regaining his balance only to tip in another direction. Once, he tipped backwards and flipped onto his hands, walking around upside down like he was very confused, then flipping back to his feet. It was quite entertaining for anyone watching.

The priestesses were elbowing each other: it was the first time they had seen the girl smile.

“This ALWAYS works.”

NoName got the idea that she couldn't stay in the building and had to go with the man, but he was BEGGING her to come. She had no idea what would happen if she refused, but it seemed like she was being given a choice for the first time she could ever recall. She eventually decided the man was worth a try ... she could always return to the street or maybe try another of the big buildings ... or come back here.

The man pointed, and the pair of them walked in that direction, with her tugging the leash from time to time, thinking it was very odd that he allowed himself to be controlled like a dog. Would a mean man do that?

They eventually came to a small house, went in, and the man retreated to a far corner. There was a woman there ... a cozy, soft woman ... still dressed in night clothes ... who reminded her of her mother more in attitude than body. The woman got a terribly sad expression on her face and started crying, then kissed NoName on her head ... a few times ... then started hugging her. They were very nice hugs.

It took a couple of weeks before NoName accepted the fact that she had a new family. She was quick to do the dishes and sweep the floor, but sometimes the people would sit her down, give her something sweet, then continue the job **she** had been doing. "Sweet" was an entirely new concept for her, and she liked it. It was the one thing they wouldn't give her in any quantity.

The woman began taking her outside, first little trips, then further and further. When they did this, the woman would tie their waists together. NoName did not like this until she noticed that ALL the mothers did that with their children. It wasn't the mothers tugging at their children : it was children constantly trying to get into things, knock over things, take things ... tugging their mothers. If someone got between them, the mothers would immediately respond with angry faces, and mouths and arms that moved quickly. In NoName's case it was hardly necessary, since she always had a firm grip on the woman's clothes.

On one trip, a vendor had small dresses, and one had a colorful dragonfly embroidered on the shoulder piece. NoName was entranced. The woman noticed her attention immediately.

Ram had been working on an antiquity replica. He put down his work for the day and he did his usual routine. He had been doing exactly the same thing for days ... counting on repetition. He gave NoName a hug and kissed the top of her head, pointed at himself and signed "Ram" by closing his hand but curling his thumb and pinky into ram's horns. Then he pointed to his mom and signed "mom" with an open hand and thumb to his chin.

For the first time, the girl pointed at Ram and gave his sign, and did the same with his mother and her sign. She pointed to herself, then to the dragonfly ... then made her left hand perpendicular to floor, and cupped her right hand on top of it. She was a little frustrated when they didn't get it. She opened and closed her cupped hand. Nothing ... Then she spread both arms and flapped them like wings.

"Dragonfly!!"



Chapter IV – *Gold Is Where You Find It*

The Pharaoh was in a good mood. Most of the previous day had been spent in a religious ceremony. He had forgotten which deity. He used a boilerplate speech which he had pretty much memorized over the years, and it had spots to insert the deities' names and unique traits. He had taken to writing these on his hand to avoid mistakes in delivery, but they were all smudged now. That looked like a "B": Bastet? Bes? Babi? Babi didn't make any sense ... he didn't remember any baboons. Bastet maybe? It felt like more of a Bes party afterwards, and it was a great one. He played his flute along with the band, the dancers were very nice, the wine was alright (but he preferred his own palace-made beer), and that new girl from the Black Sea tried very hard to separate herself from the pack and please him. All in all, it was very good to be Pharaoh.

Then he stepped into Cleopatra's office.

The first thing he saw was the top of his daughter's head, as she had her head down and was examining documents. The desk was STACKED with them. Documents always meant unpleasant questions, usually concerning money. The Pharaoh knew this wasn't going to turn out well, and he tried to beat a hasty retreat.

"Come right in, oh Divine Horus, Lord of the Two Lands ... take a seat. Let's talk."

She hadn't even lifted her head. The Pharaoh started to squirm.

There was a huge sigh from the Princess, then she lifted her head. When she was reading documents on the right, her hair had gotten in the way and she had made a random pony tail on that side. The same thing happened on the left. The oddly angled hair bunches were quite cute in a little girl way, but there was a very angry face in front of them.

