

Selene strives to be a doctor-hard enough for women in AD 412 in Alexandria, Egypt. Add a Machiavellian bishop, a powerful governor and a famous Lady Philosopher; and Selene must survive riots and political plots, as well as plague.

Selene of Alexandria

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SELENE OF ALEXANDRIA

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ISBN: 978-1-60145-813-1

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Printed in the United States of America.

www.faihljustice.com
2009

Chapter 1

Blood pounded in Selene's ears, beating to the rhythm of her bare feet thudding on the hard beach scrabble. Her breath came easy as she crested a low ridge and took a moment to glance back. Through the deep shadows of the early dawn, she saw her older brother Nicaeus and his best friend Antonius struggle out of a shrubby wash at the bottom of the ridge. She threw her head back and shrieked a triumphant ululation. Arms wide, she hurled herself down the slope with wild abandon.

Running filled her with joy. The feel of her body working smoothly – legs striding, arms swinging, lungs pumping – put her in supreme awareness of her senses. The sky seemed bluer, the briny tang of the breeze sharper, the cry of the seagull more exquisite. Selene never felt more alive than when she ran.

At the stone marking two miles from the city of Alexandria, she skidded to a halt. Selene took a goatskin bag from her belt, unstopped the neck and poured water into her mouth. Her sweat evaporated in the morning sea breeze, leaving a gritty rime of salt under her breast band. Selene pulled her clammy linen tunic away from her body. Several black curls escaped her braid and lay plastered to her forehead and shoulders. She pushed the hair behind her ears and waited for the two boys.

Antonius arrived first, staggering down the scree-covered slope to collapse at Selene's feet, his breath coming in ragged gasps, his dusky skin ruddy with exertion. Nicaeus was behind him, blowing like a hippo. Her brother leaned over, hands on knees, trying to catch his breath. Selene laughed and sprinkled them with water. The boys scowled at her. Her brother made a half-hearted swipe for the water bottle but she danced out of the way.

"Who's fastest?" Selene teased.

Her brother lunged after her. "You won't be if I ever get hold of you. Gazelles can't run with broken legs."

"You'll have to catch her first and that doesn't look likely," Antonius said between wheezes.

Nicaeus collapsed next to his friend, laughing. "You're right. Whatever will we do with our wild little Selene?"

"Not so little any more. I'm nearly as tall as you, brother." Selene's lithe body seemed to have skipped the awkward-colt stage common to 14-year-olds and moved smoothly into graceful young womanhood. She cast a critical eye at her brother and his friend, who at sixteen and seventeen still had an unfinished look; their proportionally larger feet held the promise of more growth – longer limbs and deeper chests. She walked back to the boys and offered her goatskin.

Nicaeus poured water over his head. "My sister, the Amazon." He looked at her and grinned. "But even Queen Hippolyta had her Theseus."

"And fleet Atalanta had her golden apples." Antonius leered. "Maybe I should bring some the next time we race. Would you marry me, Selene, if I beat you on the course?"

Selene snorted. "Why would I want a husband with wits as slow as his feet? Besides, I heard your esteemed father was planning a match for you with Honoria."

"Honoria of the horse face and cow hips?" Nicaeus laughed and punched his friend on the arm.

Antonius' leer turned sour. "Where did you hear that?"

"From Honoria, last week after Sabbath services. She wants hordes of children and thinks you will sire beautiful ones." Selene brushed the dust from her short undertunic and tied the water bottle to her corded belt.

Antonius groaned and reached for Selene's ankle. "Save me, O Amazon Queen, I would much rather marry a friend than a brood mare."

"Honoria is my friend and a perfectly nice young woman. You could do worse in a wife."

"Besides, it will be at least two years before Father finds a likely husband for my wild sister." Nicaeus rose and offered Antonius his hand. "You wouldn't want Selene anyway – too bony. Now Honoria has breasts like pillows – something you can sink your face into."

Both Antonius and Selene scowled.

"As if you would know anything about it," Antonius muttered. Nicaeus turned a brighter shade of red.

Selene tossed her escaping curls over her shoulders and strutted in front of the boys. "I won't need to catch a husband. I plan to convince Father to let me stay unmarried, like Lady Philosopher Hypatia."

The boys snorted in unison, then laughed at the unlikely idea that the esteemed City Councilor Calistus would let his only daughter go unmarried.

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Antonius squinted at the rising sun and grinned at her. "Come, Nicaeus. We need to get your sister home, before your father comes looking for us. It wouldn't do to miss the new Prefect's welcoming procession."

Her brother and Antonius linked arms and strode toward the city, which was just becoming visible through the dawn mists.

Selene dawdled as the boys picked up the pace. The subject of marriage disturbed her acutely as she approached betrothal age. It hadn't always been so. Her mother had been happily married to her father for over twenty years. She bore him six children, three of whom still lived. As a little girl, Selene assumed she would marry, have children and run a household as her mother did. That changed the day her mother and infant brother died of a fever, two years ago.

At the funeral, Selene rejected the comforting words of the priest and vowed to thwart death any way she could. She would become a healer, a physician. As she grew from child to young woman, Selene realized death was inexorable, but the urge to become a physician strengthened. There were many women healers, especially among the nuns, and even a handful of woman physicians. Selene knew the main obstacle to her ambition was her father. No upper class man would willingly allow his daughter to engage in any profession. Calistus would have to be persuaded by someone he respected.

"Who's fastest now?" Her brother's taunt broke into her reverie. She sprinted to catch up, a plan forming in her mind.

"Nicaeus, I need your help."

