

CLEOPATRA 54-52 BC

Romance Collection

EXTRACTS

Immediately after his decision, Dakka's tutoring began. It had only been a few days, when his teacher brought him to examine the case of one of the old scholars, Elpidios. All the medical men were just standing around, watching him slowly die. This was a great shame: not only was Elpidios one of the leading experts in Greek wonder machines, he was hilarious. He cracked jokes constantly, made terrible puns, and was the first to pipe up with a sexual double entendre. Not today.

Something looked very familiar to Dakka.

“May I?”

Dakka looked between Elpidios' toes: there was a green tint. The same under his arms, and the same at his gums. The whites of his eyes were yellowed, but there was vague green tint as well.

The Museo food was often terrible, but if it was something from the kitchen, there would be more than one dying scholar. Elpidios liked to “hold court” in a shady spot near the fountain, and Dakka went there. He found a kalkarus plant with many missing and torn leaves.

Dakka needed help in the herbarium. Everybody called the same plants by different names. He had to comb through scrolls of plants in The Great Library until he found the ones he wanted, then point them out to the herbarium clerk. Eventually, Dakka got what he needed, mixed the powders, and got Elpidios to drink the potion.

Dakka totally forgot his place as “student” and started barking orders in a command voice.

“Give Elpidios this potion every 12 hours. Between times, he has to drink a full cup of water every hour. NO MORE”

Then he caught himself.

<kaff cough kaff> “Sorry. Elpidios needs to pass water to get rid of the plant residue, but if you give him too much, that will make things worse.”

Dakka was being very closely scrutinized, but he continued.

“There’s a plant that Elpidios chews when he’s telling jokes. I don’t know what you call it. Nubians call it ‘kalkarus’. It needs to be dug up and burned. It will grow back, so this needs to be done three times.”

No one was saying a word.

“If I’m right, he should be visibly better in two days. He should be almost normal in ten.”

The silence was killing him. Dakka just turned around and quick stepped as fast as he could to get away. He nearly ran into Kalek who had been watching the whole thing from a distance, and had a very silly grin on his face.

“Have fun at the palace.”

“What?”

Φ Φ Φ

Two days later, as Dakka predicted, Elpidios was still bed ridden but feeling much better. Elpidios was starting to tell some of his worst jokes, then falling asleep before the punch lines, but it was definitely a positive sign.

Dakka was wearing a tunic with a cowl, trying to hide his face and avoid attention.

The scholar tutoring him made an announcement that there would be special lecture on palace grounds from the finest medical scholar in the empire. He had retired several years ago, but under royal order was giving a lecture on his specialty: treatments for pain. Food was to be supplied.

Of course, it wasn’t until the very last bit of information that anyone was interested.

Dakka accepted this like everyone else, then pulled up short:

“How did Kalek know?”

Φ Φ Φ

They were in the same banquet hall as the previous party. There were only two tables. There were no musicians, but the serving girls looked suspiciously like the previous dancing girls. There was a small table with sweets that the others hadn't noticed, near a side door. Dakka was positive the serving girl standing next to it was the dancer that had the big ... tattoos. It was a trap.

Dakka quickly walked to the table, to get the best treats before the others. The girl grabbed him, pushed him through the side door, and closed it behind him.

Inside was a young girl with loose hair and blue eyes, flanked by a scribe on each side. They were sitting at scribe desks, and the middle one had the cartouche of the Princess. All three had papyrus and ink.

“We wish to speak with you.”



The Princess had grilled Dakka for hours (four in fact). Dakka felt like every piece of knowledge had been drawn out of him with a huge syringe.

She just wouldn't stop: “... and how does the combination affect the result?”

It went on and on and on. He did quickly comprehend that he was **not** the most knowledgeable herbalist on the continent.

When she was finished, the Princess thanked him, hopped up like a cricket, and ran out of the room. This was good, since Dakka was shell-shocked just like Kalek had been: he couldn't move. It's one thing to be examined by a scholar you don't really respect, and quite another to be hammered by the ruler of an empire.

Dakka was happy to close his eyes and just be nowhere.

Dedyet came into the room.

“Dakka?”

“Mmmmmmm”

Dedyet slipped a hand into his robe and he snapped awake like a firecracker.

“Errrrr ... you looking for something?”

“No problem, I found it.”

Confused and totally misunderstanding, his voice strained: “If you let go, I’ll just get up and leave, OK?”

“Ohhhh ... That’s just not gonna happen.”