"Tell me, oh great Pharaoh, have you *EVER* looked at financial records? **EVER?!!!**"

"Ummm ... I have good advisors?"

"Don't you **DARE** try to blame this on your advisors. They do what you tell them."

"Is there a problem of some sort?"

"**A problem?** Why, yes ... now that you mention it. There **is** a problem ... **YOU!!**"

"I'll go get Dios. He was in charge of the treasury."

"Don't bother. I have his records ... and **notes** right in front of me. He burst into joyful tears when I relieved him of that responsibility ... and stay right where you are. I'm nowhere near done."

"Yes, Patti."

"Don't 'Patti' me ... do you even **KNOW** the state of the treasury?"

"Err ... I was just there the other day. It appears to be empty. Not even a copper."

"Good, good ... glad to know you're keeping up ... and why do you suppose that is?"

"Romans took all the gold?"

"Your poor advisors. I'd give them all raises for putting up with you, **IF WE HAD ANY MONEY!**"

You've single-handedly bankrupted the empire!"

"... but didn't you get gold from Gabinius?"

“How do you think the army is getting paid? The administrators? The palace food suppliers? The police? The navy? The city water workers? The waste handlers? We can’t afford new construction ... maintenance to prevent ancient buildings from falling on people is killing us! I knew things were bad from those Roman bribes, but you’ve been letting our system of government collapse on itself.”

Cleopatra had come out from behind her desk and was stalking him ... like an animal.

“Umm ... ummm ... I’m sorry? Really, sorry?”

“AAAHHHHH!!!! You’re ‘**sorry**’?! I feel like hitting you with something ... like a temple column.”

“I’m your **FATHER!**!”

“Yes, you are ... and I love you dearly ... but by any chance do you know what last night’s party cost? I just totaled up the receipts.”

“Errrr ... isn’t that a religious expense?”

“What the Hell are you talking about? We can’t expense-out our bills from our taxes. We don’t PAY taxes, we COLLECT taxes ... I know you have no idea. I’m making a point. That one party cost 3500 silver we don’t have. You have independent resources to cover it?”

“Well, no ... I ...”

“No, you don’t. This can’t go on. From now on, all your expenses come through me for approval BEFORE you spend the funds. You’re on an allowance. I’ll give you 750 a month. If you want a big party, learn to save.”

“YOU’RE TREATING THE DIVINE PHARAOH OF EGYPT LIKE A CHILD!!”

“If it walks like a duck ...”

“**PATTI!!!**”

“... and no more foreign food imports.”

“Patti, please ...”

“... or foreign fabric ... or foreign women ... you can *think* global, just *buy* local.”

“You’re taking all the fun out of it.”

Cleopatra was patting her father’s head.

“It’s alright, daddy. It’s just until I can get us back on our feet. A little belt tightening now, then back to normal.”

“Don’t wanna.”



Dedyet was enjoying her lunch while dabbling her feet in the salt water pool. Morning classes were over and preparations for a holy day had left her afternoon free. It looked a lot like the fish had gotten plumper under Ashtaroth’s attention. The pink anemone had moved again, somehow, and Dedyet was looking for it so she could tease its defender crab.

“Dedyet? You have two clients in your office ... waiting for you.”

“What now? ... CLIENTS?! ... What are you talking about?”

“It’s a Fertility Arts thing. You have to talk to city people sometimes.”

“About what? Bedding?”

“I think it’s more like ... whatchamacallit ... *counseling*.”

“About *what*?”

“I dunno ... I think ... more like ... family stuff? ... marriage? ... keeping people together?”

“Isis Great Teat.”

“Don’t get mad at **ME!** I’ve never had anything to do with it.”

“My predecessor did this?”

“She said it was her favorite thing to retire from.”

Dedyet found a wife and husband in her office, already squabbling. They barely noticed her coming in. She drew herself up, put on a very serious face, slowly sat down with all the gravity of the High Priestess, and put what she thought would be a calming edge on her voice.

“What seems to be the problem here?”

Then it began.

It was only about fifteen minutes in, but it seemed much, much longer. Each person had been insistent that the other was describing their situation incorrectly. They were constantly interrupting and contradicting each other and the volume kept increasing as each tried to make it clear that only they were reporting the facts. Dedyet couldn’t hear words any more. She saw their mouths moving, and their angry faces ... and noise. So much ... so much noise. It was a tangible feeling: like a temple guard pushing her head against a wall.

