

CLEOPATRA 54 BC
When Your Father Leaves You The Family Business
~or~
Who Let the Scribes Out?

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Cleopatra interviews a scribe and his dog

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 gravy since I was quite young, your Highness.”

<The Princess 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.”

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

One scribe attempts to talk another into a journey 2200 miles up the Nile

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.”

Caesar surveys his ships before invading Britain

Caesar was walking along the beach, inspecting his shipbuilder's work on the western shore of Gaul.

"Good morning, Proconsul. How may I help you?"

"These are the ships being built for the invasion?"

"Yes, Proconsul."

"Nice and narrow?"

"Yes, Proconsul."

"Deep keel?"

"Yes, Proconsul. Standard Roman design. We use them all over the empire."

"I see, I see. Were you with me last year, when we tried Britain?"

"Yes, Proconsul. That was very unfortunate."

"Yes, it was ... yes, it was ... and do you remember why it failed? To do with the ships? Any guesses?"

"They grounded, Proconsul. The Britons tore into us while we were wading to shore."

"... and why was that, do you think?"

"... the keels were too deep in the water? ... and the narrow hulls pushed them into the mud by concentrating the weight?" <look of desperation>

"Very good."

The second that the first invasion was mentioned, all the surrounding soldiers started quick stepping away ... as though they had all just remembered a very important appointment that they were late for. They had seen this particular style of discourse from the Proconsul before, and knew where it was headed. There was an expanding halo of empty space around the two men.

"Let me show you something."

Caesar grabbed the man's breastplate and lifted him off the ground. He walked him 20 feet to where a board had been erected. On the board was the blueprint for a ship, designed by Caesar himself and bearing his seal.

"ARE YOU BLIND?!!!"

This was a rhetorical question, as he had roughly put the man down, and then slammed the side of his head against the board.

"JUPITER'S BALLS! WHAT THE HELL DID YOU THINK I PUT THIS UP HERE FOR?!!"

Caesar's face was somewhere between bright red and purple. His eyes were wide and wild. He had a similar build to Hannibal, solid cedar, and he was manhandling the shipbuilder like a ragdoll.

"Perhaps it would help if I pointed out the salient details?"

Caesar was holding the man's head like a coconut, grinding his nose into the design.

“This is a shallow draft vessel. See this? Shallow? The exact opposite of deep? SHALLOW? Are you familiar with this word?”

“Mmmpphhhggnnn”

“Note how the width of the ship is almost twice normal width. Do you see it? DO YOU SEE IT?”

“Mmmgggnnnnphhgggnn”

“Perhaps as a shipbuilder, YOU ARE UNFAMILIAR WITH GEOMETRY?!”

Caesar picked the man up again, then threw him to the ground like a rotten piece of fruit. It distressed him to see the blood smears on his design, but it would probably send a message. He looked around for someone to reassign as chief shipbuilder, but no soldiers were visible ... it was an empty landscape. He was going to give an order to the crumpled man, but it didn't look like he was in any shape to pay attention.

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“There's cake, Proconsul.”

“What now?”

“Birthday cake, Proconsul.”

“What the devil are you talking about, Claudius.”

“It's Germanus' birthday. We're having cake, Proconsul.”

Caesar turned his back to Claudius. He ran his hand down his face and took a deep breath to settle himself, then turned back around.

“We've been preparing most of the Summer to invade Britain. We're weeks away and the damn shipbuilder has decided to condemn us to failure and death because he chose to ignore my express instructions. The Gauls are planning an insurrection around us, possibly just before we leave for Britain. Funds are late from Rome. I have unhappy suppliers withholding grain and wine. I have unhappy soldiers not getting paid. I have unhappy camp working girls mobbing me because soldiers can't pay them. Everyone has the damn Greek pox ... and the very first thing you say to me is *'there's cake'?*”

“It's his birthday, Proconsul.”

Caesar had already savaged one man in the last fifteen minutes. He just wasn't in the mood to do it again ... yet.

Two scribes visit a souk

“Hey, hey, hey ... Dakka, I just got an idea.”

“And so begins another tragic episode in our lives.”

“Do you know any carvers?”

“Of what? Boats? Salad forks? Erotic statuary?”

“Whatchamacallems.”

“That helps.”

“The things with portraits ... like the Romans do.”

“Mosaics? Frescoes?”

“... and that’s carving, how?”

“Death masks?”

“Kam, Kamma ... CAMEOS ... were you trying to be difficult?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“Is there someone who makes cameos?”

“I know a guy. He came to the clinic once. Tapeworm maybe?”

“Thanks for that image.”

“Just thinking out loud.”

“Better out loud than never, I guess.”

A lonely priestess greets a traveler

The priestess surprised him: he was expecting an old desert crone, living out her days cackling and threatening people. Instead, she was quite pleasant and only ten years or so older than Dakka. He was in Lower Nubia, so he tried Noblin.

“May I see the High Priestess, please?”

“No one sees the High Priestess.”

The fault in his hurried outfit quickly became obvious. There was just too much fabric to roll up his sleeve as far as his shoulder. He had to take the whole robe completely off to make his tattoo visible. He was wearing a short sailor tunic underneath.

“***I***m the High Priestess ... we're very small.”

She dropped her own shoulder to show her mark.

“I've got some stuff for the Alexandrian Temple of Isis.”

“Is it those weird stacks of papyri?”

“Yeah.”

“What's up with that?”

“I haven't got a clue. I do as I'm told.”

It seemed like she was inching closer to him as they talked.

“Me, too. You traveling with the crocodile guy?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I heard there was a guy who survived a crocodile attack.”

“Not us.”

“Sure?”

“I think we'd know. Can I get you anything from the village?”

“It's not like my services are in high demand. I can get what I need. Thanks.”

...

Those are nice arms.”

“Mmm?”

“... and legs.”

“Uh ... yeah ... I'll just be ...”

“I've got some date wine in the back ... and some hash cookies.”

“It sounds very tempting, but I'm on a tight schedule ... Gotta get back to the ship ... Right away ... Sorry.”

“You sure?” <Somehow, her robe seemed looser than when he arrived.>

She had reached for him, but Dakka was quicker. He spun around and ran, djellaba stuffed under his arm. He heard her sandals on the tiles behind him ... and she was gaining.

“Make the delivery, OK?”

“Yep.”

“Seemed like you were in a bit of a hurry.”

“Yeah, I was.”

“... and that was because?”

“I guess it gets pretty lonely in a one priestess temple.”

“... and instead of cheering up the poor old girl's day, you were rude?”

“That's one way of putting it.”

“Your new friend's signaling to you.”

The priestess was standing just inside the temple pylons. She was beckoning Dakka to come back, holding her robes open, revealing herself from head to foot.

“You know, this kind of thing never happened to me before there was a Dedyet.”

“Funny how that works.”