Φ Φ Φ

Dakka woke up in a bed, somewhere in the palace complex around noon the next day. He stumbled around until he found the sea, then went the opposite way through buildings to get to the street. Kalek and Sagira were waiting for him a couple of buildings over.

Kalek: “So, learn any medical stuff at the palace?”

Dakka: “Yes. Yes, I did.”

=====

<At the farthest limit of a mission, visiting Dakka’s family in Kush>

Kalek was making Sagira [his dog] dance by feeding her bits of bread when he saw the girl. He assumed she was Dakka’s sister, Ensela, since she hadn’t knocked and had just walked straight in.

Dakka hadn’t come anywhere near describing her. For one, she was supposed to be older than Dakka, but looked five years younger.

Ensela had dirty blonde hair cut short and tousled, with startling blue eyes set in a face full of mirth. Her eyelashes formed little peaks around her eyes, giving her a “starry” look. Kalek didn’t know it was possible to have skin as dark as hers, and she wore a stark white tunic over both shoulders which set it off. She was on the lean side, and it appeared that maybe the tunic was a little big for her: a shoulder would slip off and she would pull it back ... a few seconds later the other one would go and she’d fix it ... then a mop of hair would fall over her eyes and she’d pull it back ... then a shoulder would go again. It was almost constant movement and he wondered how she managed it, while holding a cup and snacking from it. She saw Kalek’s scrutiny, and got a little shy, but she had a marvelous little smile.

She was absolutely adorable. All she needed was pointed ears to be a pixie. Kalek just couldn’t stop smiling. It was like watching a happy baby, or something.

“Ensela? I’m, Kalek ... Dakka brought me.”

“Hi, Kalek. I got some fresh dates. Want some?”

She took a step towards Kalek, and tripped ... on nothing. The dates flew into the air and the cup hit her foot. She stumbled forward towards Kalek and slipped on some dates, which Sagira was trying to gobble ... then completely lost her balance trying to avoid the dog. As she fell, she tried to grab the table ... but knocked a bowl instead and spilled kushari everywhere. The bowl slid across the table, bounced up on the back of a chair, and hit Kalek squarely on the forehead. Kalek’s legs got tangled up in a chair and he knocked over two more ... but saved himself by grabbing the edge of the table ... until he got tangled with Ensela’s feet, tried to avoid Sagira, and tipped the entire table over with a crash.

Both of them were a bit relieved when they hit the floor and things stopped happening. There were dates and kushari everywhere ... over everyone. Sagira was frantic, trying to lick it all up before someone started cleaning.

Baskakeren, currently only half-witchdoctor, stuck his head out of his room: “Sounds like Ensela’s home, Hatti.”

Hatshepsut had already grabbed a pail and mop, with a very resigned expression on her face.

“Are you two OK? Any part of you damaged?”

“I’m OK. Sorry, mom ... I tripped.”

“Of course you did, dear.”

Kalek took it all in: the adorable girl, the maelstrom of activity, the clean room which had become a disaster site, and Sagira in a frenzy.

Looking at Ensela, he imagined what he looked like with random dates stuck to the kushari spilled all over him ... and he started to laugh. It was very infectious and claimed Ensela ... and eventually Hatshepsut, as well.

Baskakeren, now only one quarter witchdoctor rushed in.

“What did I miss? What did I miss?”

Φ Φ Φ

“How come you never told me about your sister, Dakka?”
“What are you talking about? I told you about her ... lots of times.”
“You never said how she makes you feel.”
“... and how, exactly, should I have described her? I said she was pretty.”
“‘Pretty’ doesn’t come anywhere near her.”
“... and you would say?....”
“Ummmmmm ... she’s like looking at puppies?”
“You’re serious? You’re gonna go with that? Ensela looks like puppies?”
“It’s not the same. Not ‘puppies’ ... like ‘looking **at** puppies’.”
“You’re not very good with words sometimes.”

“I can’t not see her face ... I’m still smiling.”
“Oh, that. Join the rest of mankind. She just does that.”
“I like it.”
“So does everyone else.”
“Is she married?”
“... and you’re asking **because?**”

“No! ... No, no, no ... I just wondered how her husband ever got anything done.”
“I would guess that every single man in Meroe has tried to court her ... maybe most men in Kush. She’s very friendly, just never found anyone she likes *that* way. Everyone loves her, and they’re very possessive. Don’t walk too close to her in the city or you might experience this sentiment.”
“She lives here, right? I’m gonna see her again?”
“You are wearing just about the silliest expression I’ve ever seen on you, and that’s saying a lot.”