“STAHHHPPP!!!!”

They slowed down a little.

“NO! Everyone shut up or GET OUT! ... Your choice.”

She may have been short, but she had a way getting their attention. They were temporarily silent, but both looked like volcanoes waiting to erupt in an instant. Dedyet had an inspiration and grabbed a box of scarabs she was using for Gabiniani feasts.

“Only ONE person can talk ... the one that holds this scarab. If the other interrupts, they’ll have to wait outside until their partner is done ... and they won’t hear what’s going on. Your partner could be telling bold faced lies about you and I’ll just be believing them. Better to shut up and listen to what they say so you can defend yourself. Got it? ... I said: **GOT IT?!!**”

They nodded, a bit sheepishly.

“C’mon. Rock, papyrus, scissors ... NOW! Get your hands up ... one, two, THREE!”

The husband won.

“He always ...”

“Shut **UP!!**”

Dedyet had noticed a variety of hourglasses on a shelf, and now she understood what they were for. She inverted the smallest one in full sight.

“GO!”

The husband got out two sentences before the wife interrupted.

“OUT!!”

Φ Φ Φ

Kalek was pleasantly surprised when Dakka joined him for lunch, outside the small house with their feet up on the low wall. Sagira acted like he was a long-lost friend. It had been weeks.

“I don’t wanna talk about it, Kalek.”

“That’s great! I don’t wanna hear about it. Have some pi.”

“Pi? You’ve given it a name?”

“It’s round, isn’t it?”

“For the love of ... fine. Are you stealing palace beer again?”

“Since I was over there ... it’s so much better than from the beer guy.”

“You know parasites are a very low form of life.”

“... and?”

“I’ve got something serious to talk about, Dakka.”

“Not now, please. Just let me enjoy this moment of nothing ... you can babble, but I won’t listen.”

“I don’t need much help right now, but I need you onboard.”

“You’re going to pester me and ruin my lunch until I listen?”

“Yep.”

“What is it you’re eventually going to ask from me?”

“Money.”

“You have *plenty* of money. We practically have no expenses.”

“**WE** need more. For our families. We may have to hock our jewels.”

“Can you assume I just agree with the buildup and skip to the punchline?”

“We need to prepare for bad times.”

“What kind of times?”

“Take your pick: Romans, Ptolemies, Egyptians ...”

“OK.”

“That’s it? I had a speech ... topic cards and everything.”

“I know everybody says you’re a bit ‘off’, but you always have good ideas for keeping us safe.

‘Families’ did it for me. I’m in.”

“Who says I’m a bit off?”

Φ Φ Φ

“High Priestess?”

“What is it, Banafrit?”

“Can you spare a few minutes ... in the War Room?”

“Of course.”

“I’ve noticed that agricultural areas are painted now ... rather drab colors for Egypt.”

“It’s the harvest, High Priestess. We’re in the last weeks of Shemu. Kalek made me this key.”

Banafrit gave her a wooden board with colors and descriptions.

“Oh, this is clever. Frog green is normal harvest, light green is 10% more, bright green above that ... and it gets sandier going the other way.”

“Look at the map, High Priestess.”

“Didn’t you finish painting?”

“It is complete. From all the harvest reports, High Priestess.”

“Good Lord! What’s all this sand? Shouldn’t it be green?”

“I believe it should be, I don’t know why it’s not. Could you ask her Highness to send scholars out to investigate? I was thinking plant and agricultural people from the Museo ... High Priestess.”

“The Hell with that! Give me your hand.”

The High Priestess took off her seal ring and slipped it on one of Banafrit’s fingers.

“Use this temple seal to get into the Museo and draft the scribes. I’ll get you a royal seal to set up the trip ... or get Dakka to do it, if it takes too long. We’ve only got a couple of months before all the evidence gets submerged with the next flood. My God, Banafrit! How did we get by without you?”

The High Priestess glanced around to see if anyone was looking, then broke character and gave Banafrit a quick hug. Banafrit did her blotchy blush.