"Oh ho, the mighty Amazon Queen seeks the help of a lowly male." He bowed, brushing the dusty road with the back of his hand. "How may I be of assistance?"

"I want to meet Lady Hypatia. She teaches in the public forum on Mondays. Would you take me there?"

"If Father gives permission."

"You know he would never do that!" Selene wailed.

"No, I don't. He's indulged you in everything else – tutors, gymnasium-training, attendance at council meetings. I know no other girl your age that has had your experience. Why wouldn't Father allow you to go?"

"Lady Hypatia is a pagan. He might not want it known that his daughter attends lectures by the infamous female philosopher. Please, Nicaeus, help me."

"Poppycock! Lady Hypatia is well regarded by the city fathers and the Church. I won't go behind Father's back. Ask him. If he says yes, I'll accompany you."

"But..."

"I said no."

Selene looked at Antonius. He grinned and shrugged his shoulders. He would not get between her and her brother.

It was true that her father admired the Lady Philosopher of Alexandria. He had even attended her lectures, as had most of the men in positions of power in the city and the Church. It was also true her father allowed Selene much freedom in private, but she doubted he would approve such a public departure of decorum. Selene needed a plan to get Hypatia on her side. Once she was accepted as a student, her father would surely give his permission to continue her studies.

The stench of a long-unwashed body assaulted Selene's nose as they rounded a ragged limestone outcrop. She spied a wizened man perched on a pile of rocks. His matted hair hung in clumps like a sheep's fleece. His stick-like limbs sported grotesquely swollen joints that must have caused him considerable pain. The man's hooded eyes bored into Selene's with an intensity that sent her cringing against her brother.

"Repent. Let the Lord Jesus enter your heart, for He died upon the cross to deliver us from evil. Give up worldly pursuits and join the One in Grace for He will soon return and rise up the righteous to heaven. Heathens and nonbelievers will be destroyed by fire and suffer the tortures of the damned. Repent. Let the Lord Jesus enter your heart." The holy hermit waved a knurled stick, barely missing their heads.

Antonius knelt before the old man, grabbing Selene's hand and hauling her down beside him. A rock pierced her knee. "Ouch!" she cried.

Antonius hissed at her to be silent and dug his elbow into her ribs. He addressed the holy man with bowed head. "Holy Father. Will you give us your blessing?"

Nicaeus knelt by her other side. The smelly old man shrieked more prayers, and then put his hands on their heads for a final blessing. Selene shivered. She hoped he didn't have lice. More and more ascetics left the cities to infest the cave-pocked hills and stony deserts. They fervently believed the Second Coming was imminent and prepared to be uplifted to heaven through fasting and hardship. The general populace revered the hermits, feeling the ascetics' holiness reflected on the city. Selene never

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understood why the Lord Jesus Christ would require anyone to stop bathing in order to be saved.

The three rose from the ground, Selene rubbing her knee. They bowed to the hermit and sprinted toward home, scuttling through the western necropolis inhabited by the dead and those living ascetics who took up residence in the tombs. Selene's family had a fine tomb farther to the south, but they were not here to feast with the ghosts of their ancestors as many did on the anniversary of the deceased's death. Selene hurried, ignoring the sense of loss that crawled up from her stomach to choke her throat anytime she neared the tomb.

She squinted to the east. The sun glared through a haze, promising a hot July day for the new Prefect's investiture. The city's white limestone walls rose slowly from the low-lying Mediterranean shore. Alexandria sat on the westernmost part of the rich Nile delta, sandwiched between the sea on the north and the immense Lake Mareotis on the south. The Great Alexander had chosen this spot for his Egyptian capital because the breezes saved it from the desert's desiccating heat. Selene welcomed the coolness on her fevered skin.

A short distance from the Gate of the Moon, set in the city's west wall, they retrieved a small pack hidden under a rocky shelf. Selene swaddled herself in a long white linen tunic, gray wool cloak and laced leather sandals. She pulled the cloak over her head to hide her dusty hair and give her relief from the sun. She whirled in front of the boys. "Do I look respectable now?"

Nicaeus struggled with his traditional cloak bordered with a narrow band of embroidery proclaiming his status as the son of a councilor. He swore fiercely until Selene took a hand. "Let me." She settled the wrap in folds across his left shoulder and right hip, around his back, over his head and down to his right arm where she wrapped the end so it dangled nearly to his knees. She looked him up and down then glanced at Antonius adding finishing touches to his own fine cloak. "You'll do. Maybe you should get Antonius to teach you how."

"Why should I, when I always have a servant or you around to do it for me?" Nicaeus' grin disappeared – not at Selene's frown, but at the sound of church bells marking the time. "Come. If we're late, Father will tan our hides. He wants to make a good impression on the new Prefect."

Selene sniffed and wrinkled her nose. "We'll make a better impression after we bathe. We have but a short time to go home and make ourselves presentable." The boys followed her lead with no grumbling.

They entered the gate with an ever-increasing crowd, past city guards. The common people came from the countryside to join the public feasting and perhaps pick up a coin or two from the Prefect's coffers or the Patriarch's appointed almsman. The three proceeded onto Canopic Street, the vast main thoroughfare bisecting the city from east to west. The magnificent Church of St. Theonas, sometimes called the church of a thousand pillars, anchored this end of the boulevard, while the Church of St. Metras greeted travelers from the east as they entered the Gate of the Sun. Selene's father had been a boy when St. Theonas had served as the Episcopal residence. The former Patriarch Athanasius needed ready refuge in the necropolis and desert monasteries during his ongoing battles with the Emperor's choice for the Patriarchy. Calistus occasionally spoke of those bloody times with a fierce desire never to see them repeated.

