

CLEOPATRA 54 BC

*When Your Father Leaves You The Family
Business*

~or~

Who Let the Scribes Out?

Marian Marion Kebab

Foreword

In 54 BC, Egypt is bankrupt and deep in debt due to a long line of inept Ptolemies. At 15, Cleopatra has been plopped on the throne to support her dad's early retirement, and there's a learning curve ... for manipulating people. Humorous historical fiction with embezzling Romans, rude politicians, an ex-witchdoctor, priestesses, working girls, and a small dog ... what's not to like? No posh British elitist aristocrats, just ordinary people that don't speak like Shakespeare.

Anxious to refill the treasury and payoff the debts, Cleopatra maneuvers foreign ministers to gain access to the gold mines of Kush. She sends a mapmaker and an herbalist, on a secret mission of 1000's of miles, up and down the Nile. Meanwhile, she plots the legal demise of a Roman tax collector to buy time, tries to whittle away loyalties of 2,500 Romans, deals with domestic and international politics, plays both sides of a diplomatic game for patronage, befuddles Caesar in Gaul, and stumbles with her own personal issues. It's 6 years before Caesar sets foot in Egypt: it's not that kind of story.

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 editors, without whom this narrative would have been far less interesting.

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To Louie

You weren't much help, but you were always there.

The family tree isn't part of the story, but Dios insisted

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Chapter I - *Kalek*

“What the HELL is **THIS!!**”

The director, always in a bad mood, was absolutely livid ... having found a n actual reason to rail against something. Kalek had been waiting more than two weeks for this.

“Looks like a scroll, sir.”

“I **KNOW** it’s a goddamn scroll, idiot! What’s it doing **HERE!!**”

“Looks like it’s filed under Greek cities starting with ‘Ψ’ ... sir.”

“Is your head filled with crap or just completely empty?! I CAN **SEE THAT!!**”

“Then why did you ask, sir?”

The director’s face was bright red, with a little purplish tinge. Kalek was enjoying torturing him, watching his fury ratchet up.

“It’s not a Greek city starting with ‘Ψ’ ... sir?”

“NO! It’s goddamn **NOT!!** LOOK AT **THIS!!!**”

The director unrolled about a foot of the scroll. It had beautiful paintings of animals, and looked like it was at least fifty years old. It was clearly a natural history scroll of some sort, and didn’t belong in the map section of The Great Library. It seemed like a minor thing ... a scroll filed in the wrong place ... but the director was extremely unreasonable about this sort of thing, and took it as a personal insult. Kalek had created the scroll, aged it, and misfiled it specifically to set him off.

“It’s very nice, sir.”

Kalek just kept verbally poking him to see how far he could go ... perhaps he had gone too far. The director was advancing on him.

“Maybe it got misfiled, sir?”

The misfiling was bad enough, but Kalek’s moronic responses were driving the director wild. The director had grabbed Kalek by his shoulders and was holding him up off the ground. Kalek was fighting hard not to crack a smile and was holding the blankest, most innocent expression he could muster.

“I don’t file, sir. I’m not allowed to file, sir. The **FILER** files, sir. I put all my scrolls in the **FILER**’s basket, sir. I don’t do natural history, sir. I just copy maps, sir.”

The director roughly dropped him, and stomped off looking for his next victim, gaining speed as he left. Had he unrolled another six inches, he would have seen some of the fantasy animals and monsters Kalek had painted. Kalek was sad he would miss this reveal, but not every plan works out like you expect. In retrospect, he was still a little unhappy with the design that had wings, scales, *and* tentacles ... it seemed a bit ‘heavy’ ... but he had been anxious to finish the scroll and put it in a place where it was likely to be found.

Φ Φ Φ

Kalek got back to work, finishing a copy of a new map that had been confiscated at the seaport. He was almost done. All the terrain details had been duplicated, and he was just finishing off his favorite part: representations of animals, real and imagined.

The original image was a giant octopus gripping what looked like a crude Phoenician ship. Kalek improved his version by adding a little space between the hull and the water so it looked like the entire structure was being lifted. Then he added a tentacle, raising a poor screaming sailor high in the air.

Kalek hid his signature and mark in details of a coastline, using the slightest hint of blue, and the tiniest bit of his own gold leaf, with a pin. You could just catch a glint of it, if you tilted the papyrus at the right angle.

He gently fanned the scroll until the ink was dry, rolled the copy and the original up, and added the appropriate tags. He grabbed these and the other scrolls he had been working on, and walked to the department desk.

The maps came from ships and caravans, seized at the ports and city limits. If The Great Library already had a copy of the maps, they were returned ... unless they were originals. Kalek walked over to the courier's desk and placed all the copies in the bin, again making sure all the ownership tags were secure.

If an *original* document of any kind was found, a scribe like Kalek would make a copy. Kalek did maps, others did philosophy, medicine, drama, poetry, etc. Once an original entered The Great Library, it never left ... a **copy** would be returned to the original owner. Kalek liked to think that he enhanced the artistic detail, and his copies improved on the originals.

He transferred the ownership tag to his copy and dropped it in the courier's bin. Then he went over to the Filer's desk (currently empty) and filled out a new tag:

"Coastline of Numidia, by Abdul Abd Al-Karim, from Roman trader Marcus Galixus Severenus, second-year second-reign Ptolemy Neos Dionysos Theos Philopator Theos Philadelphos."

As he did every single time he carefully scrawled out the formal name, he wondered if they just couldn't just use some kind of number scheme. At least he didn't have to add "Son of the Sun", "Lord of the Wheat", "Possessor of the Great Sand" ... or any of that claptrap. He intentionally misspelled one letter of the name that wouldn't be immediately noticed, just to make a statement.

Kalek said a little prayer of thanks to Nabu, patron god of scribes, as he left the map section. It was prestigious to work in The Great Library where only scholars had access. It was an easy job, he didn't get sunburned or sweaty, and he enjoyed it (especially his modifications). He received frequent annoying rants from his boss, but he also enjoyed finding unique methods of revenge.

He decided to swing by the Museo to see if he could snag some food. In nice weather, they sometimes put snacks outside. Most of the scholars were gone, and there was no one to yell at him, so he ran up to the table ... and looked with great disappointment at remnants that looked as though they had been spoiling in the sun for a few days.

Kalek couldn't go straight home tonight. He had seen something in the new map and had to make a stop at the Temple of Isis. He walked on the edge of the palace complex to the spit of land stretching out towards the Pharos lighthouse, and came to the Temple. He avoided the main entrance to the

Temple and walked almost all the way around it to the back entrance. The door was hidden, tucked behind a large pharaonic style statue in armor ... that talked.

“New work, Kalek?”

“Yeah, new map came in today, Mahu.”

“Hold on a minute ... ceremony’s prancing through.”

Kalek had given up trying to hold a conversation with Mahu. The weather and the state of Temple activity was just about the limit of the enormous guard’s social skills.

“Nice day?”

“For some.”

There was a new fellow about his age he hadn’t seen before, another scribe probably.

“Hi. I’m Kalek ... Great Map.”

“I’m Dakka ... herbs and medicine ... from Nubia.”

“I’m from here, but my mother was from Nubia. You new?”

“Yeah, just a couple of weeks now. I’ve seen you zip in for ten or twenty minutes, then duck out. That Banafrit seems to like you.”

“You think so?!” <His reply was awkwardly quick and enthusiastic.>

“Yeah. Say what’s the story on the acolytes?”

“Good Nabu, no one told you?”

“Told me what?”

“The priestesses are one thing: they have responsibilities, they have privileges, they bed who they like. The acolytes are something else entirely. They’re from around the empire, some from distant temples and oracles in the rest of the world. They’re just silly teenage girls when they come here: some rich, some poor ... all giggly and empty-headed. They have no privileges and no responsibilities other than slave or servant work. They are protected by the Temple. Their lives are so petty and aimless, it’s easy for them to get into trouble, so they never leave the Temple and it is absolutely forbidden to touch them.”

“Like taking them to bed?”

“Exactly like that. I guess the idea is they could easily get pregnant and have to leave, before they winnow out the clever ones to promote to priestesses. At the start, they just have sort of a hive mind. Avoid them any way you can. It’s easy to identify them: no one ever uses their names. If you get the urge, try and find a second level that will talk to you.”

“Thanks. What’s Banafrit?”

“I dunno. Something above first level.”

“Did you go after her?”

“NO! No, no, no ... it’s not like that.”

As the sounds of the ceremony faded away, Kalek and Dakka walked in. No matter how many times he came here, Kalek always felt ill at ease. The ceiling was so high, he couldn’t see it in the dim light, and he felt like an insect next to the enormous columns. It seemed like an eternity to walk anywhere. He especially dreaded the vast empty distances between the columns. He swore that sometimes dark figures or shadows glided around just out of sight.

When they were almost to the Reference Room, a group of acolytes came giggling by. Kalek tried to sink into the shadow of a column, but it was too late. With glee, they started teasing both young men

... dropping their robes, provocatively dancing and posing, insulting their manhood, closing in on them ... the usual.

They formed almost a solid wall, and there was nothing for it but to push through them, trying to make a gap between their bodies. The touching part wasn't "bad", but knowing their restrictions, it was more of an annoyance. They couldn't possibly be punished for pushing and grabbing ... things ... just to get loose, could they? The girls clearly enjoyed the wrestling, but it was a bit like fumbling with a girl when you knew her father was watching. It was just another way of teasing males ... tempting with something that was completely unavailable. Kalek and Dakka were just relieved when they finally got through.