Dakka and Kalek were sitting outside, with their backs leaning on trees, drinking beer. Dakka nearly choked, and spit it out.

“ORESTES!! What the **HELL** are you doing?!!”

Orestes was carrying one of Dakka’s larger trunks, holding it on his shoulder with his good arm ... and limping a little towards the house.

“I got bored, Dakka. There’s some sort of religious thing and the taverns are closed. The captain wanted to clear the hold for a few days ... so I thought I would help out?”
“GODDAMMIT, Orestes! Sit down ... RIGHT HERE!”

Dakka had a very angry expression on his face as he unwrapped the remaining bandages on Orestes' leg.

“You're just damn lucky, Orestes ... but you've delayed healing a couple of days ... Orestes? ORESTES?”

Orestes was a big man, with a big face, which had just lit up with an enormous grin. Dakka didn't even turn around.

“Meet my sister, Ensela. Ensela? This is Orestes. He's the one that played with a crocodile.”

“I'm very pleased to meet you, Orestes.”

It seemed impossible, but it appeared that she had ratcheted up her charm.

“P-p-p-leased to you ... meet ... Ensela.”
“Would you tell me about the crocodile?”

Kalek was able to break his gaze on Ensela, but only because Orestes had become inept. Dakka and he were listening, with their mouths open, as Orestes stumbled through the tale, got stuff in the wrong order, used the wrong names, and basically made an incomprehensible muddle of the whole thing ... it wasn't even clear that a crocodile was directly involved. By the end, they were holding their sides, straining with effort to keep from laughing.

This wasn't the first time Ensela had experienced this sort of thing.

“Thank you, that was very nice.”

She took three steps to touch his bad arm, and tripped on a root. She was headed for a face plant on a rock, but wound up hooked on Orestes' good arm, suspended in air.

“Thank you, Orestes. I've got to go help my mom ... I'll see you later?”

She took a few steps, then looked over her shoulder at him: she had a shy little smile. Then she scampered off.

“Uhhhhhh ... maybe you're right, Dakka ... my leg's started bothering me. I'll just stay here for a bit.”

It was clear Orestes wasn't going anywhere, so they got him some beer ... and the big chair. The chair faced out into the surrounding jungle, but Orestes adjusted the angle so he could watch the house as well. There was a dark little face, peaking at him, from the window.

Hatshepsut caught sight of him: "Oh! The BIG man in my vision! I knew he would come!! ... Stay for dinner!"

Orestes took up a lot of space at the dinner table, but he didn't move much ... or actually, at all. His eyes were riveted on Ensela, and he just couldn't look away. She was helping her mother with dirty dishes, and was playing with him. She'd pick up a dish, then duck behind someone on her way to the kitchen ... and peek out with a pixie grin. Orestes could've watched her for days. If Ezra hadn't come by to get him for the ship captain, it wasn't clear he would have ever left. Ensela was a little sad to see him go.

"Mom? What's that thing Ensela does with her face?"

"What do you mean, Dakka?"

"She bites the corner of her lip, and smiles with the other side of her mouth ... and the corners of her eyes crinkle up. I don't remember her doing that."

"You're right ... I did notice that. Maybe she likes Orestes?"

"She likes everyone."

"Maybe she *likes* Orestes?"



Kalek was up early ... Sagira needed to go out. He found Ensela peeking out a window. This time, she was holding her lower lip with her front teeth, and her eyebrows were up.

"What's up, Sela?"

"That big man?"

"Orestes?"

"Yeah ... he came back in the middle of the night."

"... and you know that because?"

"I've been watching him the whole time."

Kalek looked out the window, and Orestes was stretching, getting the kinks out.

"Where did the blankets and pillows come from?"

"That was me."

Ensela went to the kitchen and started loading up a plate.

Hatshepsut: “No! Ensela, invite him *in*.”

It was the same as the previous meal. Orestes had a dreamy expression and was fixated on Ensela. Ensela was trying to look busy, while peeking at him, but Hatshepsut wisely only let her handle the dirty plates ... as she pretty frequently dropped them, or knocked them over. She tripped a couple of times near Orestes, and he seemed quite pleased to snatch her before she fell.

Dakka: “Busy day, Sela?”