Those dark days seemed long over on such a festal occasion. Flowers wreathed the church in all its glory. Garlands twined about the columns, bright hangings shaded the doors, and streamers waved gaily in the windows. All the buildings along the processional route would be similarly adorned.

Selene glanced down Canopic, assessing the crowds and their chances of making it home on time. Other wide boulevards branched off at regular intervals, leading to spacious homes clustered in residential districts – the sign of a planned city. The wide straight streets were bounded with shaded colonnades. Brightly painted statues towered over squares or peeked from carved niches.

Sharp cries drew Selene's attention. A group of men in rough brown robes, armed with heavy wooden cudgels, emerged from the church and forced their way through the crowd. A woman pulled her children out of their path and drifted off into a side street. Others suddenly found their errands took them in opposite directions, leaving Selene and her companions in the middle of the wide boulevard. The glowering men headed straight for them, brandishing their weapons.

Chapter 2

Selene!" Antonius yelled. When she stood rooted to the spot, he grabbed her arm, sprinted toward the church and yanked her onto the steps. She stumbled against the wide marble slabs, banging her shins and yelping in pain. "Are you trying to get your head bashed in? Those men are dangerous!"

Antonius' face was pale except for two hectic red spots high on his cheekbones. Was he angry? Frightened? She would have stepped out of the way in another moment. There had been no need for him to treat her so roughly.

She shook off his hands in a pique and reached down to rub her shins. "The only wounds I have sustained today are those you gave me. First you force me to kneel on sharp rocks, and crack my rib with your elbow. Now you practically pull my arm out of its socket and cause me to scrape my shins. May the Good Lord save me from your protection!"

"Why you ungrateful, stubborn, donkey-headed..." Antonius paused, grasping for words. "...child! See if I save your precious hide again. Let your brother do it. That's his job, not mine."

His unkind words stung, probably because they were close to the mark, but Selene felt wronged by his attack. She yelled back, "I don't need either of you to protect me. I can..."

The shouts of the armed men drowned out her final words. They boiled by the steps then halted to insult the vastly outnumbered gate guards. One guard, pale face sweating under his helmet, stayed close to his post and looked as if he would bolt for the guardhouse any moment. The second man, older, maintained a cooler head. "It's a feast day, good brothers. I'm sure your patron, the Patriarch, would not like to hear of disturbance by his chosen ones. Go about your business and leave the travelers in peace." The guard's friendly smile and affable manner disarmed the unruly men who, finding no fight, drifted off in another direction.

"Let's go home." Nicaeus grabbed Selene's arm and escorted her firmly down the steps to a side street. Antonius sulked behind.

"Who are those men?" Selene asked her brother. "Where do they come from?"

"They're Patriarch Theophilus' parabolans, his personal body guard. He recruits them from the hospital guild. Only the strong of back and light of purse will work lifting the sick and carrying the dead. The Patriarch offers them good money and the protection of the church if they become too zealous in their protection of him."

Selene craned her neck to look back at the parabolans. "I don't see the Patriarch. Why would his bodyguard patrol the streets? That's the city guards' duty."

She observed the two boys exchanging glances over her head. Her anger flared anew. She shook off her brother's hand and stamped her foot. "I'm not a child to be cosseted and protected. What do you know of this?"

Nicaeus sighed. "Patriarch Theophilus is building a private army in the city. Father believes he wants to suppress the Novatian Christians. The council fears riots if he attempts to purge the city of rival Christian sects."

Selene, at first irritated that she had been kept unaware of these developments, sobered. She was not yet born when the Patriarch had suppressed the last public vestige of the pagan cults. After murderous rioting on both sides, he closed the Great Temple of Serapis and reconsecrated it as the new Episcopal residence. Her father said smoke had fouled the air for days as the Christians burned the tens of thousands of books housed in the public library there. When she questioned the tears in his eyes, he explained they were irritated and would talk no more about it.

She took him at his word. Her father was a good Christian. Why should he mourn the passing of the last pagan temple?

"The parabolans are most diligent in their policing," Antonius added. "Some student friends of mine came home with cracked heads when the Patriarch's men caught them drunk outside a tavern. Their fathers protested the treatment, but the deacons quoted scripture and admonished the men to keep their sons under better control." He rubbed the back of his head as if in sympathy for his friends' pain.

Selene, remembering him complain of a sore head just two days ago, asked, "How are your 'friends' doing now?"

Antonius had the decency to blush. "They are on the mend." He looked ahead. "I see no meddling parabolans in our path. We should hurry." He grabbed Selene's elbow and the two boys hurried her toward home. Noting the angle of the sun, she did not protest their haste.

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Selene and Nicaeus entered their father's home bickering. "Please, Nicaeus, I need longer to prepare. Let me have the baths first?" She looked at her dusty feet, sniffed her armpit and wailed, "I stink as bad as the holy hermit!"

He seemed to relish her minor tragedy. "I'm sorry, little sister, but I'm older and have precedence. You'll just have to wait your turn."

"But there won't be enough time!"

"Remember that the next time you beat me at a race," he teased.

She flounced off to her room with his laughter echoing in the stone halls. Her room was tucked away on the second floor in a warren of small private bedrooms. She opened the door, threw herself on the bed and planned a number of petty revenges on her selfish brother. Perhaps a purgative in his soup? A knock at the bottom of her door interrupted her plotting.