Entering the Reference Room, Dakka went to a desk and Kalek approached the Great Map. It was a lot like a mini-Great Library: organized shelves of scrolls, a couple of scribes writing, the High Priestess going over a scroll with another scribe ... but the major feature of the room was a huge expanse of temple wall painted with a map of the entire world. Kalek was proud of it. He had updated at least a third of it as a side-job from his work at The Great Library. It not only contained geographical features, but notes were pinned at various points that changed frequently. Those were the responsibility of other scribes that worked in other areas in The Great Library ... as well as various other informants that worked for the temple network directly.

He went to his cabinet and started mixing paints. He needed the scaffold to reach Numidia, so he dragged it over and started adding detail to the mouth of a river that joined the Mediterranean not far from where he had enhanced the octopus. The High Priestess did **not** appreciate "sea art" and had made that quite clear the first time he added some, so he confined himself to the new details he remembered.

Kalek had a very good memory ... in fact it was photographic. This was very handy in his particular line of work. He could probably repaint 60% of the wall from memory.

Banafrit came by with a clay cup of water. The water was seeping through the clay a bit and the cup was very cool to the touch. Kalek put it against his forehead and neck, then drank. He liked Banafrit ... a lot. She didn't seem to tease him, seemed a little shy but often exchanged a few words. He sometimes got a little uncomfortable with the way her body moved under her thin linens, and she seemed quite pleased whenever she noticed his reaction.

"How was The Great Library?"

"The usual. I tried to snag some food at the Museo, but it looked spoiled."

"You're lucky. We've been hearing a lot about that meal. There's a crowd of old, sage philosophers puking on the dock."

"I'd pay to see that."

"I'll get you some leftovers."

"Thanks ... Banafrit." <He just couldn't think of the right thing to say to make her stay.>

As Banafrit passed him, she "accidentally" brushed him with her hip and added a very slight movement that made him catch his breath. She walked away with an evil little grin as she heard him nervously swallow.

He finished his work, cleaned up, and waited for Banafrit to come back. Instead, yet another man mountain trundled in. Kalek didn't know this one.

“Hi? I’m Kalek.”

“I know who you are.”

The guard shoved a plate of food at him, and without a pause tromped grumpily away. Kalek couldn’t help being a little disappointed. He found a corner out of the way, sat on the floor, and enjoyed his meal. It was the first time he had really relaxed all day.

“Duck?! Wild duck?!! Maybe my day is turning!”

Kalek’s last chore was to check-in with the High Priestess and get paid. There was a place for dirty plates, so he used it, then just started strolling around the big map while he waited. He loved it ... not only his own work, but what it represented: a collection of hundreds of years of knowledge ... maybe thousands.

“Kalek!”

“Yes, High Priestess.”

“What’s new?”

Climbing the scaffold: “The mouth of this river had really good detail in a new Abd Al-Karim map, consistent with the coastlines and land details we already had ... High Priestess.”

“Good job.” – and he got some silver.

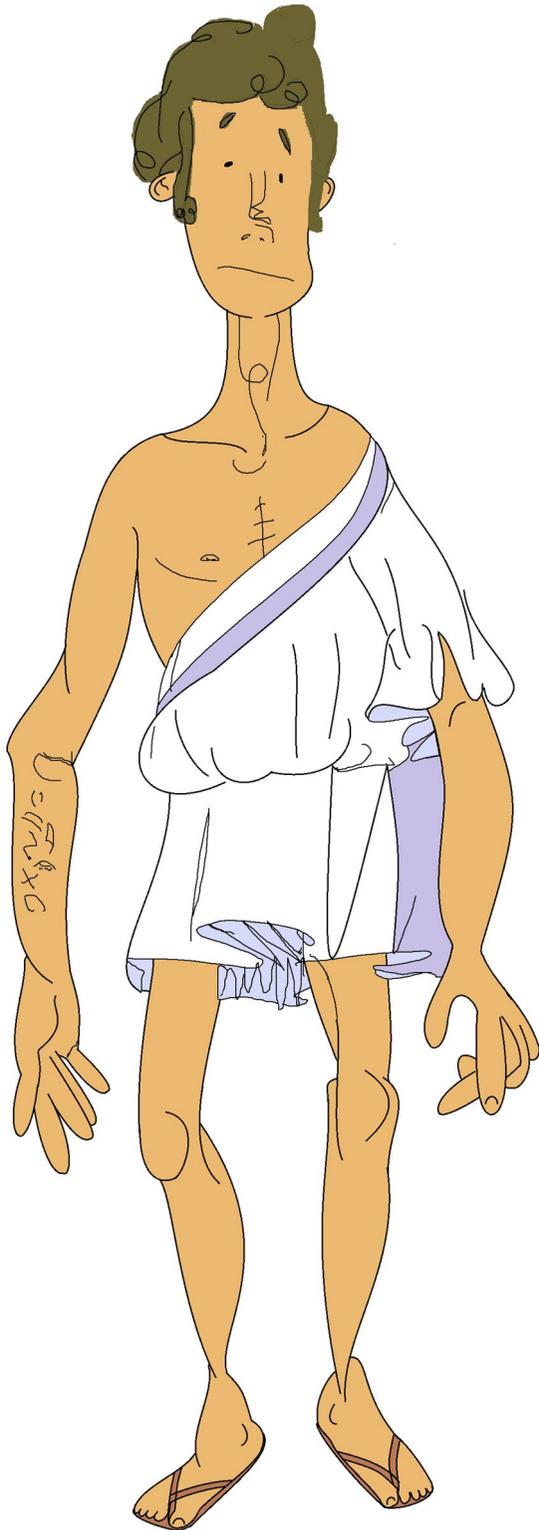
That was it. The High Priestess never insulted him, but it was hard to like her. She was taller than Kalek, and somehow her imposing attitude made her even taller. He was convinced she used makeup to appear kind of unearthly, and the wrinkles and sharp angles only contributed to the effect. It certainly worked on him. “Like” wasn’t the word ... “fear” was closer to it.

“Thank you, High Priestess.”

As Kalek left, the High Priestess looked at the darkening twilight through the window and called to the guard outside the door.

“Raia! Relieve Mahu and tell him to watch Kalek. Dedyet! Find a replacement for Raia. You! No ... the other one. Clean up those dishes.”

Details were endless ... and no matter how important you were, there were always dirty dishes.



Chapter II - *High Priestess*

The High Priestess was walking slowly, thoughtfully, through the cavernous parts of the temple complex. She liked staying in the shadows so that she could suddenly appear and terrify any hapless worshippers, or even her own staff. It was one of her true pleasures: scaring people just for the fun of it. Today, she was working on her “glide”: she hadn’t got it quite yet, but a Macedonian priestess had shown it to her and it was a way of moving, and using her cloak, to make it look like she was floating over the floor.

She wound up in front of the frieze of High Priestess memorials. Most of them had died from “Summer vapors” ... in other words, “poison.” Her immediate predecessor had died from a hippo attack. **THAT** had taken a lot of planning.

The High Priestess made her way to the Record Room, and it was bustling. She sat regally in her chair on the raised platform ... then nodded her head.

“The Cumaean sibyl reports bad omens for Pompey’s wife. Their midwife was not happy with the progress of the pregnancy at 4 months.”

“Tiburtine sibyl concurs.”

“Recorded.”

“Cumaean sibyl reports Crassus to invade Parthia early next year.”

“Oracle at Ephesus concurs.”

“Who’s Crassus?”

<A scribe stood up.>

“Didn’t he **just** invade Parthia?”

“Yes, High Priestess. He invaded, sacked a few cities, then returned to Syria.”

“Interpretation?”

“Romans are very odd about military resumes, High Priestess. While a general is in the field, stacking up victories, all the citizens sing his praises, and throw him a triumph when he gets back, then they descend into fear and suspicion that he has too much power. Still, money alone won’t buy them the highest offices, they need a military history. Crassus has that Spartacus episode, but he didn’t get much credit for walloping slaves. He’s proconsul of Syria, Parthia is close, I’m guessing he wants military victories so he can use them to gain high office in Rome, High Priestess.”

“That’s a very good analysis. Thank you.”

“Continue”

“Persian sibyl concurs about Crassus and adds that Parthians are under-reporting troop strength. Predicting Crassus defeat. Numbers available.”

“Oracle at Delphi concurs with schedule and troop strength. Numbers available.”

“Recorded. Numbers to be compared and recorded.”

Papyri were handed to a recording scribe.

The reporting and verification of information from network staff took almost two hours ... about average.

Now it was the High Priestess’ turn to speak.

“Inform all sources of last week’s storm, the lost ships, the wheat harvest, and the Kush southern border bandit problems. Also, list all the merchants currently in port, and those that left in the last month ... and all their cargoes, as usual. Those Druids were paid for that map, yes? ... it was very good ... send them some kind of fancy Syrian dagger ... That will make the Romans wonder ... Shaqilat? What about Caesar?”

“No change, High Priestess. Caesar continues to prepare his invasion of Britain on schedule.”

“What of the Princess’ gifts?”

“They arrived at the neck three days ago. Caesar should receive them in two weeks ... High Priestess.”

“Pigeons?”

“That’s me, High Priestess.”

“Make sure Tingi and Carthage have plenty of our pigeons.”

“Standard exchange ship left last week, High Priestess.”

“Excellent. Anything I should know?”

“Delphi is unusually quiet ... no messages in almost two weeks, High Priestess.”

“Banafrit. Work on that.”

“As you wish, High Priestess.”

“Who’s doing Antipater?”

“Here, High Priestess.”

“Any change?”

“He sits happily on the throne for his Roman masters. No sign of expansion, High Priestess.”

Information was reviewed, verified, combined, and filed. Messages were sent to network members. Agents were dispersed to collect information deemed necessary but not available. At the end, the High Priestess left to go soak her feet.

