

# CLEOPATRA 54-52 BC

*Romance Collection*

*Temple Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*

*~ or ~*

*Shuttup And Kiss Me*

Marian Marion Kebab

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## **Foreword**

This collection of light hearted romance short stories is set in Ptolemaic Egypt, around the time Cleopatra VII is co-regent beside her father, Ptolemy XII. Cleopatra is only fifteen years old, but her father, the Pharaoh, has dumped administration of the entire empire in her lap, as she performs much more effectively than he ever did.

However, the stories aren't about Cleopatra: she may be running the show, but she's frantically concerned with restoring a bankrupt empire. She may set wheels in motion, but the stories concern common people, not pompous elitists or royals. It's an exotic backdrop for a woman dominant culture, but it reveals that across thousands of years people really are all the same. Priestesses, widows, working girls, scribes, sailors, retired tomb robbers, a soldier, a warrior, fisher boys ... everyone needs a little romance (or a lot, as the case may be).

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am extremely grateful to my wonderful editor, without whom these short story extracts would have been far less interesting.

Cover modified from tomb of Seti I by Kebab  
Hathor presenting Seti I a sacred collar and leading him through the afterlife

To Marie  
Sorry you didn't make it this far.

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## **Banafrit and Kalek / Dedyet and Dakka**

Adapted From: *Cleopatra 54 BC* by M.M. Kebab

Kalek walked on the edge of the palace complex to the spit of land stretching out towards the Pharos lighthouse, and came to the Temple of Isis. 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.

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.”



“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."

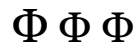
"Not exactly what I'm looking for. Dakka appeals to me. I think there's more to him than he's letting on."

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

“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.”



After the day’s business, Princess Cleopatra 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 acting 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 Jewish 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, *Cleopatra* ... your Highness.”

“Thanks for that ... Give and take away.”

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 staff, 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, the weapons instructor, 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.

Φ Φ Φ

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 [his dog] 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 a 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, tricks that had kept her alive and fed when she was a lone street dog.

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 painter 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.>

“The High Priestess told me about forbidding monsters on the Great Map. She’s not really fond of unnecessary detail. I quite like it.”

In Meroitic:

“Have you ever been to Kush?”

Φ Φ Φ

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 Banafrit 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, Banafrit."

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 Banafrit 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 Banafrit 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.