"Enter!" Rebecca, her personal servant, backed through with a basket of clothes balanced on her head and a pitcher of water in her arms. Although but two years older than Selene, Rebecca had the composure and easy confidence of a much older woman. She had been Selene's primary teacher in how to run the household. Selene jumped to help, taking the pitcher and placing it on a small table next to a wash bowl and sponge.

"Rebecca, you are an angel in disguise. Whatever would I do without you?"

Rebecca looked at her disheveled state and pursed her full lips in a moue of distaste. "We haven't much time to get you decent, Mistress. First we wash off that dust, next arrange your hair, and then fresh robes." She grabbed Selene's hands and clucked over the bitten nails. "I don't know if we can soak out that grime, but I can at least smooth those ragged edges."

Selene stripped and kicked her dirty garments to a corner while Rebecca poured warm water into the wash bowl and laid a thick reed mat on the stone floor. Selene closed her eyes and sighed as Rebecca gently sponged the dust away, wrapped her in a linen towel and started to comb her tangled hair. "Rebecca, what's the gossip about our new Prefect?"

"My friends say their masters are apprehensive. He is unknown. They speculate on whom he will support in the disputes among the Christians, much less the other factions. He is also unmarried and there is much talk about which of the local maidens might be a suitable match." She stopped to separate a particularly bad tangle. "Selene, what do you do to your hair, let birds make nests in it?"

"Ouch! If you can't be more careful, I'll comb my own hair." Selene reached up to grab the tortoise shell comb from Rebecca. The servant girl slapped her hands away.

Rebecca took a blue glass bottle from a pouch tied to her belt and poured the contents into a shallow bowl. "Here. If you need something to do with your hands, soak them in this oil."

Selene obediently put her fingertips in the bowl. The oil smelled faintly of roses. "Where was the Prefect posted before Alexandria?"

Rebecca finished combing and started to smooth Selene's nails with a flexible piece of horn. "He served in the army, but left to take provincial posts. For the past several years he has served in the Emperor's court under the sponsorship of Anthemius, the Regent."

"I suppose he worships Mithras, like most of the army?" Selene dried her hands on the linen towel and dropped it to the floor.

Rebecca shrugged. "Come, Mistress, time grows short. Let me see what I can do with your hair."

"Something simple, Rebecca, I don't want to be pushing curls off my face all day. If I had my way, I'd cut it short like the holy women."

Rebecca gasped. "Cut your hair? Oh, no, Mistress! It's so beautiful." She pulled the hair back from Selene's face and secured it with bone pins, then twisted it into a compact bun. Silver combs held it in place. Rebecca teased two small tendrils into curling in front of Selene's ears, then handed her a polished bronze mirror. "Here, this is a simple style."

Selene looked at herself critically. "Nicely done. Go as lightly on the cosmetics and I will be most satisfied."

Rebecca smoothed lotion on Selene's face and neck. "You really should stay out of the sun. You're scandalously brown. Before you know it, your skin will look like cracked boots."

"I like being scandalous. Besides, some powder should make me suitably pale."

Rebecca applied a light dusting of powder and shaped Selene's eyes with kohl. A thin red paste for the lips finished the picture.

Rebecca laid out her clothes: a long-sleeved, full-length linen undergarment to be covered by a lightweight, cream-colored wool dalmatica. The voluminous dalmatica was cut in the simple style of the day – a wide, straight sheath for the body with generous sleeves that came to the wrist. This one had green and blue embroidered strips depicting fanciful sea creatures bordering the sleeves and appliquéd from both shoulders to the hem. The crowing touch, a filmy blue-green silk wrap for shoulders and

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hair. Rebecca draped Selene in her various layers and stood back to judge the effect.

Selene fussed with the swaths of material belted with a silk cord just under her budding breasts.

"Stop trying to improve on perfection, Mistress. The stripes are aligned." Rebecca settled the silk wrap in wispy folds over Selene's hair and shoulders.

"With all this cloth, I feel like I'm wearing a merchant's tent," Selene complained.

Rebecca smiled, showing small, irregular teeth. "Would you wear less and be taken for an actress or acrobat, men vying for your favors?"

Selene blushed at the thought, mumbling, "At least they're comfortable."

"The tent looks quite elegant with your height."

Selene took a second look in the mirror. "Now for the jewelry and I'll be ready to greet the new Prefect...as if he will even see me in the crowd." She put on the heavy silver bracelets and faience earrings that had been her mother's, bringing back bittersweet memories.

Rebecca nodded approval. "You look much older than your fourteen years."

Selene preened. Since she had the responsibilities of the household, she could at least be treated as an adult.

"There's only one thing missing," Rebecca added.

What? I'm wrapped, draped and pomaded. What more can you do to me?"

Rebecca opened a carved cedar chest sitting under a narrow window and pulled out a pair of clean sandals. The blue leather enclosed the toe and heel, leaving the arch free. "We can't have you padding about the city barefoot like a beggar."

"Of course not." Selene giggled and sat on the bed so Rebecca could lace the sandals. There was another knock at the door. "Yes?"

"It's Nicaeus. Father waits. Are you ready?"

Selene's heart quickened. She glanced at Rebecca, who nodded. "I'll be right out."

Selene strode across the room then moderated her gait to the feminine glide her friend Honoria had worked so hard to teach her. The astonished look on her brother's face was worth all the fussing. She kept a serene mask as she took his proffered arm and they descended the stairs.