Φ Φ Φ

“We’re pulling our hair out, Nebby. We just can’t get gold fast enough.”

“Is there a problem with your plans, Co-regent?”

“Co-regent’ ... still getting used to that. It’s not as sweet as ‘Princess’ and not awe-inspiring like ‘Majesty.’ It sounds more like an administrative position.”

“Isn’t that exactly what it is, Highness?”

“Yeah, well ... you know what we mean ... don’t you? ... Never mind. What were we discussing?”

“Gold, Highness.”

“Gold is coming in from Kush. I’ve still got some of Gabinius’ gold ... but the harvest was barely average, and the taxes have to last us the whole year. ... Oooh, are *we* going to hug Banafrit when we see her ... Maybe we can improve next year, but we’re stuck with this year’s yields. All the temple industries are doing well, but you can’t run an empire on that ... AND pay the interest on our father’s loans. We need more gold.”

The High Priestess had been through this kind of discourse many times. She stayed silent, waiting for the finish.

“There’s a lot of gold just sitting in the ground, Nebby. We’re simply going to take it.”

“What? Besides the Kush mines, Highness?”

“Mmmmmmm? We were thinking much, much closer.”

“No ... no,no,no ... are you **serious?** From the royal **tombs**, Highness?”

“They’re not using that stuff. WE need it.”

“But, but, but ... the Pharaohs! ... Highness.”

“We wouldn’t be the first dynasty to go ... ‘retrieving’. Even our grand-uncle melted down Alexander’s coffin, and Alexander was a RELATIVE ... We know the religious-y part is hard for you, Nebby. I just can’t think of anything else right now. We’re STARVING for cash.”

“As you wish, Highness.”

“Find me an expert, Nebby.”

“As you wish, Highness.”

Chapter V – *State of the World*

Orestes had spent the week writing letters to his parents and relatives, and saying goodbye to men he had fought with, side by side, for decades. He lived in a room in the nicest tavern, which only made sense because he was their best customer. He was a different man now, and none of the girls could interest him. The girls were sad, but management was happy to see him go since he didn't represent revenue anymore.

Orestes last stop was with Hannibal. They had been together from the very start of their careers. They had started families together ... and lost them together.

"We've had a good run, captain."

"'Good' hardly covers it, Orestes."

The two men embraced. Some ribs made popping sounds.

"You're like my right arm. I don't know what I'll do without you." <He touched Orestes' cameo>

"Those ears really catch her spirit. I don't blame you one bit."

"Every heartbeat I feel a tug. Homing pigeons must have something like it."

"Let's have a last glass of wine ... I'd really like your opinion on something."

Both men settled themselves in chairs. A wave came through the port, rocked the boat, and made the timbers creak. The waning sun cast a golden glow in the room. It all had a very nostalgic feel.

"Shoot."

"Her Highness has set up a line of communication with Kush royalty. Apparently, they're very pleased with the pirate episode and would like to have an arrangement for policing the Nile ... and being part of the temple network."

"That worked out well."

"There's more. We're setting up intelligence posts in Semna and Kerma, using those pirate ships and some fast boats ... but they'd like a representative of the Temple and Highness in Meroe. Someone with connections to the Kush palace, who is already familiar with the network, not temple staff, who can fit into Meroe life without causing the wrong kind of attention. Know anyone for the job?"

"What are you dragging me into?"

"The Kush Princess, who is next in line to be Kandake, has specifically requested **you**. Apparently, she's been present for some of your tales, she had you investigated, and knows your father-in-law is a palace minister. You don't have to agree, of course. Did you have some other job in mind once you settle in? Reading between the lines, I suspect that Princess will get you one way or the other. Might as well be with us."

"You bastard! I'm trying to get out and you're pulling me back in!"

"It's no more breaking men in two for you ... you'll be shuffling papyrus ... with your babies crawling around your feet. An occasional visit to the palace in nice clothes. The Princess was quite keen on hearing more stories as well. You did THAT to yourself."

"Goddammit ... you know I can't say 'no'."

“What were you planning on doing anyway? Fisherman? Cobbler?”
“I hadn’t really thought that far ... ‘getting there’ pretty much occupies me.”
“Good thing I already told them you agreed. They’re waiting for you.”
“You son-of-a-bitch. Did it ever occur to you to discuss this with me?”
“Why? This was so much fun. I’ve been waiting to spring it on you for days.”