The true value of the temple, the reason the cult had survived for thousands of years, was its part in a global intelligence network, chiefly organized through multi-religious oracles throughout the world. The cults, the cultures, the ethnicities ... none of it mattered. Information was the valued currency. If merchants, generals, or emperors needed to know the state of the world, they came to the oracles ... and the High Priestess was the top intelligence officer of the African continent.



“High Priestess.”

“Banafrit?”

“We need the Gold Oracle, High Priestess.”

“Who’s the supplicant?”

“The merchant Galixus Marcus Severenus, High Priestess.”

“I know him. He has gold?”

“Roman gold coins, High Priestess. I made him show them.”

“Very good. Bring him to the Room of Destiny.”

“As you wish, High Priestess.”

The Room of Destiny was a light trap, deep in the temple. It had a thick stone table, with one big high-backed chair facing the door, and some smaller stools on the opposite side. It also had a small brazier just below the table in a cut, just in front of the big chair. The effect was to starkly illuminate the High Priestess' features from below when she sat down. She was very big on presentation.

When they had first used the room, the brazier turned it into an oven. Holes had to be cut into the walls for ventilation, and people were required to manually fan the external openings. Air was forced into a lower opening and returned in an opening above it. The High Priestess wore a silk cowl that slightly fluttered up in the breeze, along with her hair. Anyone on the stools did not benefit much from this air flow. Discomfort was part of the plan.

"Severenus, my loyal patron. So good to see you again."

"Er ... yes, yes, High Priestess ... uh ... good to see you ... too ... High Priestess."

He was uncomfortable and looked like he was sitting on rotten fish.

"What do you ask of the Holy Oracle?"

"High Priestess, may I?"

"Of course"

"I lost a ship to pirates and if I don't make a good run with this load, I'll be ruined. I'd like to take wheat on a short run to Judaea, but I'm pretty sure my competitors have the same idea. Judaea, Syria, Silicia ... all need wheat, but the price drops the minute the first ship comes in. If I guess incorrectly, I'll be selling second or third cargo wheat and barely break even. I humbly ask the Holy Oracle: 'where should I deliver my shipment' ... High Priestess."

"I will consult with the Oracle. Banafrit will take your coin. Be sure to give her all the details of your loss."

The High Priestess returned to the Record Room.

"Dymnos! What have you got on the wheat trade in the East?"

The information was short and clear. She decided to kill some time to build up the perceived value. She went to the Acolytes' Room.

"You! Bring me lime water ... and some cakes. You! No ... you ...with the ... hair ... wash my feet ... COOL water, idiot!"

After a suitable period, she returned to the Room of Destiny.

"Do you want a show?" <There was an edge to her voice.>

"Th-that won't be necessary, High Priestess."

"Very good. You were correct in your concern. You are VERY late. Wheat ships set sail weeks ago. Syria has been having a drought and demand is high. Three ships headed there. All of them sank in a storm. You will get a premium price for your wheat in Tyre ... so says the Holy Oracle."

"Thank you, High Priestess ... thank you, thank you ... uh ... High Priestess."

"You may go."

"Thank you, High Priestess .. Thank you ..."

"Enough ... get out."

It seemed that if he stayed two seconds more, his smile would have spread and cut his head right in half.

Severenus was walking on air ... that and skipping a bit: quite unseemly for a successful merchant. He stopped at the common Oracle for its entertainment value.

“Oh Holy Oracle, my husband is in the army and has gone to the Kush border. Will he die in battle?”

The Oracle girl was painfully thin with a wild look in her eyes. She danced, swooned, writhed on the floor, vomited a bit, then started to babble. A priestess with a wax tablet dutifully wrote down the nonsense sounds ... then interpreted them, while yet another priestess wrote the interpretation on a small piece of papyrus:

HE WILL RETURN HOME
NOT
DIE IN BATTLE.

The Oracle was always correct, but it really depends on which side of the “NOT” you put the comma. You get what you pay for.

Chapter III - *Banafrit*

Banafrit liked using the Room of Destiny for serious events. It made her appear much more intense and serious. She had come in early with a small statue of Isis, which had a candle and reflector at its base to create a similar lighting effect as the brazier. She sat up straight and tried a slight scowl to add gravity as the three second level's came in and, blinking as their eyes became accustomed to the light, nervously fumbled for their stools.

"This is the decision day for you second level priestesses. It's entirely up to you. You will choose your own future. You're not at a fork in the road. It's more like being on a well-traveled road and continuing on, or taking a side route. You have two options:

- 1) Stay as a second level priestess, in a year you will be given another chance to make this choice. As a second level, you may stay in the temple as long as you like or until you become pregnant. You may leave the temple on your own, or we will find you a rich husband regardless of your state. Isis priestesses schooled in the Fertility Arts draw a high bride price, which you will split with the temple.
- 2) You can advance to a first level priestess and never leave the temple alive. You can still bed who you like, but pregnancy may have fatal consequences."

Banafrit let that sink in.

"I know exactly what that sounds like. I became a first level five years ago and I have never seen an exception to this rule. I've seen priestesses die and I've noticed they've disappeared, but I've never seen them leave. Stay at your current level, or advance to all the privileges of a first level. Choose."

One girl nervously coughed: "I'm sorry Banafrit. I'm just not ready."

"Perfectly alright, Alkyone. Nothing to be ashamed of. There's no punishment associated with this. Maybe next year."

With a sigh of relief, the girl scuttled off.

"How about you, Kiya?"

"Why did priestesses disappear?"

"**WHAT?!?**"

Banafrit's intense scowl was real.

"Why did priestesses disappear ... *Banafrit?*"

"Respect' is one of the most important things you need to maintain at all times in the Temple, no matter who you are. In answer to your question, making the High Priestess really, really mad was the most common reason for disappearing ... that and pregnancy."

"Dedyet?"

"I knew what this was all about when I came in, Banafrit. I want first level."

Kiya: "I'm sorry, Banafrit. I'm just scared."

"Perfectly alright. See you next year."

Kiya left the room.

Banafrit took a deep, meaningful breath and tried to scowl again. It was so much easier with just one.

“Dedyet, what is our role in the temple?”

“To worship Isis and petition Her for worshippers.”

“Very good. That’s the exact quote from the papyrus you signed your first day.”

Banafrit blew out the candle in front of the Isis statue.

“Let’s try again. What do we do here? You’re not a giggly acolyte. You made it here because you have intelligence and can keep your mouth shut. What have you seen? What is our purpose?”

“Messengers and pigeons come from all over the world, mainly from other oracles and sibyls, I think. Some things from The Great Library are copied into the Reference Room, like the Great Map. Other messages from outside are collected and filed in the Record Room. I’m not sure what happens after that. I guess the information is distributed to someone, somehow ... I just have never seen how it works ... Banafrit.”

“Welcome to first level, Dedyet. You are no longer required to use my name for respect.”

“Am I allowed to ask you about the High Priestess? ... Bana.....sorry.”

“No problem. Here’s all you need to know. It’s good to be the High Priestess of the Temple of Isis. No one tells her what to do. Most people are afraid of her. She eats well, sleeps late, and spends her waking hours maintaining her position. She fought her way to top, and discourages any additional accession by transferring any threats to other temples. I think she likes me, as much as she can. I never let her see anything but a cheerful assistant who follows orders with intelligence. If I uttered a single word about wanting more responsibility, I don’t doubt there’s a spot waiting for me in Ephesus. Do whatever she says with a smile, never complain, and don’t cross her.”

“What’s the deal with her makeup?”

“As a first level, you’ll be called into her private quarters, so you need this, too. The High Priestess is very big on stagecraft. She’s a lot younger and more beautiful than you’d think. She intentionally makes herself look older and highlights all her angles to look ... I dunno ... ‘evil’? Then she adds a cadaverous tone as well. It’s all got to do with mystery, magic, fear ... that kind of stuff. **DO NOT** act surprised when you see her face naked. You’ll get pulled into a discussion you do not want to have.”

“Thanks”

“No problem. If you’re lucky, you can catch her trying to glide around in the dark. I can’t describe it. It’s something you have to see ... without letting her know, of course.”

“How did you get here, Banafrit?”

“My father is a high priest of Ptah, in Memphis. I was raised in the main temple, and had all the temples in the city to play hide-and-seek in as a kid: dark vaulted colonnades, secret rooms, hidden passages ... everything ... even how to get past sacred asps. I learned all the ceremonies by being forced to attend ... with people whacking me not to fidget. Between all the different gods, the ceremonies are very, very close ... just the words are different.”

“All the mystical, sacred ceremonies? That must’ve been awesome!”

“Ever heard the expression ‘*a magician’s assistant soon loses the wonder of the act*’? Some poor worshipper thinks they hear the word of a god, and it’s some disgusting, filthy old man in a loin

cloth, drinking beer and eating sandwiches, speaking into a tube on the other side of a wall. It's very deflating."

"If you're that cynical, why did you stay in the system?"

"Like the high priestess, I have an affinity for the stage craft ... the mechanical kind. The Greeks were very clever in thinking of stuff, like water screws and steam devices, but they weren't keen on actually building the complicated ones. Egyptian temples love that stuff ... statues moving, magical water effects. I really enjoy working with them. I was actually just loaned here to help out, but decided to stay. Better career options in the most important temple for women ... and these Greek-style tunics are more fun."

"Uh ... can I ask a personal question, Banafrit?"

"You can ask ... maybe I won't answer."

"Are you interested in Kalek? The map fellow?"

"I don't know yet. It's wonderfully fun to play with him. Until I decide, don't mess with him. What about Timon? He's a map guy."