Ensela: “Just the usual ... I could use some help.” <Her eyes moved towards Orestes.>

Ensela walked over to Orestes and grasped just the tips of his fingers on his good arm ... and pulled ever so slightly. Orestes felt like he was floating towards her.

Φ Φ Φ

Ensela grabbed a half dozen straw carrying bags, gave them to Orestes, and walked with him to the souk. On the way, it seemed as though tree roots were magnetically attracted to her feet, and rocks spontaneously popped out of the ground to get in her way. Orestes got used to catching her the many times she tripped, and wondered what she had done before he got there.

They approached a long barren patch of broken rock.

Ensela pursed her lips to one side and scrunched her eyebrows: “I usually try to squeeze past on the edge.”

Orestes had seen it at a distance and had to suppress his smile. He made his arms into a cradle, and Ensela hopped in. Orestes carried her across the rocks as though he was some kind of animal, whose particular evolutionary specialty was walking across broken rocks carrying someone. He was looking forward to the return trip.

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This was a good day. Nefertari had finished two clients by lunch, and had two more to fill out the afternoon. She wasn't just “**a**” bookkeeper: she was “**the**” bookkeeper of

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey! HEYY!!! Anyone there? Ya got a runner!!"

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

"Is it gone, Tari?"

"You call yourselves 'men'? What the Hell is wrong with you?!"

"It was a POISONOUS COBRA!!"

"That a child could have handled, you big frickin' babies!"

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

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

“We can’t read Egyptian.”

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

“Will it come back?”

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

“Errrrm ... I’m ... closing the door? ... So they won’t come in?”

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

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

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

The books were done quickly.

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

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

Φ Φ Φ

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

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

“Hey, baby! Don’t be like that ...”

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



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

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

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

“You serious?”

“C’mon! It was the LAST ONE.”

“Errmm ... They WERE pretty good.”

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

“Here.”

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

“Hatti did the books.”

“Oh ... No, no, no ... YOU did this?”

“Yes?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“I’m doing the books now.”

“Isis Great Teat! What’s this? Is it ‘ξ’ or ‘ζ’?”

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

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

“There’s no such thing.”

“YOU wrote it!!”

“That’s not what I meant to write.”

Tari took a deep breath to steady herself.

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

“I have no idea.”

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

“Did I write that?”

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

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

“I can’t do this again, Nebo. I think it’s bringing on the demon.”

“Oh! I’m terribly sorry. Anything I can do?”

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

“Eight, I think.”

“You ‘think’? Typical dad. He’s a little young, but send him to the House of Life at the Isis Temple. Use that money I found; the money that guy never paid back. Turn your son into a scribe. He can help you, and it’ll give him an alternate career if something goes sideways. In the meantime, you’ll have to pay a scribe to help you. I just can’t do this again Nebo.”

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

“Yeah, I know. Let me know when you have decent books and I’ll come back.”

“Thanks, Tari.”



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

“It’s OK, Tari. It’s me.”

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

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

“Two doses, please, Felix.”

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

“I’ll be fine ... I’ll get my sight back in twenty minutes or so. I might wobble, but I can get home. Thanks. You really helped me this time. What’s on your schedule?”

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

“I could tell.”

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

“Oooh ... what kind of party?”

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

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

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

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

“Ram’s meeting us.”

“Throw him an insult for me.”

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

“Like an escort, Tari?”

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

“The usual.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Goddamn frickin’ overgrown babies.”

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

“I think it was squinting over Nebo’s hen scratchings combined with the setting sun right in my eyes. I suspected that might happen, but he just lost his wife ... That’s what I get for being nice.”

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

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

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

“Bastard.” <not really serious>

Ram: "Evening, Hatshepsut. I've brought you your lovely daughter."

Tari: "Give it a rest."

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

Tari: "MOM! Butt out!"

Hatti: "He's hauled you back from where ever. It's the least we can do."

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

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

Tari: "Frickin' morons."

Hatti: "LANGUAGE! ... Stay for dinner, Ram?"

Tari: "MOM!"

Φ Φ Φ

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

"I think I fare pretty well without anyone. I don't NEED anyone."

"... and what about a family?"

"I don't need babies right now."

"... and what about when you do?"

"MOM! Just drop it!"

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

"That's just a stupid rumor."

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

"I don't believe it."

"You don't think other women are interested in him ... just for fun?"

"Shut up, mom."

"Have you really taken a good look at grownup Ram? He turns women's heads."

"Just shut up."

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

"WHAT'S HER NAME?!!"