Dakka and Kalek had heard that Orestes was about to leave any minute. They caught him on the dock, after he had left Hannibal’s residence/office.

Kalek: “It’s pointless to say ‘take care of our sister.’ What else could you possibly do?”
Orestes: “I’ll miss you guys ... and especially **YOU!** I owe you my life ...”
Dakka: “HEY!! I’m not Hannibal. Watch all that punching!!”
Orestes: “Sorry ... a little.”

Dakka took out a wax tablet.

Dakka: “Could you do me a little favor?”
Orestes: “Of course.”
Dakka: “Could you make a list of the best taverns?”
Orestes: “Food only, or with working girls?”
Dakka: “Working girls.”
Orestes: “Baal’s balls! Dedyet’s not enough for you?!!”

Kalek couldn’t hide his huge smirk.

Dakka: “Shut up, Kalek ... Remember how I helped you and the crew? Pox? I want to train **all** my Dakkas.”
Orestes: “What a great idea! Do you have any that I could take with me? I’m leaving in hours.”
Dakka: “I didn’t know it was **your** trip. I’ve got two guys already trained. We’ve been using sailors and some Temple working girls. Two or three guys trying to get a good view is awkward enough, but when eight or ten are shouldering each other, squeezing in, the patients tend to get pretty upset.”
Orestes: “I get more and more nervous whenever it seems the Fates are going my way. Gimme that thing. I’ll just put down the ones that know me.”

Orestes wrote down six right away. Thought a bit, and wrote down four more. Furrowed his brow, twisted his mouth ... and wrote down a few more. This went on for a while.

Kalek and Dakka were awestruck.

“What?! I’ve been in Alexandria almost five years!”

Kalek and Dakka bowed.

Φ Φ Φ

Dedyet, Dakka, and Kalek were headed to the first establishment on Orestes' list.

Dakka: "Dedyet, why do **you** have to come along. It's embarrassing:

'This is my wife, she doesn't trust me.'

You think I'm stupid enough to add *more* women to my life?"

Dedyet: "It's not *you* I'm worried about. A young handsome doctor has a magnetic pull."

Dakka: "Banafrit let Kalek come by himself."

Dedyet: "Why is he here, again?"

Dakka: "Business angles."

Dedyet: "HmMMM ... anyway, Kalek's hardly the same thing ... because ... you know."

Kalek: "I'm hardly a what because of what?"

Dakka+Dedyet: "Never mind."

Astraea: "Seems you three already have your own party? What do you need? A room?"

<She eyed Dedyet>

"I think I know you."

Dedyet: "Maybe from another life."

Both Dakka's and Kalek's heads swiveled in a curious way.

Astraea: "No dogs! I don't like dogs."

Grrrwuff

Kalek: "That's OK. The feeling is apparently mutual ... We have a business proposition for you. No one loses, everybody wins."

Astraea: "Get the Hell out! ... there's no such thing."

Kalek: "Hear us out. It costs you nothing. We propose giving you a couple of doctors for a month. No charge. After a month, we give you new ones. No charge. You don't have to feed or board them. They'd be like employees ... that you don't pay."

Astraea: "What's in it for me?"

Kalek: "... Two doctors."

Astraea: "Sorry. The 'no charge' threw me. What's in it for you?"

Kalek: "Have you heard of Dakkas?"

Astraea: "Who?"

Kalek: "Doesn't matter. We're training a special group of doctors. Regular doctors, not fancy ones.

They treat regular people. The kind of things that everybody gets. They need training in poxes."

Astraea: "What kind of training?"

Dakka: "Doctors need to know about poxes. They need to know how to recognize them. They need to know how to cure the ones they can, and at least help the ones they can't. They'll be learning women's problems as well."

Astraea: "What do you get out of it ... again?"

Dakka: "They need to **learn**. One doctor will be teaching the other."

Astraea: "I already have a guy."

Dakka: "... and is he an Alexandrian trained physician?"

Kalek: "Is he FREE?"