"Not exactly what I'm looking for. Dakka appeals to me. I think there's more to him than he's letting on."



"Banafrit! It's the statue again!! The goddess' arm is stuck!!!" A little third level had run up to the two first level's.

"Oh, good grief. C'mon, Dedyet. I'll grab my tools and you can see what it's about ... did it make that 'scritch-ponk' sound?"

Barely had Banafrit collected her kit, when another first level ran up to her: "Banafrit! Banafrit! How many wreaths do we need for the Divine Mother rite?"

"Welcome to my world."



Chapter IV - Sagira

Leaving the temple, Kalek walked along the lower palace complex. It was quite a walk. Each new Ptolemy had added more buildings, so it was practically a chock-a-block city in itself. He had never been inside any palace and wondered what they did with all the space. Maybe it was like the Temple: they were mostly empty for dramatic effect. The walk was quite pleasant: monumental statuary, pharaonic scale clean painted buildings, tiled walks, sea breezes, no crowds, no city noise, quiet threatening guards ... but then he entered the city.

Kalek nervously broke into a sprint to get into side streets as quickly as he could, from the wide open complex. His house was only about three-quarters of a mile away on the edge of the Jewish quarter, but he had to go through street gang territories on the way. Greek gangs, Coptic gangs, Jewish gangs, Nubian gangs, Egyptian gangs, Roman gangs ... Alexandria was very diverse.

He rounded a corner and saw the dog. He liked the dog. With whatever intelligence she possessed, she knew that her best method of survival was to be cute: she cocked her head, wagged her tail, walked on her back legs, punched with her front legs ... anything she could think of to beg for food. Kalek had saved a little of his temple meal for just this purpose. The dog not only recognized Kalek, but also the motion of digging into his tunic, and leaped through the air into his arms.

“Eww ... hope I don’t get fleas ... or something else.”

Then Kalek heard the familiar cadence of bragging, partly drunk gang members. At a distance, they sounded Coptic. He quickly ducked into a shadow, but the dog had approached them hoping for food. It was being teased by the gang who were pretending to feed it ... then they started throwing things at it ... then one member delivered a vicious kick. The dog screamed and made a sickening sound when it hit a wall.

Kalek lost his mind: “Hey! Cut that out! It’s harmless ... you’re KILLING it!” <in Coptic>

He didn’t have much time to consider his great error, as the gang seemed to pounce as one ... in a heartbeat. There was a lot of pain ... then it just stopped. All the yelling and laughing suddenly quieted. When he checked himself for damage and slowly got to his feet, everyone was gone.

Without really thinking what he was doing (for the second time tonight), he went over and picked up the whimpering dog and limped home.



What Kalek had missed, during the brief interval when his eyes were closed, was the appearance of Mahu, who had been discreetly following him. The High Priestess considered Kalek a valuable asset, and sometimes asked Mahu to shadow him home. This was not the first time Mahu had made himself known to a street gang.

While the street gang was kicking and punching Kalek to the ground, a large dark shadow fell over them, blocking the moonlight. The last image any of them could remember was a monolithic figure with a huge grin and sparkling eyes. Each member vaguely remembered being picked up by their face, with a hand the size of a dinner plate, and then things went dark. They all woke up in a pile in an alley.

Most of them would probably be able to walk home ... with some effort. None of them, or anyone that they knew, would ever approach Kalek again.



The adrenaline surge had passed and Kalek was a mess. He went in through the servants' gate, and did a one handed crawl up the stairs to his small apartment above the slave rooms, holding the dog with his other hand. He laid on the floor just inside the doorway, cradling the dog, for quite a while before he roused. He dragged himself back to the top of the stairs and waited until a slave went by. He called for water and a rag, and would have normally been ignored (they were not **his** slaves), but he looked such a catastrophe, the slave mom took pity on him. She cleaned up his wounds, but made him put the dog aside and wouldn't touch it. Syrians were funny about dogs. She gave him a bowl of broth, then was gone for the night.

Once she left, the dog began a soft but constant whine. Kalek cleaned her wounds, and eventually wound up immersing all of her in the fountain in an attempt to kill the various tiny vermin living in her short fur. His Jewish nanny had been a herbalist and he took ointments and powders from his cupboard to treat the pair of them. He fed her the broth. Considering what had been living in her coat, he took pains to sleep at the top of the stairs, with the dog, outside of his room.

The next day, despite sleeping on stone all night, he felt better enough to walk. He found a rag he didn't need anymore, and tucked in the dog, leaving it just inside his door ... she wasn't going anywhere. Just down the street was the man he needed. They spoke in Hebrew.

"Peace, brother Gavri'el, vendor of the finest herbs and powders, savior of the masses! Your day is good?"

"Kalek, Kalek, my favorite pagan scribbler. You look awful! Take a dive off the Pharos?"

"I had a disagreement with six or seven pairs of fists and feet. Could be worse. I could use some of your excellent elephants."

"What?" <he chuckled a little>

"Uh HERBS! I could use some of your herbs, please. I have nutmeg."

Gavri'el had motioned to two or three of the other vendors to come and listen.

"What?" <they all chuckled>

"SILVER! I have silver. ... I'm sorry ... I'm a bit rusty."

"I would have never known."

All the men started to laugh.

"What do you need?"

"Something to get rid of fleas and bricks and lice from the outside. Something for pajamas on the inside. Something for blood in lemonade ... OH COME ON!!!"

All the men were laughing loudly. Two in the back were crying. The one with the deep "HO HO HO" was the most annoying.

"Slow down Kalek. You're sounding like a crazed prophet. Fleas, lice, and TICKS ... Right?"

"What did **I** say?"

More guffaws. The number of men was growing.

“Pajamas has me confused. What’s inside?”

“...WORMS.”

One man was on his back, holding his stomach, and kicking his feet in the air.

“Of course, how could I be so confused? ... and lemonade?”

“What’s wrong with lemonade?”

The men were all holding their breaths, waiting for the punchline.

“Made from squeezing lemons?”

“Oh, oh, oh ummm URINE.”

The men were laughing so hard, they were having trouble breathing.

“Solomon’s beard! **WHAT** have you been **DOING**, Kalek?”

“It’s not for me, it’s for auhh ... DOG.”

There was a sigh of great disappointment.

“That would please your Reza. She always wanted you to be a doctor.”

Another burst of laughter. It was now like a formal audience watching a stage performance.

Gavri’el began bundling herbs and powders and explaining their use to Kalek. This was boring. Most of the men filtered away. A few stalwarts were hopeful for just one more good bit of humor.

“Here you go my friend. You should come by more often ... and work on your Hebrew.”

“They keep me very busy scribbling. I wish I had more time for old ... ummm ...uh ...friends.”

“You know my Rebecca still asks about you. She is no longer a tiny girl.”

“You would let her marry a **pagan**?!”

“With a few snips, that can be fixed.”



The next week, Kalek stayed at home and nursed himself and the dog. He couldn’t explain why, but had taken to speaking to her in Egyptian. She looked so small and helpless all curled up, he called her “little one” “Sagira.” She eventually stopped passing blood and got control of her bowels. He had taped her broken ribs, like his nanny Reza had done for him after a similar event. Sagira slowly started stumbling around on her feet.

The Great Library didn’t give a damn about his condition. He kept getting nasty messages from the director threatening his job. The Temple, however, delivered him medicine and food every day. Sometimes even a doctor showed up to check his wounds. Thank Nabu the gang had left his hands alone (the High Priestess was thinking exactly the same thing, and was still fuming).

Through all of this, Sagira recognized that the man had saved her life. She got it into her canine head that he was a god. While awake, she never took her eyes off him for more than a few seconds, and tried to stay as close to him as possible. If she had anything to say about it, she would never consider doing anything else.

This turned out to be more of a problem than the cute behavior it sounds like.

Chapter V - Cleopatra VII

Banafrit had taken Dedyet to the throne room, as part of her training.

“What do you know of politics, Dedyet?”

“I lived in the Upper Nile and was accepted to the temple in Dendera. We didn’t really talk much about politics in the south. I was transferred here for my second level. I know there’s always a Pharaoh. The faces change, but there’s always a Ptolemy something. This one plays the flute?”

“If you value your life, **NEVER** mention the instrument again. The current Ptolemy is Auletes. You are correct about his nickname but never utter it. It makes the Princess really, **really** mad. The Pharaoh wanted to ... *retire* ... and discovered that the Princess can run the empire better than he, so he leaves it to her while he does all the religious stuff.”

“..but ... but ... she’s just a kid.”

“She’s only 15, but very, very smart. Don’t underestimate her. The Pharaoh may not care for the empire, but he cares a lot about his kids. In their lust for power, they kill each other like swatting flies, but they’re all very well educated. The Princess is amazing. She’s written a medical book ... and one on magic ... and one on alchemy ... and she’s helping on one in mathematics.”

“Why does she look so grumpy?”

“What were you doing when you were 15? Giggling acolyte? Her dad abandons her to do the hard work, while he goes to temples smiling and waving. She doesn’t have a life, she’s already an institution ... and it will never get any better. She can never be a kid, never tease and torture boys, never get drunk and dance at the festivals, never get treated by anyone as an equal. How would you feel? She’s a teenager in charge of a penniless empire, trying to restore it.

...

Just watch.”

The Numidian ambassador was trying to weasel out of a multi-year grain contract with Egypt. Everyone knew the state of Egypt’s treasury. The country was deemed weak and ready to collapse. He was barely polite to what he considered a childish puppet of administrators.

In Greek, to the Princess:

“We will be canceling the contract with no consideration.”

In Khoekhoe, to his fellows:

“This child will soon make a fine whore.”