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

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

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

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

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

"It's different?"

"Curious?"

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

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

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

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

"I know a game we can play."

"Saphron! Please put that back on."

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The Valley of Kings wasn't anything like Mernu had remembered. Of course, he had only been there in the dead of night by the light of a single small lamp ... squirming and twisting through gaps in rubble, always coming in through the cliffs. The place was *bustling*. Once you got past the ticket taker, there were people all over the place: locals, diggers, soldiers, guards. It wasn't a desolate, haunted place ... it was like a little city.

"These are the jobs we have, Mernu. You're not allowed to use that arm yet, so digging is out. You could be a runner for messages between places. You could be on the perimeter looking for people sneaking in from the cliffs. Can you read and write?"

"No, Ram."

“We’re going to fix that ... right away ... but that lets you out of the desk jobs. There’s cleanup: pick up all the litter our sloppy guests leave. There’s food service: mainly just bringing up food from the docks and collecting the trash ... and there’s ‘tour guide’.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s tomb work. You take people into tombs and explain stuff.”

“Wriggling and crawling?”

“No. No, no, no. I know you’ve had a bad time. Let me show you what it’s like. We’ll go together. You can back out any time.”

“Don’t like tombs.”

“I know ... just trust me on this.”

They waited until the last group had left Ram IV, then went in by themselves.

“Imagine you’re leading a bunch of visitors into this tomb. They’re a bit scared of mummies and who knows what. They’re going into a place that’s a thousand years old ... *underground*. The girls are all huddled and making frightened noises. You have to calm them.”

“What?”

Mernu cringed as they stepped in through the entrance of the restored tomb. The plan had changed and rather than risking damage to the artwork by visitors carelessly waving lamps around, now there were permanent stands with bright lamps illuminating the corridor.

“What the ... ?”

“You try to calm the visitors by making the Pharaoh more human ... like *‘These walls illustrate the Litany of Re. The Pharaoh’s ghost could walk by here and just read the various names and the accompanying spells.’*”

“This place looks more like a temple than a tomb. Ghosts? Spells?”

“Thanks! We aim to please ... yeah, the genius who thought this up was convinced tourists would like ‘spells’ better than ‘prayers’ ... there’s a list of words to use ... as you walk between the galleries, you throw in chatty info like --

‘Ramesses IV went on a massive building program and greatly expanded his father’s Khonsu temple in Karnak.’”

“How am I supposed to know that stuff?”

“We have a cheat sheet. You just memorize it. Oh, right. I’ll read it to you. There’s not that much.”

As the pair walked through the lighted corridor, and Ram talked about the artwork and trivial Ramesses IV anecdotes, Mernu completely forgot he was in a tomb. It was really beautiful. He had never seen such bright painting on a wall. This was nothing like his definition of “tomb”.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Ram.”

“Why not just give it a shot? You can always say ‘no’ after you try. Here. Take this next group.”

Patiently waiting in a cluster were Cinnamon, Saphron, Coriander, and some other girls from the tavern ... all wearing very light, thin clothing for the hot day. All perfumed.

“Oh! Are you our tour guide?” <They were all smiling sweetly, directly at Mernu.>
“I’LL DO IT!!”

“What is so damn funny, Ram?”

“Ki [currently one of the reconstructive artists], you know how sometimes you plan and plan and plan ... and it doesn’t work out? ... But sometimes things just fall into place?”

“Has this got to do with your new boy?”

“Yep.”

“... and it was the plan to get him into a tomb with all those tavern girls?”

“Yep.”

“How much did it cost you?”

“It was worth every copper.”

Ki and Ram idly chatted and waited for them to come out. When they did, Mernu was flanked by Cinnamon and Saphron, each holding a hand, with the others clustered around him. Saphron was caressing his mostly healed wound. The group started up the long walk to Ram VII.

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The helmsman, that Batnoam originally called “Butch”, was actually named “Kyros” [prn. *Key-rohs*]. He was from a tiny fishing village so small it didn’t have a name. Alexandria was overwhelming. He mainly stayed near the ships. He was rooming with some other sailors and only ventured back and forth to the barracks with one of them.

He was headed back to the city, but the sailor he had tagged along with had to make a message delivery for temple intelligence. Kyros had to wait with a guard outside the first secured door. His eyes were wide as he was overcome by the immense architecture and art work of the Temple of Isis. He stood in a daze, trying to take everything in. He was *observed*.