Kalek: “Think about the business angles, Astraea. You’ll have regular girls, and you’ll have ‘healthy’ girls. Seems like you could charge extra for that. The doctors would scan your customers too: if they wanted to play with the healthy girls, they need to be healthy. Doctors still do it for free for you, but you can demand the inspection, and charge for it ... as well as up pricing the girls.”

The light that suddenly went on over Astraea’s head was blinding.

Astraea: “When can you start?”

Dakka: “We have to have an agreement.”

Astraea: “Here it comes.”

Dakka: “These doctors are all young men. You have to agree that the girls won’t get frisky with them. I’d even prefer if you treated them with a little disgust ... treat them like night soil collectors, but that’s up to you. This isn’t a naughty vacation: it’s WORK. I don’t care what they do in their own time. If they take a girl to bed on MY time, they’re out.”

Astraea: “That’s it? No freebies for the docs?”

Dakka: “Yep. It’s your place. You make the rules. They’re my men, but think of them as working for you.”

Astraea: “Mmmmmm ... You’re the doctor, you’re the jealous wife, what are *YOU*?”

Kalek: “Business advisor.”

Astraea: “What do *you* get out of it?”

Kalek: “Hours of amusement from those two.”

Astraea: “Let me show you around.”

As they toured the place and talked about the logistics, the word had spread that there was a young physician in the house. It wasn’t working hours, and all the girls who had previously been bored and a little annoyed at the intrusion, suddenly became very sweet and overly friendly.

It was only the daggers from Dedyet’s eyes that kept them at a distance.



The Pharaoh was pouting and feeling sorry for himself. His own daughter had clipped his wings, and he found out very quickly that people he considered “friends” only hung around when money was being spent. Even his consorts had grown cold because he wasn’t giving them things. Cleopatra was just being mean.

His entourage had trimmed down to nothing more than palace guards. The Pharaoh wasn’t used to having an absence of fun/interesting things going on, and he was aimlessly walking down the line of old palaces: looking at the sea, looking at the palaces, sometimes not looking at anything at all.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Kalek in the small house. Kalek was wearing only a loin cloth and painting something on an easel. There was a large map drying on another easel close to him.

“Kalek, old boy! What’s up?”

“M-m-m-m-ajesty.”

“Calm down, calm down. Ooooh, that’s nice. You’ve caught quite an angelic face on that girl ... is that the priestess that did the solar thing the other day?”

“Yeah ... I thought she had interesting lips, Majesty.”

“You bet she does ... you should do the rest of her. We found THAT quite interesting as well.”

“Sorry, Majesty. I liked her lips, and when she spoke her mouth was a little crooked. I really liked the image ... Majesty.”

“Well, you missed something there, boy. Do you have any beer?”

“You know you can’t drink my beer, Majesty.”

“Isn’t it *mine* in the first place? Your pilfering isn’t unnoticed.”

“...but I’ve had my paws on it, Majesty.”

“Oh, all right.”

GRMMMBL

“Speaking of paws, hi, Sagira!”

<pant pant pant>

The Pharaoh raised his index finger in the air, and described a small circle. One of the guards came in carrying an amphora full of the Pharaoh’s hobby beer.

“Have some, Kalek. This is our *special* brew.”

“Majesty, *your* beer?”

“What’s the difference, you steal it anyway ... or you would if you knew where we kept it.”

Kalek actually DID know where it was kept.

“Did you strain out the chunks, Majesty?”

“They get in the way of the alcohol.”

Kalek looked at the thin, almost transparent liquid with feigned appreciation. To make the Pharaoh happy, he took a big swig. That was a mistake.

“WooooohhhHHHHHHH!!!! ... Is the top of my head still there? It feels like it just popped off ... Majesty.”

“First drink always hits you like a hammer. We like a little ‘life’ in our beer. Have some more ... it smoothes out after a few.”

Cleopatra came in through the wall door. She was hoping to surprise everyone with a cake, fresh from the palace bakery. She snatched it before anyone in the palace had cut out a chunk, and brought it here to save it.

She was greeted by something she just couldn’t have expected: the Pharaoh, well lubricated, was alternately dancing and playing his flute, in his loincloth ... Kalek was in an uncomfortable position on his side, on the floor, with his top arm and leg twitching from time to time. Sagira was licking his face non-stop, trying to rouse him.

“What happened to Kalek, daddy?”