The air became thick in the room, and no one took a breath. There was a tangible change in the Princess: it was as though her rage had taken solid form, like a huge wave roaring up behind her and crashing toward the Numidians.

In Khoekhoe:

“You will honor the contract. You will pay the tax. Otherwise, your Numidian capitol will be burned to the ground by Egyptian and Roman troops. Your Juba is a friend of Pompey. That will not save him from our Roman money-lenders. They care more about gold, than they do about friends in their Senate.

...

We sit as proxy to the divine Pharaoh, whom you have insulted beyond measure. This can not be ignored. You will pay an additional 7% ... or die where you stand, **BASTARD!**

“You ... you ... you little **BITCH!**”

“Do you truly value your life so cheaply?”

The Princess was on him in an eye blink. Re-enacting an insult from Caesar, she pulled his beard so hard that his head bent to the floor and he threw out his arms to counterbalance. She grabbed an arm, twisted it towards his body and ducked under his armpit. In a fluid motion, she pulled and raised it forcefully, high behind him ... and there was a muffled “pop”. The ambassador screamed. The Princess then locked her arms around his head and threw her body over his shoulders until there was a “crack”, and the ambassador’s body slumped to the floor motionless.

With her golden robe of office, it was actually a very elegant sweeping movement, except for the snapping part. The Princess calmly scooped up her crown, replaced it, and settled back on her throne. She wasn’t even breathing hard.

In Greek, to the remaining Numidians:

“Our administrators will draw up the new contract including the additional 7% ... Are there any other issues to discuss?”

Dedyet finally took a breath.

“They should sell tickets.”

“See? I told you she was smart. She’s also been training with Mahu for years. I saw her take him to the floor once.”

“No! ... seriously?!”



After the day’s business, the Princess was relaxing in a cool pool. The High Priestess was sitting on a stool next to her, more relaxed than one would expect, for someone looking like she does, in the presence of the ruler of an empire. Normally, she would wait for the Princess to speak first, but she had been there at least fifteen minutes and suspected it was one of the Princess’ little head games.

“May I ask why you summoned me, oh almost divine Princess of the Upper and Lower Nile?”

“Hentaneb, cut it out. Don’t be formal. We are not even wearing clothes.”

“Oh probable divine offspring of Ra, I live but to serve independent of your state.”

“If you don’t cut it out, we shall call you ‘Nebby’ in front of the acolytes.”

“Yes, your Highness.”

“That’s better. ... What do you know of the map fellow? The really good one.”

“Pardon my impertinence, your Highness, but why on Earth would you care about a scribe?”

“Nebby, we cannot walk ten feet without tripping over a scribe in this place. We don’t give a damn about just any scribe. We think we both know the mapmaker is a little special. Are you trying to **hide** something from us? Mmmmm?”

“You know his function, your Highness. He picks up new map details in The Great Library, and transfers them to the Great Map in the Temple of Isis ... entirely by memory. I’ve verified his work. I’ve used your seal to borrow original maps and compared them side by side with his work. They’re identical. I do everything I can to prevent anyone from appreciating how truly gifted he is ... including himself ... your Highness. I have Mahu watch him travel back to his home every day now.”

“Oooh, Nebby? Could you pass us those cakes? Thanks ... We heard about the gang incident. We also surmised he had some kind of memory gift. Can you tell us more about the man?”

“His father was a successful wine merchant, Greek. He died and left two ships to Kalek’s older brother, and left his house to Kalek. There wasn’t much money that wasn’t invested in cargo, so Kalek rents out his house to the wine merchant Kadmos to pay taxes and get a little money. Kalek lives in a small apartment above the slaves. I really wish I could get him near the temple or on palace grounds, but then it would make a statement about his value.

...

His mother was a Nubian so he speaks Meroitic, but she died when he was seven. His nanny was a Jew herbalist, so he speaks Hebrew, knows some herb healing, and watches some of their dietary rules ... I think he avoids pork. After the gang incident, he somehow connected to a street dog, that now goes everywhere with him. He thinks he sneaks the dog into The Great Library, but his director knows and is furious about it: the temple has a hand in making the director tolerate this.

...

He has nowhere near your language abilities, Highness, but he was a translator in the wine trade and reads a few of the older tongues from his map work: Hittite, Canaanite, Etruscan, some kind of Arabic, Latin of course. I saw him successfully struggling with Gaulish. The soldiers helping him were alternately wincing and laughing at his pronunciations, but he seemed to be understanding it ... your Highness”

“That’s actually just what we were looking for. Can he be controlled? Does he have a lover or family or something?”

“He’s quite fond of the dog, I guess. I’ll have to admit I’ve had a hand in keeping him away from women. He’s a bit naïve and childish with them. I’m afraid he’ll become useless if he devotes himself to some trollop. You know, all swoony and lovesick. In truth, I help with the dog because it might distract him from girls just a little longer, until his attitude matures more ... Banafrit’s been playing with him in a teasing way he doesn’t quite understand. I don’t think she would mind at all if we wanted to use her ... your Highness.”

“Good to know, Nebby. Good to know. We think you’ve just given us a game piece that may work nicely. At this time, just make sure Banafrit keeps him on friendly terms.

...

Thanks Nebby, you may go. We aren’t being dismissive. We just have a class in Euclid. Of course they’ll wait for us, but we really don’t like to act like a diva.

...

... Nebby?”

“Your Highness.”

“Will you ever call us by our name?”

“No, your Highness.”

“We like the sound of it. We miss hearing it. Not even the Royal Family uses it unless we beg ... and our royal father is gone half the time ... and our sister plots our death.

...

Have a nice day, Nebby.”

“Enjoy Euclid, your Highness”

Cleopatra VII, Thea Philopator, current acting ruler of the Egyptian empire, hopped out of the pool totally unselfconscious, towed off on the run, and threw on a plain tunic from its peg. She practically danced through the door in a good mood. One of the ever present oversize guards lumbered after her. He was unusually festooned with a variety of weapons: swords of two lengths, a long spear, a short st aff, bow & arrows, a straight dagger, daggers with hooked blades, an axe, and some kind of foreign chain thing. None of the weapons were his. He had noticed she was barefoot as she passed him, but he was carrying a spare pair of plain sandals as well.

The High Priestess, left behind in the whirlwind of movement, chuckled a bit and hoped the girl was clever enough to survive her family for a long time. It was quite a change to have a monarch that was actually concerned about the empire.

Anticipating her speed, guards at intervals already lined her route. According to Mahu, it wasn't clear they were actually needed. The only thing in the world that Mahu enjoyed anywhere near as much as using his own skills, was watching his best student use hers.



Chapter VI - *Kush*

The visiting legation from Kush was drinking wine in temporary palace quarters. They had been present at the audience with the Numidian ambassador and were trying to settle their nerves. Just in case they were overheard, they were speaking in Meroitic.

“Hunh.”

“Yeah.”

“So that was a thing.”

They all took a drink.

“We just watched a 15-year-old girl kill a 200 pound man with her bare hands in the blink of an eye.”

“... and?”

“Just sayin’...”

More wine.

“I miss Ptolemy.”

“Which one?”

“ANY one.”

The Viceroy was actually a Greek from Alexandria, and he didn’t feel any more secure than the others. Like the Numidians, they had come to cancel their contracts and take advantage of an impotent child. Their audience was tomorrow.

Viceroy: “How do we get out of this alive, Piankhy?”

Piankhy: “What was plan B?”

Viceroy: “Very funny. Remind me to laugh when I’m choking on my own blood.”

They all took a large swallow of wine.

Viceroy: “We have to totally abandon any demands or requests, and give her something ... before she decides to take something else more valuable.”

Piankhy: “You mean like gold coins or something?”

Viceroy: “Maybe a nice brooch? ... You are such an idiot. If we sold everything we had and went in naked, any gift we could afford would be an insult ... and you know how she deals with insults.”

More wine.

“We could no.”

“What about? ...”

“Do you think? ... No ... never mind.”

More wine.

Shabaka: “What about the mines?”

Viceroy: “The what now?”

Shabaka: “Take a breath. Hear me out. Due to the cost of defending our borders, the mines are shut down. We’re not losing any money from them, but we’re not making any either. We could give

the Egyptians the right to pull stuff out of our mines ... uh ... with 'temporary' leases. The Princess is clearly not going to pay us anything, but with a contract that expires, at least we don't lose them."

Viceroy: "And?"

Shabaka: <sweating a little> "... Ah! Any export going across our borders is taxed by Egyptian law. We get 10 percent of the tax. They'd actually be paying themselves, then us."

Everyone was holding their breath.

Viceroy: "If I heard this right, we give the Egyptians the right to mine and **WE** make money. Correct?"

Shabaka: "Correct. Workers are paid with Egyptian money because **they** will hire the workers, so we gain that way, too."

Viceroy: "Congratulations! You're the new prime minister."

Piankhy had a very sad look on his face.

The climate of the room had changed in an instant. Everyone now saw themselves on a boat going up the Nile to be reunited with their families, still breathing ... rather than satisfying royal crocodiles.

Viceroy: "How are we going to play this? If it looks too easy, the Princess might be suspicious and start asking questions ... What about this? I saw the Judaeans do it once. I'll introduce Piankhy as a direct representative of the king responsible for ... *economic treaties*, but you only speak Meroitic. I will translate into Egyptian or Greek ... whatever she wants ... and it'll stretch things out and give me some time to look thoughtful. It doesn't matter what you say ... I won't be listening to you. Just look like you have to think about your answers."

They all burst into laughter: it wasn't really that funny, they were just relieved. It had been very tense since the audience and now they were convinced they wouldn't die the next day. They all suddenly realized they had skipped dinner and called for servants.