Their father waited in the vestibule. Calistus was of unremarkable height, with the stooped shoulders and small rounded belly of a man who spent

more time at his books than in the gymnasium. Today the full regalia of a city councilor disguised his physical imperfections: full length white tunic, topped with a voluminous toga bordered with the thin purple stripe denoting his class. He wore rings and medals denoting his various civic offices and honors, and carried a mahogany staff capped with gold.

Selene's heart swelled as he smiled at her, his eyes lighting with joy and his face creasing with laugh lines.

"I see you both will do me proud today. Let's be on our way."

They exited onto a broad residential street and proceeded toward the agora. The streets in their quarter filled with families of distinction – councilors, lawyers, rich merchants – making their way east. As they approached the agora, the crowds became more varied – churchmen, sailors, shop owners, apprentices, teachers, beggars and pilgrims – all heading in the same general direction. Wine shops and fruit merchants did a brisk business. Other enterprising men and women hawked baskets of dark brown rolls, flat bread, and grilled meat and onions on a skewer.

The smell of cooked onions and garlic vied with that of unwashed bodies and urine. The workers who cleaned and stocked the public privies seemed unable to keep up with the crowd. Or, possibly many people, unwilling or unable to pay the small coin for use of the privies, relieved themselves where they willed. Selene wished she had brought a perfumed cloth to hold to her nose as they passed one particularly noisome alley.

She stopped to look over some vases showing the profile of the boy-emperor Theodosius II on one side and, purportedly, the new Augustal Prefect on the other. Other merchants sold bronze coins, plates, glass beads, goblets and all manner of wares adorned with the stylized face of the emperor and/or the prefect. Her father called to her and Selene hurried along, not wanting to lose him in the crowd.

The street emptied into the spacious open square where Canopic Street met the equally wide north-south street of Sema. Porticoes and public buildings surrounded the vast agora. Wooden stands, erected at one end, held city officials and offered a platform for the speeches. A freestanding monumental arch stood opposite the podium through which the procession would arrive. Selene could feel the crowd's excitement heighten, and her own pulse raced.

Her father took her arm and pointed toward the wooden stands. "We'll be over there." The three picked their way through the crowd towards their designated spot. Calistus sat with the other city councilors in a place of honor on the platform. Selene and Nicaeus stood with the councilors'

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families on the steps of the law courts, above and a little to the right of their father.

From that height, Selene could make some order of the crowd below. She spied Lady Hypatia, made conspicuous by her gender, sitting among the city nobles. The Patriarch Theophilus and his immediate staff occupied a dozen of the seats. The tall man in full army uniform must be the Egyptian *dux* Abundantius. The Jewish council of elders completed the platform contingent. Behind this first rank, families and staff ranged up the steps, each in the place designated for them by religion, birth, age and profession.

"Can you see anything yet?" Selene asked her brother.

The sun was just past its zenith. Nicaeus shaded his eyes with one hand while looking eastward along the boulevard. "Nothing yet. We'll probably hear it before we see anything."

"I suspect it will be an hour or more before the procession makes it to the agora," a deep voice said behind Selene. She turned and looked into the bearded face of a man with brown eyes and black hair, very much like her own. His lips turned up into a smile. Selene put a hand to her mouth then gasped, "Phillip!" She greeted her oldest brother with a leap into his arms. Phillip grabbed Selene in a bear hug then put her down with a grunt. "My baby sister isn't such a baby anymore." He looked her up and down with a wistful smile. "In fact, you've grown into quite a lady."

"Phillip! It's been three years! You've grown a beard. Why did no one tell me you were coming? When did you get home? What was the court like? You must tell me all about Constantinople! Does Father know you're home?"

At the mention of Calistus, a shadow passed over Phillip's face. "Father doesn't know I'm back. I decided not to finish my law studies and had the good fortune to travel home with Orestes and his escort. We took the overland route and became great friends on the journey."

"Orestes?" Nicaeus blurted. "Our new Augustal Prefect? You're friends?"

"Close your mouth, brother, or you'll catch flies. Yes, the new Prefect and I are quite good friends." The next hour passed quickly as Phillip regaled his small but attentive audience with the exploits of his fellow law students, the wonders of the royal court, and his adventures traveling with Orestes.

Selene's breath came quick as Phillip described a narrow escape on the trip. "We chased the bandits into a blind canyon where they fought for their lives. Just as I thought they were finished, the leader..." Phillip's words were

drowned by the blare of a hundred trumpets playing a fanfare. They all looked up in surprise. "I'll finish the story later."

Selene's deep disappointment at the interruption of the story must have shown, because Phillip chucked her under the chin and said, "Don't worry, little sister. I lived." She punched him in the ribs and turned to watch the procession.

It took the better part of another hour for the whole parade to wend its way into the agora. First units of soldiers from the garrison at Nicopolis, followed by all manner of conveyances fantastically decorated by the city's guilds and youth groups. Most were wagons decorated with flowers and streamers and containing people acting scenes from the Bible that in someway related to their professions. The shipbuilders provided Noah and the Ark with several real animals. The bakers chose the Sermon on the Mount and tossed free bread to the crowd, much to the disgust of the food vendors.

Selene gasped when a lovely painted plaster statue of what seemed to be the Virgin Mary was revealed to be the goddess Athena. Several pagan students from the association that provided it accompanied the statue. They marched in silent defiance when they entered the agora, then broke into a hymn of praise to the goddess in front of the platform. The Patriarch rose and pointed a staff at the students, as if to strike them down. "The laws are clear forbidding public worship of idols. Stop this abomination at once!"