“Funny thing. He was sitting on the floor ... then he just fell off of it.”

“He fell ... OFF THE FLOOR?!”

“Yep”

“For the love of Ptah! Ruining the empire wasn’t sufficient. You had to ruin my scribe?!”

“Oh! Cake!!”



With the before-and-after Dakka activities, the Princess had been absent from the Briefing Room for almost two months.

“What did I miss? Quick summary, High Priestess?”

“Curio’s father died. Ambiorix joined with the Nervii and they’ve encircled Quintus Cicero’s camp with vastly superior forces ... mmm ... here ... 60,000 men. We’re not sure if Caesar knows about it yet. We know what’s going on, but Caesar’s on the move ... pigeons won’t work. We don’t have anyone who can reach him in time. Roman politics is in shambles: there are two political factions headed by Publius Clodius Pulcher and Titus Annius Milo. They’ve formed groups they call *collegia*, that are nothing more than thuggish street gangs. If anyone voices a political opinion, they get attacked by the other side ... other than that, not much. Highness.”

“*Clodius*? That bastard made Uncle Ptoley kill himself. We hope he gets a little *too* involved with all that violence. How much is a decent assassin these days? ... Any *good* news?”

“A big bunch of Greek tourists came to see Alexander in his tomb. They were surprised by the hefty new fees, but as you suspected, they had come too far to back out, Highness.”

“Every little bit counts. What’s this stack of *Marcus* Cicero stuff?”

“His scribe has a girlfriend ... an Egyptian girlfriend ... from Rome’s Temple of Isis, Highness.”

“How did *that* happen?”

“The High Priestess says the girl saw an opportunity and used her own initiative, Highness.”

“Good for her. We need to encourage that sort of thing. We’re going to pick her out some nice jewelry ... maybe emeralds ... small ones ... Is there anything valuable in it?”

“You know Cicero, Highness.”

“So many words, **so** many words ... is there a summary, we pray?”

“The bottom line is that he oozes himself into the favor of as many politicians as he can. He pretends to favor one side, then favors the other if it gets him something. He comes out with a book on philosophy or ‘The Great Republic’ every now and then, but most of the time he just writes letters, laying on disingenuous compliments a mile thick, and finishes with asking a favor or a liaison or something.”

“Why are we not surprised?”

“I don’t know how Caesar puts up with it, Highness. There’s a constant barrage of oily sucking up with no worthwhile content, finishing with some kind of a request for a favor. I guess Caesar values his political contacts. We know he constantly pesters his brother, Quintus the legate, to ingratiate himself more with Caesar. He’s got a lawyer friend, Gaius Trebatius Testa, that’s in Gaul with Caesar. Those letters are kind of funny: he alternately insults, praises him, says ‘you made a good decision’, then the next letter says ‘you should have never gone.’ It takes a lot of effort to squeeze out useful information reading between the lines ... So far, he’s just verified Roman political unstableness, but we are pinning up a chart ... over there ... with the connections he gives us between all the political people, Highness.”

“The strings connecting people is a good idea ... Banafrit?”

“Of course, Highness.”

“That girl really knows how to organize ... we still owe her some hugging for the agricultural data ...

Having an ear inside the Senate could prove to be a good tool, but reading Cicero is agonizing.

Don't assign one person to summarize. Rotate it amongst the staff.”

“As you wish, Highness.”

“Hello, Shaqilat ... miss us?”

“OF COURSE, HIGHNESS!”

“What have you got on Caesar?”

“Actually, not much, Highness. When Caesar arrived to rescue what was left of Cotta's and Sabinus' troops, Ambiorix ran away as quickly as he could. Caesar went back to his Winter camp and is trying to locate him with scouts. Ambiorix was begging to get German mercenaries, but when they heard it was against Caesar, they had nothing to do with him. Ambiorix did the next best thing and lied: he told the Nervii that not only did he have German mercenaries on his side of the Rhine, but they were pursuing Caesar who was on the run. The Nervii joined him and encircled Quintus Cicero's camp. The Romans are fighting for their lives as we speak. With nothing more than sword blades and cloaks, the Nervii built a ten-mile round circumvallation ... in **three hours**. It's desperate for the Romans. They're trying to send messengers, but the Nervii cut them down. They've been fighting for two months. EVERYONE is surprised that Quintus is managing. Caesar is deep in Gaul. We just don't have any way to get to him in time ... Highness.”