The room they were in was quite modest. Given it was in an Egyptian palace, there was nothing heroic about it: couches, wash basins, chamber pots, linens ... it could have been a room in an upscale merchant's house. Most notably, considering the expansiveness of everything else, it had a normal height ceiling instead of a huge magnificent expanse.

The reason for this was to bring the hidden listener in the ceiling close enough to hear conversations. In this case, it was the Princess herself, soaking wet with her own sweat. There was no one else in the palace who spoke Meroitic. The palace spies had cleaned the spot up for her beforehand, but it was still a stifling, claustrophobic spot. The Princess quietly squeezed herself out of the hole, and ran full speed through corridors and stairways to get to her pool.

Somewhere between here and there, she just discarded her dripping garments.

At the pool, she immediately immersed herself, holding her breath as long as she could ... to the point where her handmaiden started hopping from foot to foot and making worried noises, looking at the guard. The Princess popped up and took a breath.

"Bring the High Priestess"



Kalek, Dakka, and Sagira were just getting back to Kalek's house. Dakka had turned out to be a good natured friend and knew the best places to gamble and drink ... and watch dancing girls. He didn't live far, and they now routinely walked back and forth from The Great Library together, sometimes from the Temple. Sagira alerted and made a grumble sound with a question mark at the end.

Grrrbuff?

Kalek said "Mahu?", and curiously looked inside the gate.

Sagira never left Kalek. She clearly remembered what it was like to be abused by street gangs, and wanted to stay as far away from them as possible. She easily recognized the smell of delinquents looking for trouble, and would "alert" ... indicating the direction to avoid. She had also gotten used to the leather, armor, death dealing smell of Mahu trailing them. This had started a game that did not amuse Mahu at all: Sagira would alert Kalek and Dakka to Mahu, then they would try to surprise him. They made sure there was always something they could duck behind on these occasions.

Mahu should've been done for the day, but there he was, standing by Kalek's stairs.

"The High Priestess will meet you in The Great Library ... it will be awhile."

Taking the hint, Kalek did a quick wash and put on clean clothes. He grabbed Sagira's basket, and followed Mahu at a pace that made him pant.



It was not "unusual" to be in The Great Library at night, it just never happened ... *ever*. For one, it was entirely lit by sunlight with ample openings and reflectors. For another, any kind of flames were absolutely forbidden for obvious reasons. The interior doors had locks, the hallway doors had locks, the exterior doors had locks, there were two soldiers at every door, and at least one soldier for every window that could be reached with a ladder.

NOW, a side door was open with soldiers allowing access. The High Priestess was waiting for him with a small natron lamp. It *was* still a piece of fire and Kalek cringed.

The High Priestess explained what was needed from him. One thing could wait until tomorrow, but the other had to be done tonight ... it had to be finished by noon. Sagira jumped in her basket and Kalek carried her in with Mahu following.

The first stop was the garbage bin. No original documents were ever thrown away from The Great Library: they might have faded to unreadable, but they were kept. However, scribes made mistakes when copying – some could be corrected, some had to be discarded. Kalek and Mahu were looking for something special that was trash. Last week, Kalek had come across a bad map copy tucked into the wrong place in the shelves. It was cracked and faded, but it was just an awful, unintelligible piece of work. Its value to Kalek was that it was an aged piece of papyrus, rather than a new one. Kalek imagined that the artist had been fired long ago and was especially ashamed of this particular work, so that he hid it ... rather than reveal it in the waste.

Mahu found it: the image of the big man sorting through little scraps of papyrus was an image Kalek would remember.

The next step was to gather his paints. Sagira had never touched the floor in the library before, but he needed her basket for all his supplies. She delightedly pranced and slipped around on the cool tiles. He took the supplies and the old parchment to a table outside the building and asked Mahu to wait there.

Kalek went back in the building (Sagira at his heels) and found his way to the map catalog. It was difficult to read scrolls by the light of a small lamp, and he had to be careful not to let it drip. On the fourth scroll, he found what he was looking for, then put all the catalog scrolls back where he found them. He went down the aisles to the shelves he needed, then carefully looked through about seven of them before he found what he wanted ... then, back to Mahu outside.

“Mahu? Could you get some torches?”

Kalek started to work, and worked all night without a pause.

A temple messenger came by about 10:00am with some breakfast. Kalek and Sagira were sleeping under the table. There was no sign of the night’s labor with paints and a reference map, but there was a newly drawn map stretched out on the pavement where the morning sun was hitting it full bore, to age it.

“When do you absolutely *need* it? It would be better if it got at least another hour of sun ... Oh! Take this note for the High Priestess, please.”

Kalek and Sagira shared the breakfast, then went back to sleep.



The Kush delegates were waiting in the audience room. They were definitely not over confident ... or even happy. They had been too nervous to eat and were just waiting for things to be over so they could go home.

In Egyptian:

“Oh Great Princess of the Two Lands, Isis ...”

In Greek:

“Enough. ‘Your Highness’ will do. Why does our honorable Viceroy of Kush appear before us?”

“Your Highness, your humble province has a miserable idea that might possibly help the royal treasury.”

“You have our attention.”

“Our humble economic minister would like to provide the details with your permission, your Highness?”

“Of course.”

In Meroitic:

“Now, don’t mess this up. Act serious.”

“*There once was a sailor from Karnak.*”

“Son of a bitch.”

In Greek:

“As I’m sure the Princess is aware, our famous mines of Kush lie idle due the cost of our border conflicts draining our own treasury. We are suggesting a cost free lease to Egypt, your Highness.”

“Meroitic must be a very compact language.”

The Viceroy broke into a sweat.

“He merely approved what I had rehearsed, your Highness.”

“Continue.”

In Meroitic:

“Are you insane? Our lives are on the line here! Please, please act like a sentient being.”

“*Who only liked women on their back.*”

“GOD DAMMIT!”

In Greek:

“Is there a problem?”

“No, your Highness. I’m just a little frustrated with my poor translation abilities. We humbly suggest that Egypt take full control of operating the mines and their output. Should the crown require refining, Egypt can manage our mills as well ... for the period of the lease ...”

He swallowed hard after that last bit.

“... your Highness.”

“That is an excellent proposition, but we have grown bored of this”

In Meroitic:

“We believe the next line of that poem is

‘He’d find ones with bosoms’.

We trust you will never take that blathering moron on a diplomatic mission again. As a demonstration of our royal mercy ... ***Raia!***”

From the edge of her peripheral vision, a simple bow came slowly cartwheeling through the air: the Princess caught it with one hand. Two seconds behind it came an arrow from the other side, twirling faster ... caught in her other hand. Like a well-oiled Greek wonder machine, the Princess never stopped moving and fired the arrow into the idiot minister’s arm.

She had practiced this all morning, with Raia, on a dummy. The dummy was positioned on exactly the same marks where the Kushite now stood, the Princess on hers. The hardest part was making the weapon catch, a bit of stagecraft worked out by Mahu and the High Priestess some time ago. She had been working at it for weeks for a situation like this. There was no guarantee a Kushite would have done something foolish, but she wanted to be prepared for an opportunity to make a point.

A war arrow would have done enough damage to destroy the arm, so she had used a practice arrow with a simple point dipped in silver. It tore through the outer edge of the man’s bicep, leaving a furrow about an inch deep ... pretty much as planned.

As a subtle finish, Mahu was standing behind the Kushite and caught the arrow before it caused any collateral damage.

The Princess handed the bow to a servant, and calmly resettled herself on the throne.

In Meroitic:

“We require some additional information from one of your party. Karkamani is it? Are we correct that you supervised most of the mines for the previous Viceroy and frequently traveled to them?”

“Yes, your Highness”

There was no point denying it, she knew.

“Do you speak Greek? Egyptian?”

“Just Greek, your Highness.”

In Greek:

“Very good. The honorable Karkamani of Kush has personally visited many of the famous mines of Kush and has indicated that he’d be **DELIGHTED** to mark them on our map.”

The Princess dramatically clapped her hands, and an easel was brought in. An old, worn, frayed, faded map was hanging on it, displaying Upper Egypt and Kush. The Kush delegation were thrown off balance when they saw a copy of the best map they owned of Kush, currently 2700 miles away in Meroe. It was unexpected for the Princess to be so well prepared, but **their** map was an additional shock. They thought they had a good copy in Meroe, but this was so much better: all the mythical creatures in Africa were there, all the odd peoples, the monsters in the Nile ... they squinted at the signature, and there it was ... barely readable but unmistakable: Abu al-Qasim Almasi. This was obviously the original.

They were caught. Karkamani, in fear of his life and being the nervous type, would mark up the map with everything he knew, exactly as he had marked their copy in Kush. They couldn’t filter him. Besides, they were sure the maps would eventually be compared for any discrepancies.



Kalek was trying to relax at the baths. Dakka was taking care of Sagira outside the gates, and she was having none of it. He could hear her bark/whining through the building walls. So could the other bathers and they were getting more unpleasant about it by the minute. Well, he had the second part of that rush job to do anyway.

Kalek met Dakka, picked up Sagira, and they both headed to the temple.

“You up all night?”

“Yeah ... but I caught a little sleep under a table.”

“What was that all about?”

“If I told you, we’d both die ... horribly”

“Never mind.”

Raia was on duty today, and they just nodded and walked in. Barely two steps, and they heard approaching giggling.

Dakka: “Do it, Kalek! *Now!*”

Kalek: <In Egyptian> “Sagira, keep them busy.”

Sagira happily ran to the acolytes and started her show. She danced around on her hind legs, punched with her paws, rolled over on her back, hopped straight up and down like her legs were springs ... quite a variety of cute dog tricks she had performed on the street. All the while the girls were squealing “how *cuute!*” and playing with her. Kalek and Dakka strolled by unnoticed. When Kalek almost disappeared in the dark, Sagira jumped up and ran to him.