Immediately a pack of parabolans attacked the students with clubs. The students fought fiercely in defense of their goddess, kicking and punching their attackers, but they were no match against beefy men with cudgels. Selene heard the sickening crack of wood on bone and shrieks of pain that turned to shouts of anger as the parabolans broke through to topple the statue. It shattered into a thousand pieces and a cloud of dust. The troops from Nicopolis drove a wedge-shaped formation through the melee and started to separate the combatants by hauling them to opposite sides of the agora.

The soldiers' quick action forestalled others from joining the fray, but the mood of the moment turned sour. The crowd milled and muttered on the edge of violence. Suspicious glances, and not a few provocative remarks, flew from group to group. Selene's heart fluttered in fear. Phillip pulled her close and looked around, as if scouting for an escape route. Nicaeus blocked her view as he moved in front to protect her, but she heard a commanding female voice cut through the mutters of the crowd.

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"Peace, my friends and fellow citizens. Let us not spoil this celebration by committing bloodshed over the foolishness of a few youths. We are here in fellowship to welcome our new governor. It would be a poor welcome indeed, if he met with riot and disorder on his first day. My friend Patriarch Theophilus will join me in this plea for peace; will you not, Good Father?"

Selene peeked around Nicaeus to see Hypatia holding out a hand to the angry Patriarch. A few ragged cheers started on the edge of the crowd. "Heed Hypatia. Peace for the Prefect."

Theophilus spread his arms to address the crowd.

Chapter 3

Orestes, Augustal Prefect and governor of all Egypt, chafed at the slow pace of the procession. He made a striking figure, his military bearing belying his civilian purple and white ceremonial robes. Orestes had toiled for years in provincial towns to reach this appointment. This would be the culmination of his career. If successful, the rewards would be substantial, both in terms of power and esteem. The Praetorian Prefect and Regent Anthemius, his patron at the court, had warned him this appointment would be a difficult one. The city had been quiet for several years, but had a reputation for riot and disputation with imperial authority, particularly as the Patriarch grew in power.

Orestes nodded and waved from his burnished chariot, handling the four white mares himself. An aide stood at the back tossing coins to the tightly packed crowd; more coins in this poorer section of the city close to the walls, fewer as they neared the agora where the more privileged awaited him. Orestes would have dispensed with the whole celebration, if he had a choice, but the fractious people of Alexandria did not give him one.

His good friend Abundantius, posted here for several years as the Egyptian military commander, made it clear what the people of the city expected. "One of my predecessors had to accompany a new Patriarch into the city to protect him after he had been tossed out," he had told Orestes. "The good father was humble and most holy, but he was the Emperor's man, not theirs. The new Patriarch came into the city with little fanfare and compounded his error by shortening the investiture ceremony. The good citizens of Alexandria drove him out of the city until he did it right. 'Right' meant a full procession with troops, clergy, and – most important of all – a feast day for the city."

Orestes laughed at the story, but took Abundantius' point. Alexandria was the third largest city in the Empire and the major supplier of grain for Constantinople as well as the army. Peace in the Empire depended on bread from Egypt. Peace in Alexandria depended on a shrewd mind, an adept hand at the helm, and a lavish welcome complete with free food and drink.

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Orestes watched closely the faces of the people he had been sent to govern. Those faces changed dramatically as he approached the agora, from the dark pinched countenances of the Egyptian peasants flooding the city, looking for work, to the olive-toned descendents of Greek and Roman conquerors. The crowd had a fair sprinkling of black Nubians and an occasional startling blond barbarian, both usually towering over the short people of this region. Alexandria was a crossroads for trade and pilgrims. People from all over the Empire and beyond, traveled its streets and did business in its shops and offices.

Orestes sensed a change in the crowd's mood as he approached the agora. They looked uncertain, muttering and straining to hear voices that trickled from the open space in front of the triumphal arch. He motioned to the decurion of the mounted escort Abundantius had provided. The grizzled man approached, horse skittering from the chariot wheels.

The soldier snapped a salute. "Can I be of service, Sir?"

"Do you know what is going on?"

"No, Sir, there's been no word."

"Then carry on, but prepare your unit for trouble."

"Yes, Sir!" The decurion rode from mount to mount giving orders and watching the crowd carefully.

Battle senses alert, Orestes rode into the vast square. He saw several people cleaning a pile of rubble from in front of the viewing stand. A diminutive woman in scholar's white and a frail man in full Bishop's regalia harangued the crowd. He immediately recognized the famous Lady Philosopher Hypatia and Patriarch Theophilus. Whatever the problem, they had it under control.

The crowd roared his name. The roar devolved into a chant: "Orestes. Blessed be your name. Just be your rule." The chant continued as he circled the agora, descended from the chariot and ascended the steps to the podium. His escort took positions ringing the platform. He raised his arms for silence. The crowd gave one final roar and quieted in expectation of the speeches.

Orestes sat on a cushioned chair left conspicuously vacant. He faced a tedious afternoon and was pleased to see the dignitaries well served with food and wine. Numerous scribes stood ready to record the speeches. Copies would be posted throughout the city tomorrow. A sailcloth canopy gave some relief from the sun, but Orestes soon felt sweat trickling down his back to be absorbed by his wool tunic. He resisted the urge to doff his full toga.

The Patriarch took the podium first. He welcomed Orestes to the city then conducted a lengthy prayer and homily admonishing him to do God's work. A number of nobles, councilors and elders followed Theophilus, each expressing their gratitude to the Emperor for sending such a wise and just man to rule over them. One by one they pledged their undying support. After about three hours, Orestes asked a servant to escort him to the facilities and excused himself to visit the private privy built under the reviewing stand for the comfort of the dignitaries.