“... thank you, Shaqilat. Excellent work. We do NOT like being powerless, but they'll have to settle it on their own. Maybe we're looking at this the wrong way. See if you can find a path to alliance with the Gauls ... but they're not really centralized, are they? Look into it.”

“As you wish, Highness.”

“Anything cheery to say, Ariadne?”

“Curio's son finished the amphitheater for his father's funeral games, Highness. The people sit in what looks to be a stadium, two sides of an oval. Then it splits apart and the two sides rotate so they're back to back. Each side gets a stage play. Then they rotate back together for gladiatorial combat. The people don't move, they just stay in their seats the whole time. I have diagrams, Highness.”

“WHAT?!” <The Princess pulled her head back in surprise> “That sounds really wasteful and stupid. What possessed him to do that?”

“Everyone told him not to, Highness. Some of those Marcus Cicero notes say ‘don't build it’, ‘your father wouldn't like the waste of money’, ‘no one likes gladiators anymore’, ‘you've been in Asia too long, people don't remember you’ ... he did it anyway. It's not clear if there **is** a family fortune anymore. He's deep in debt, Highness.”

“Serves him right. All that money wasted on a contraption doomed to break down. What's the general opinion?”

“It's described as ‘rickety’, Highness ... but the Romans ride it like children on a rocking horse.”

“Why are we not surprised? ... If they've got all that money in Rome, maybe we should invest or something. How did the father get his money?”

“Proconsul of Macedonia, Highness.”

“Nothing to grab onto there. Isn't Crassus into real estate?”

“Absolutely, Highness. He buys up crumbling tenements and burned buildings, slaps on paint and rents them out, Highness. He’s not doing well in Parthia. There’s not an oracle or sibyl in the world that predicts anything but defeat, Highness.”

“See if there’s some way to get a piece of that before he dies and the Romans start carving it up.”

“As you wish, Highness.”

“Oh! What about Pompey?”

“He mourns in Rome and continues to govern his province at a distance. Nothing new, Highness.”

“Very good, have a nice day Ariadne.”

“As you wish, Highness.”

“There’s no point getting upset about things we can’t change, Nebby. We can’t ‘wish’ them to be different.”

“*The Nile Rises, The Nile Falls, The World Turns*’ ... Equinox in a few weeks, then the Khamaseen, Highness.”

“Just what we need. Fifty days of winds that knock over statues and small buildings, blasting everything with Sahara dust and sand. Isn’t that just swell?”

“We’re preparing the Temple for the poor, as usual, Highness ... a well as the bigger cisterns.”

“We suppose *every* country has something unpleasant. You can get indoors for the wind ... someplace nice and solid ... but that damn sand gets EVERYWHERE: in your eyes, between your teeth, in your hair, ... even in your ... never mind. There’s grit everywhere, scouring everything ... everything needs to be repolished ... which takes more money.

...

OUR SHEBA MIRROR!!

Φ Φ Φ

Caesar was looking at his war table and it wasn’t a pretty sight. Quintus Cicero’s camp was laid out, but they had surrounded it with pebbles. Each pebble stood for a hundred Nervii. There were 600 of them, mostly around the camp but spread out in the terrain as well. As the reports came in, they were moving to the opposite side of a valley from Caesar’s encampment, where he had come to rescue Quintus. Caesar had 70 wooden cubes on his side.

How the Hell did Quintus survive this long?

“Get me Antonius.”

“*Marcus* Antonius, Proconsul?”

“We have another one?”

“Isn’t there an Antonius who’s a quartermaster, Proconsul?”

“What? ***Atticus?***”

“Ummmm ... an Antonius who handles livestock, Proconsul?”

“***Aridius?!! WHY*** would I want to talk to any of those people ... ***RIGHT NOW?!!***”

“Ummmmm ...”

“Who the Hell are you again?”

“Cook, Proconsul.”

Goddammit.

“Why are you wearing an infantry uniform ... and armor?”

“It looked like it might get a little ... dicey? ... Proconsul?”

Jupiter’s Balls! There’s just no end to it.