There were four maps waiting for Kalek. One was last night’s work that had been marked up by the Kush minister, the other three had been checked out of The Great Library on the power of the Royal Seal. Kalek didn’t even know this was possible, but he listed the scrolls he needed on the note to the High Priestess, and here they were.

He much preferred working here because no one scowled or yelled at him ... and there was sometimes Banafrit.

“Like some lemon water?”

He hadn’t seen her at all. He nearly jumped out of his skin in surprise. He choked a little as he said: “Thank you.”

Banafrit didn’t touch him, but her hand swooped so close to his skin he felt a little breeze. Then she was gone.

The map he had spent the night copying was a bad one, not very accurate for any river or stream, but had reasonable detail for land features. He had picked it because he knew the Kushites would recognize it. He knew they had a bad copy of it in Meroe, because he had talked to someone who had seen it. He hoped the Kushites would suspect that eventually his map would be compared with theirs, and any discrepancies in mine locations would come back to bite them. They could’ve just marked up the original, but Kalek didn’t think The Great Library would allow even the Princess to do that.

The other three maps were the best The Great Library had to offer on Kush. One had mountain ranges and passes clearly indicated. The other two had roads and trails ... and some mines marked. The Princess wasn’t the first person who had tried to figure this out and these maps had occupied a special place. Now, Kalek had a fourth map for additional reference. He began by copying the map that had the best, most reliable detail: shorelines, roads, even named landmarks. He wasn’t done by the time his hand started shaking and he gave up for the night.

Kalek was too tired to go home and asked the guard if there was a place he could sleep. He got a grunt in response. He was settling into a corner on the stone floor, when Dedyet tugged his shoulder. He followed her to a room with a bed. He thanked her and flopped on the bed face first, and was instantly asleep. Sagira woke him up with a cold nose and insistent claws to see a warm plate of food, a glass of wine, and a bowl of water. His awake state only lasted as long as the food.

When Kalek awoke, he didn’t feel alert, but at least he didn’t feel like he was made of heavy stone. He had no idea what time it was: it was dark, he was in the Temple ... it was always dark in the Temple. What’s worse, he had no idea where he was. The place was intentionally built like a labyrinth to confuse anyone led into the inner sanctum: it was the kind of enhanced mystery that the High Priestess was fond of.

Outside the room, he saw nothing: no ceiling, no walls except the one behind him, no columns, no torches, no shaft of light ... nothing.

“Er ... Hello? ... HELLO?!”

“Hi, Kalek. You don’t have to yell.”

He actually jumped.

“Hi, Banafrit. You surprised me.”

“Obviously. Come ... I’ll take you.”

She hooked his arm in hers, and briskly took him through a half dozen turns to the Record Room. How she navigated in the dark, he hadn’t a clue ... and really didn’t care. This was the longest time he had ever been close to her. He remembered that he smelled Dedyet last night and thought of “high altitude mountain air” ... and clouds. Banafrit was very similar ... plus something ... something like cinnamon.

He wasn’t looking where he was going, lost in her scent, and hit the edge of door with his shoulder, spinning onto the floor: the guard was chortling, and it sounded like Banafrit was doing her best to hold back outright laughter.

“You still sleepy?”

“Yeah ... yeah, that’s it ... sleepy”

“I’ll get you something.”

“Thanks.”

It took him two more days to finish the map, and then correlate the three with mine locations. The map modified by the Kushite had Greek notations, but the other two had Kushite hieroglyphs that he wasn’t sure of. He had to go all the way to The Great Library to find scrolls to decode them, and, of course, had to deal with abuse from the director about his job, and insults from the scholars about who exactly had the right to access scrolls. When he was finished, it occurred to Kalek that not only was this the most detailed map in the world of Kush, it was technically an original that he had created. He had earned his own spot in The Great Library ... but *this* map would be a Temple secret.

To his great disappointment, Kalek didn’t see Banafrit again during those days. He had been imagining all sorts of casual meet-ups that developed into something else,

“Oh! Imagine that! You’re right next door!”

but they just didn’t happen. Dedyet or some second level would take him to a room (maybe the same one, maybe a different one) and bring him back.

He and Sagira were fed and watered. They took breaks in the temple gardens. He didn’t even know there *were* temple gardens until now. Dakka sometimes kicked a ball of rags around the fountain with him while Sagira chased it. The acolytes didn’t bother him. Life could have been a lot worse.

Chapter VII - *Day of Scribes*

Kalek and Dakka were having lunch outside The Great Library. They had gone to Kalek's favorite Hassidic vendor and gotten vegetables and duck rolled up in flat-bread. This was something brand new to Dakka, but he was starting to appreciate the notion of clean kosher foods compared to pretty much the direct opposite from all the other vendors. So far, he had never felt sick a single time from kosher food ... but he couldn't help feel that everything would be improved with a little bacon.

"Did you hear about the scribes' party, Kalek?"

"I never hear about anything ... **WHAT** did you say?"

"It's a party for all the scribes in The Great Library and the Museo '*honoring our contributions to eternal knowledge*'! The directors are fuming because they're not invited. The scholars are jealous and outraged: they've been pelting any scribe they see. Oh! We get the whole day off **WITH PAY!!**"

"This hasn't happened in ... ever. Does the Princess need to feed her crocodiles or something?"

"I'm sure **BANAFRIT** will be there..." <he did this in a singsong voice>

"Shut up."

"There's supposed to be food, and wine, and music, and **dancing** girls ... and I don't know what else."

"All this information was on a poster or something?"

"No ... but **EVERYONE**'s talking about it. The directors and scholars wouldn't be so mad if it weren't true."

"Do they usually need some reason to be mad at us? **I** predict, we'll show up and get a lecture ... a shaky spoke weakens the whole wheel, put in lots of overtime for the team, that sort of thing."

"So, you're not going?"

"Are you nuts? You know how good the temple food is when we're lucky enough to get it? Palace food has got to be 10 times better. I hope I can sneak Sagira in. Maybe we can hide in the crowd."



When the day of the party came, it was a good thing that it was a paid day off. Not a single scribe would've accomplished a good five minutes work. They were all speculating about what they would be fed, how much they would drink, and how many dancing girls they would bed ... and in what ways. A rumor that the Princess herself would award a prize of a gold talent to the best ... **something** ... was running like wildfire. Some of the more foolish had already started drinking (somehow forgetting about the free wine that was on the schedule) and might not even make it through the door.

At the appointed hour, those who could walk gathered at the entrance to the Ptolemy VII palace. Of course none of them had ever been there before, so it was all new, amazing, gigantic, stupendous, awe inspiring. They were led into a typical dynastic palace room, setup for a banquet. The ceiling was several stories high, apparently supported by huge pharaonic statues. There were scantily clad girls, jiggling and smiling in a corner, and a group of musicians waiting for a signal to start. There was a flow of servants, like a small creek, floating various trays of food to the unbelievably long banquet tables.

Kalek had Sagira in her basket, and kept moving around to position himself in the center of the throng. He wanted to make sure that even if she started a commotion, none of the palace staff would be able to see her. At worst, he figured he'd at least get to see the place and grab some food before being thrown out.

He tried to stay surrounded, but somehow once inside the room, he got pushed to the back. He then tried to keep to the corners. A signal was given, the music started, and the dancing girls swirled out. Every eye in the place was on them. Kalek felt a strong tug, then smelled Banafrit. When he turned, her face was two inches from his own ... she mouthed the words:

“Come with me.”

He was helpless to do anything else.

She pulled him past two typically huge guards into a small side room. Then she vanished and the door closed.

There was a young girl, with loose black satiny hair that had a bit of a curl to it, sitting in a high backed chair. She wore a simple linen tunic, maybe with a little gold in it: some threads shined a bit in the light of an open window. Her skin was an olive tone, maybe a little darker, but her eyes were blue. Kalek got lost in them: they were almost black on the outer edge, then dark blue, then a little lighter around the pupil, and a ring of gold surrounded the pupils themselves.

“We would like to speak with you.”

What does she mean “*we*”? Kalek’s head swiveled about the room. Banafrit was gone, no one else was there. **OH GOD NO!**

Kalek fell to his knees, and in his desperation to say “your Highness”, his ankles got tangled up somehow on the way down and he did a face-plant. His forehead made a wet smacking sound when it hit the stone tile. He saw stars.

He was never completely “out”, but did take a decent shock, needing a little time to come out of it. He had the distinct impression of a small hand gently petting his head, then strong arms helping him to a stool. When his head cleared, the Princess was sitting quite close.

The Princess wasn’t completely taken by surprise. This wasn’t the only time this sort of thing had happened in a first meeting (“This fellow’s a complete mess. We need to calm him down”).

“May we see your dog?”

“Of course, your Highness. Right away, your Highness ... uh ... your divine ...”

“Why don’t you just settle on ‘Highness’? You OK? Your head took quite a crack.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine ... your Highness. Uhhh ... this is Sagira ... your Highness”

“Oh how appropriate! She’s small enough to fit in a basket ...”

In Egyptian:

“Why an Egyptian name?”

“She’s a native Egyptian your Highness. Born and grown in Alexandria ... your Highness ... and I just like the sound of it, your Highness.”

“And you trained her”

“In Egyptian, your Highness”

“Lovely. Ooooh ... it seems like something’s wrong with her abdomen ... there’s a little bloat.”

“She’s only been like that the last hour or so. I went to the baths, and a friend was taking care of her, but she got away and I think someone fed her something bad to shut her up ... your Highness”

The Princess clapped her hands. A door opened, opposite the way he had come, and a girl leaned in.