He returned in time to see Lady Hypatia take the podium. She nodded as he seated himself and launched into her speech. He listened with interest, never having heard a woman speak in a public forum. Her intense form and commanding voice seemed to cast a spell over the crowd. They had been shuffling noisily and talking among themselves, but now they quieted, occasionally laughing at an amusing story or punctuating her speech with shouts of agreement. Anthemius had recommended Orestes seek the Lady Philosopher's advice and now he understood why. Hypatia seemed to have astute insight into the history and workings of the city.

The rhythms of her speech kept him enthralled until the use of his name startled him. "Orestes, I ask you to lead the city well. Remember a leader is best when the people feel a firm hand helping them along the road, not when they feel a heavy foot upon their necks. Beware of false obedience and acclaim. Listen more than you speak. Honor the people and they will honor you. When your work is done and your aim fulfilled, the people should say, 'We built this,' and honor you for letting them. Welcome to our fair city, Orestes. May you – and we – prosper."

Hypatia bowed to Orestes as the crowd started chanting his name. It was his turn to take the podium and greet the people. He straightened his shoulders and strode to the lectern with his head held high. The chanting filled his chest with pride until he remembered Hypatia's words on false acclaim. These people knew nothing of him except that he represented the Emperor. He would have to prove himself worthy of their regard, as he had with his army commands, through hard work and wise decisions. He felt a momentary hesitation, then let it pass.

"My fellow citizens," he began in slightly accented Greek, "I greet you on behalf of the Most Pious and Beloved Emperor Theodosius II. In this, the fourth year of his reign, the Roman Emperor of the East extends to you his blessings and assures you of his love and justice." Orestes continued in the same vein, as customary, acknowledging the warm welcome and elaborately praising the city and its people. "The Emperor knows of the great work you

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do here in Egypt, laboring to feed the Empire..." There were some mutters and dark looks, so he hastened past this topic onto another. "In appreciation the Emperor has increased the bread dole by one-half portion for three months."

The crowd roared its approval, stamping their feet and clapping loudly while calling his name. When they quieted, he continued. "The Emperor provides a thousand head of cattle for your feasts." More cheers rippled through the crowd as the word spread beyond his voice.

Orestes noted the lowering sun and the restive condition of the crowd, and concluded, "In light of the advice given me by the wise Lady Hypatia to listen more than speak, I'll conclude by saying what an honor it is to serve my Emperor in this fairest of all cities. Enjoy this feast day, good citizens, and may God bless us all."

The crowd indulged in one more round of chanting before dispersing to the various celebrations sponsored by the city, professional guilds and the church. Orestes, girding himself for a long night of banquets in his honor, turned to the city and church elders and surrendered to his fate.

"Which group is this?" Orestes asked Abundantius as they ascended the stairs to their third reception. The *dux* had volunteered to escort his old friend around the city and make sure Orestes got to the Prefect's mansion in time to bathe before starting his duties early the next morning.

"The city councilors."

"How many?"

"Only about thirty...with their families."

Orestes groaned. "I'm getting too old for this. My shoulder is bruised from so many vigorous salutations, my ears numb from the incessant requests for an audience, and my face will likely crack if I have to smile one more time." He ran his hand through his close-cropped auburn hair. "I would rather march thirty miles, in full pack, cross-country than spend another day such as this."

Abundantius roared and pounded Orestes on his reportedly sore shoulder. "You're the one who gave up the military life for civil service, my friend. Now you have to live with it. Come, the councilors wait."

The City Council building housed the banquet. They ascended the marble steps past a row of columns, into a massive hall. Internal columns held up a vaulted ceiling, painted deep blue with the twelve constellations depicted in gold leaf. Painted plaster walls gave the illusion of looking out into a formal garden. About seventy temporary couches lined the walls,

many accommodating two or three occupants. A leather couch strewn with red and purple silk pillows was reserved for him just to the right of the entrance.

Orestes took his place and waved off the servants bringing food, although he did accept a goblet of cold white wine. The councilors approached him one by one, according to rank and seniority. Abundantius introduced each and provided amusing stories about some as they left earshot.

"This next one is a solid fellow," Abundantius said in low tones. "Honest. Has a good head on his shoulders and is well respected by his colleagues."

Orestes looked up. A familiar face grinned at him behind a dignified old councilor's shoulder. "Phillip! Is this your family?"

Phillip bowed low. "Yes, Honored Prefect. This is my father Calistus, my brother Nicaeus, and my sister Selene."

Orestes clasped Calistus' arm. "Well met, Sir. Your son has told me much about you. I look forward to knowing you and your family better." The younger brother stepped forward with a bow. "Nicaeus, is it? I hope you've been staying away from the green melons."

"Yes, Sir." The lad blushed to the tips of his ears and glowered at his brother.

Orestes' eyes widened at the sight of Selene. Taller than most women by half a head, she had strong features – sweeping eyebrows, a nose just a bit too long, and a generous mouth. Not daintily pretty, but handsome in a way that lasts well into old age. "Phillip, this lovely young lady surely cannot be the madcap child with skinned knees you told me of?"

Selene curtsied low and flashed a smile as he offered his hand to help her rise. "I see my brother has been most generous with his stories. You must not believe everything he says, Lord Prefect. He is a most notorious teller of tales. He honed his gift through the study of law."

"Ouch!" Phillip mimed pulling a knife from his heart.

Calistus frowned at his oldest son and said in frosty tones, "You must forgive my unruly children, Sir. Although it might not be in evidence, they *were* taught how to behave on formal occasions." All three offspring lost their smiles at their father's rebuke. Phillip's face settled into careful neutrality, only the tightness about the mouth betraying some tensions between father and son.