“Hi, sailor! ... New in town?”

“Uhh ... kind of ... Uhh ... yes?”

“Oh! *Bashful?* ... That’s sweet. How old are you?”

“17? Maybe 18? ... not sure.”

“You’ll do *fine* ... strong legs ... and arms ... Who do you sail with?”

“They ... haven’t ... decided ... I” <gulp> “came in ... with ... Captain Batnoam.”

“*Batnoam!!* ... My, my, my ... Tell me more.” <She hooked his arm, touching him with her shoulder and hip. Her perfume started filling his head.>

“He ... uhh ... trained me ... umm ... as a ... helms ... man.”

“*Officer* ... already?! ... Just relax, just relax sweet boy. I won’t bite ... unless you ask.”
<She gave him a *LOOK*.>

Hentaneb, the High Priestess, went gliding by in the shadows.

“*Aaaah!*”

“What’s your name? Mine’s ‘Nasalsa’ ... ‘Sali’ for you, if you’re good.” [prn. *Sah-lee*]

“Ky ... Ky ... Kyros.”

“How about I show you around, Kykykyros?”

“I’m ... waiting for ...” <swallow> “my friend ... to take me to the barracks ... I don’t ... feel ... comfortable ... in the city.”

“You a fisher boy, Kyros? Staying in sailor barracks?”

“Yeah ... Nas ... Nasa ... Ssssss-ahhli.”

“Not to worry. We’ll figure out something ... You’re trembling. Let me warm you up.”
<She hugged him but only rubbed his back slowly> “Mmmm ... nice and firm.”
<There was a little motion on his front as well.>

There was a chunk of time that Kyros completely lost track of. Then there were some experiences he would never forget. He stumbled out of the temple in the morning, after Sali fed him in bed.

While bragging about her conquest, Nasalsa let slip the words “Batnoam” and “helmsman”. Interest in Kyros spiked.

Sailor-1: “What happened to Kyros? He looks so out-of-it.”

Sailor-2: “He got caught in the temple.”

Sailor-1: “Good for him. Slave to helmsman in two weeks? I hear he knows stars and can navigate at night ... He deserves it ... Look! Here he comes.”

Sailor-2: “HELMSMAN! ... Dock is over *there*, unless you’re planning on swimming.”

BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

=====

Axios hadn’t quite made it off the pier, after leaving the transport ship.

“Hi, sailor. New in town?”

“I’m not ... ***Nyashadxashe!!***”

“That’s not the name you used to use, Ax.”

“Nyasha ... sorry.”

“It’s like pulling teeth with you ... say it the nice way.”

“*Nyasha.*”

“Good boy.”

<Axios opened his arms> “May I?”

“I was gonna kick you really hard if you didn’t.”

They hugged but it wasn’t “hello friend” ... or “cousin it’s been so long” ... it was something else ... something warm and emotional with an edge of intimacy. Something passed between them, and they both had a reluctance to let go.

“Can I buy you lunch? You pick the place.”

“Ax with cash? This is a new experience.”

Φ Φ Φ

Nyasha took Axios to a place with a view of the lake. It was on top of a building, with a breeze eliminating the few high flying insects.

“We ‘borrowed’ a boat right from that pier. I think that’s the most trouble we ever got in. I always thought it was about the *stealing*. I think both sets of parents were more concerned with crocs.”

“So, how is it you come to be in Alexandria after 20 years?”

“No reason really ... My employer is taking his family to Rome and I got a break.”

“... and what is it you’re doing?”

“Bookkeeping. Story telling didn’t pan out like I hoped. The Arabs have that mystique going for them.”

“You tell such wonderful tales. Syrians weren’t interested in romance?”

“It’s kind of a closed market, and they much prefer mysteries with assassins. Romans like fighting. Greeks like romance OK, but want divine entities mixed up in it.”

“It’s just a coincidence you show up a year to the day from my husband’s passing?”

“He died? I’m terribly sorry.”

“Stop it. You’ve been tracking me all this time ... like I’ve been tracking you. Pelusium isn’t really that far.”

“You *knew*?”

“You didn’t really think I was that dense, did you? Anonymous flowers for the birth of my children? Who DOES that?! Anonymous toys as they were growing made it pretty obvious.”

“You weren’t supposed to know.”

“I was very touched by the prayer scroll for the baby I lost ... and the one for my husband. One year to the day ...”

“Too soon?”

“Why do you think I came to the docks today? I was waiting for you.”