“Our herbal case ... the blue one with the cheetahs ... and an old sheet ... and a bowl of water ... and some broth”

In Latin:

“Just a moment and we think we can help out this poor ‘little one’.”

“Thank you, your Highness”

Kalek’s head was spinning with this preposterous situation.

“How did she come to you?”

“She was beaten very badly and I helped her, your Highness.”

“With what?”

“I know a little herbal medicine. She had external vermin, internal worms, broken ribs, blood in her urine. A Jewish herb vendor helped with what I didn’t know ... your Highness”

It was almost getting to be like a conversation with a real person.

“From the looks of her, you did well.”

The door opened.

“Oh here’s our kit ... we’ll just fix up ‘little one’ Sagira.”

The Princess took a couple of herbs and ground them, then made a ball with some kind of butter. In an eye blink, she spread Sagira’s jaws and pushed in the ball. Then let her drink water. It didn’t take long. Sagira started arching her back and making hucking sounds, then threw up several times right on the sheet. When she had stopped, the Princess gently petted her until she stopped shivering.

While she had been throwing up, the Princess had prepared another ball, and now popped that one in. In a minute, Sagira perked up and seemed more like normal. After some broth, she started capering about.

“It’s actually harder with a child.”

“Your Highness, if it’s not too impertinent, would you tell me what you did?”

Knowing he was an amateur herbalist, she gave him a quick rundown.

In Aramaic:

“Does she do tricks?”

“Sagira .. <in Egyptian> ‘Keep them busy’.”

Sagira started her show.

The Princess smiled, then laughed a little, then let out a peal of wonderful childlike laughter. She clapped her hands and moved with Sagira. When it looked like the peak was over, Kalek said in Egyptian:

“Sagira ... ‘relax’.”

For Kalek’s concept of what it meant to be royalty, this was the damndest thing he had ever seen.

“Does she do anything else?”

“She’s a great watch dog. She talks to me in the street and warns me of gangs and other street dangers. She’s even got unique sounds when she smells Mahu the temple guard ... your Highness.”

“Any more tricks?”

“Sagira <in Egyptian> ‘your Highness’.”

Sagira faced the Princess (this was just luck), put her front legs flat on the floor and raised her hind end as high as it would go. The trick was a little risky because she could have just as easily faced the opposite direction.

Another delightfully childlike royal peal of laughter.

“Sagira <in Egyptian> ‘relax’.”

Kalek was summoned by the acting ruler of the Empire ... to talk about his dog? At least he was in control of himself.

“Kalek, thank you for the entertainment ... but did you really think we set all this up to discuss Sagira the Egyptian dog?”

“No, your Highness ... but thank you very much for helping her, your Highness”

“Tell me about **YOU!** When your father was trading, did you participate?”

“Yes, your Highness. He spoke Latin and Greek, but I translated other tongues ... your Highness”

“Did you actually negotiate? Make your products seem appealing? Bargain prices?”

“Not at the start, your Highness. I was just a translator ... but near the end I was running the business. My father had the name, and I cut the deals. My brother was more into the whole ‘*I’m a ship captain ... hoist that sail, swab that deck*’ sort of thing ... your Highness.”

“You know wine?”

“Like a wine merchant, your Highness. I know what sells and what it’s worth, your Highness”

The Princess switched to Parthian.

“How did you get to The Great Library?”

<Nabu! Why *Parthian*?!> “I never WANTED to be a wine merchant, your Highness. I always wanted to be a grave digger since I was quite young, your Highness.”

<The Queen chuckled.> “You what?”

<Kalek played what he had just said over and over in his head.> “**Paint!** I always wanted to paint and draw. As a reward for following his wishes, my cedar-tree made a donation to The Oxcart Library with the guarantee I’d always have a beetle ... your Highness.”

<The Princess was enjoying this.> “Father? ... The GREAT Library? A job?”

<Nabu, HELP!> “Yes, sorry, your Highness.”

“We really think we could speak to you in Parthian all day.”

“I’m trying, your Highness ... but I’m a bit rusty ... your Highness.”

“Indeed. How did you get to maps?”

“Every scribe starts grinding text: medicine, harness, history, curtains. It’s grueling and pretty hole-drilling. I’m not the best at mathematics, and can’t keep awake with hippo historical boatings of squirrels that might not have existed. Philosophy is stone-masons, but it’s a chariot job with a lot of asparagus: you need a patron. I worked with herbalists for a while and enjoyed drawing shoes, but no one seemed to want to do maps. They had a sudden windmill of maps and needed pudding. I got in and never left. I particularly love sea cabbages and the maps that have land details like mountains and deep working girls your Highness.”

The Princess couldn’t control herself ... she was gasping when she stopped laughing.

“You were doing so well until the sea cabbages, and deep working girls.”

“Uhhhhh ... sea monsters ... deep valleys. Sorry, your Highness.” <That’s not so bad.>

“The High Priestess told me about your sea work on the Great Map. She’s not really fond of unnecessary detail. I quite like it ... like your first Kush map.

...”

In Meroitic:

“Have you ever been to Kush?”



Kalek was back in the banquet room, sitting on a stool with his back against the wall. His eyes were open and he could see all the scribes trying to do what they had bragged with the dancing girls, but the images didn’t register in his brain. He was in a daze as though he had just completed a difficult examination in some school. He was breathing, but otherwise not much alive.

Did that just happen?

Did the Ruler of the Empire talk to me about my dog?

Did I amuse the daughter of Ra by butchering Parthian?

Although a small part of his brain was enthusiastically trying to gear up, he barely noticed the mountain-cinnamon scent and the plate of food placed in his lap.

Banafrit assessed the situation (“he’s pathetic”), and sported a wide grin. She carefully placed a cup of wine in his hand, resting it on his thigh, but as she did so, she gently dragged her breast across Kalek’s face, from his ear to the corner of his mouth.

Something very firm poked through her thin linen and moved across Kalek’s cheek. She quickly stepped back to avoid any reaction.

Kalek’s mind was completely reset. He forgot everything: the Ruler of the Empire, Sagira, mangling Parthian, how to speak at all, his own name. A bright light exploded in his brain and he understood that something very good and important had just happened to him. It was like waking up from a long wonderful dream, and not remembering a thing about it. Kalek slowly pulled himself out of his own head and started piecing his sanity back together. Where had the food come from? He saw Banafrit half-turned, walking away.

He weakly waved with the cup in his hand: “Hi, Banafrut.”

It was the first time he ever heard her giggle ... and there was a kind of evil, seductive edge to it.

Eventually, Kalek approached being normal ... well, normal for Kalek. Dakka told him that Banafrut must really like him because even though the best food ran out quickly, she had saved him a bit of everything and put it in his lap when he got all weird and statue-like.

Dakka was babbling about food and music and

“Oh! Have you see the dancer with the big ... tattoos. She can do a backflip and you can see ...”

Words were flowing out of him like Nile water in flood season. Kalek just couldn't latch on to the stream to pay attention.

Even though Kalek's memory was slowly refilling, there was something nagging about Banafrut he just couldn't put his finger on.

He *did* remember the Princess of the Empire, Daughter of Ra, saying: “*we set all this up.*”

That implication really bothered him.

Chapter VIII - *Dakka*

“How in the Hell did you manage *THIS*?”

Dakka and Kalek were enjoying the royal bath of Ptolemy IV. It was about half the size of the public baths, which still made it dwarf the pair. It wasn't heated like the Roman style ones, but it had some way of using the Sun to heat it a little, so it wasn't cold. Considering the hustle and bustle ... and theft ... and obnoxious people ... of the public baths, this was the most luxury either of them had ever experienced.

“It wasn't one of those ‘die horribly’ things, but you'd just never believe it.”

“Try me.”

“I don't believe it. Maybe it didn't even happen. Of course, we *ARE* here”

“What the *Hell* are you talking about *OOOF!!!*”

Sagira was having the time of her life. She was jumping in the end that didn't have stairs, and swimming to the end that did. Then she'd climb out and run in a galumphing sort of way to the other end and jump in again. She had just tried to swim *through* Dakka.

“Dakka, how would you like to visit Nubia?”

“*WHAT?*! Am I being fired or exiled or something? Is this goodbye?” <His brow was seriously furrowed.>

“NO ... no, no, no, ... nothing like that. There's a voluntary ... uh ... *trading* trip to Nubia. I'm going. I'm going and coming back. It's a roundtrip. You interested in coming?”

“Errrr ... what about The Great Library ... the Temple ... my job ... my rent ... Dedyet? ... Did I say that out loud?”

“Dedyet?”

Kalek half grinned, looked down and shook his head.

“Here's the deal:

you get paid three times your rate for the time we're gone,
additionally your rent is taken care of,
you get room and board for free,
you get to visit your relatives .. in fact, it's required,
until we leave in a few weeks, you'll get some medical training for free,
all the Nile crocodiles and hippos you want,
... you in?”

“What was that about medical training?”

“First aid, broken bones, sword wounds ... that sort of thing.”

“I see, I see. OK. I'll play your little game. I'm a fellow who's pretending to be a doctor in Nubia that might be involved in some pretty unpleasant business, what am I?”

“You're Dakka the herbalist, traveling with his good friend, the wine merchant Kalek, introducing him to locals in an attempt to get wine contracts.”

“What now? We drink fermented palm.”

“Don't ruin the image.”

“There's something else going on, isn't there?”

“Might be.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Nope.”

“Because”

“*die horribly*.”

“Gotcha.”

“There’s a bonus in gold if we’re successful.”

“... and if we’re not.”

“We might not come back.”