Orestes pushed away unwanted memories of his own stern father and said with a smile, "They are a pleasure, good Calistus. In a long day of

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ceremony, some levity with friends is welcome. And Phillip proved himself a most worthy friend on the journey."

Calistus' countenance softened at the praise for his son. "I'm pleased Phillip was of service to you."

"I hope you will be of service, as well. I wish to consult with you on a number of matters."

"At your convenience, Sir." Calistus bowed.

As the family retreated to their couches, and before another could approach, Orestes mused, "Phillip proved himself a most capable and resourceful fellow on our journey. I believe I have a special appointment for him."

Abundantius raised a goblet. "What? When?"

"That depends on the next few days. I have much more to learn before I can tell what tasks to set him. But I know I will need people I can trust in sensitive positions." Orestes raised a glass of wine. "We'll see what opportunities present themselves."

After returning the jewelry and fine clothes to their chests, Rebecca cleaned the cosmetics from Selene's face and combed her hair. "What is the new Prefect like, Mistress?"

"He's magnificent, Rebecca! When my gaze met his, I had trouble breathing. My heart fluttered and I thought it would stop. His eyes are clear green, like gems on an expensive ring. They seemed to see into my very soul." She sighed dramatically. "He's a full head taller than Phillip, with hair that shines like gold streaked with copper. He held my hand." She cradled her right hand against her chest. "Where he touched me, my skin yet burns."

"Perhaps some cold water would relieve the discomfort." Rebecca combed the curls out of Selene's hair.

Selene laughed. "To soothe my hand or douse my dreams?"

"It is not my place to douse your dreams, Mistress. I just caution you not to lose your heart at first glance. How old is the Prefect?"

"Younger than Father and older than Phillip. He's not decrepit, if that is what you're hinting."

"No. I just find it strange that a man in the prime of life and in such a powerful position has never married. Surely there were opportunities for an advantageous match over the years?" Rebecca pulled the loose hair back and quickly braided it to keep it from tangling during the night. "Is there anything else you require before you retire, Mistress?"

"No, Rebecca. Wake me in the morning, no later than the third hour."

"As you wish, Mistress."

Selene turned Rebecca's words over in her mind as the servant girl exited. It was indeed strange for a man of Orestes' position to be unmarried. Perhaps he had made a vow to the church or had lost a true love. Or maybe he preferred boys. What was this unwanted feeling Orestes stirred in her? How could she find out the truth about him?

What difference would it make, if he were unavailable? Why was she even thinking such things when just that morning she vowed she would remain unmarried? The thought shook Selene out of her romantic reverie.

A sudden restlessness took over her body. Selene picked up the small alabaster oil lamp Rebecca had left burning on her cosmetics table, and left her room. She didn't know where she was going until she found herself before Phillip's door. Light spilled across the threshold. Selene knocked timidly with her foot. "Phillip, are you still awake?"

She heard a groan and a faint, "Come in." Her brother lay face down on his bed, a male slave massaging his body. Lamplight rippled off corded muscles and flowed across brown skin. A faint scar ran up his backbone from his waist to mid-back. As a boy he had fallen from a wall, scraping his back raw. One of Selene's first memories as a toddler was of their mother soothing her brother's pain with a poultice of wet leaves that smelled of mint. Tears stung her eyes. She missed those simpler days, before her mother died and her older brother had gone away to finish his education at the capitol. Phillip turned his bearded face toward her. There were dark circles under his eyes. "What is it, Selene?"

She collapsed on a bench against the wall, scrubbing her face with both hands. "Nothing. I'm just tired, is all. You look exhausted as well. I'll not keep you up." She rose from the bench to leave.

"No, don't go." He reached out to stay her. Selene gave a significant glance at the slave putting away the oil. Phillip nodded. Most people treated servants like pieces of furniture, but Selene knew how the silent shadows gossiped in the kitchens and the marketplace. They provided much information to her.

"Marcus, you may go now. Attend me in the morning," Phillip commanded. The slave bowed as he left the room. Phillip sat up, wrapping a linen sheet around his middle. "Now, little sister, what can I do for you?"

"Just hold me a while." She sat beside him on his bed and nestled into his side, his arms snuggling her close. They sat quietly. Selene's breathing slowed and her eyes drooped. A sudden shift of her brother's body brought her out of a half doze.

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"You're too old for this type of cuddling, little sister, and I'm too tired." Phillip stifled a yawn.

"I know. I just came by to see if the servants had cared for you properly and..." she hesitated.

"And to see if I might arrange for you to see Orestes again?"

"I came for no such thing!" Selene exploded off the bed, her recent lethargy forgotten in a surge of pique.

Her brother laughed. "I'm not blind. I saw how you looked at our Prefect all during his appearance."

"I did not!"

"Yes, you did."

She stamped her foot and turned her back on him. He stood and took her by the shoulders, turning her around. "Orestes is a good man, Selene, but he's not the one for you."

"I don't want him! I didn't...I don't want any man. At least not for a long time. I...he just..." Her words stumbled to a stop. She stood in her brother's arms, trembling.

"He just what?"

"He makes me feel strange – like I've never felt before. I can't talk around him; I have trouble breathing, my ears ring. I feel so...so...stupid! Maybe he's bewitched me."

Phillip laughed, hugged her briefly, and then stepped back, holding her at arm's length. "You've been spending too much time with the servants, picking up their superstitious ways. You're fourteen. It's natural you would be attracted to a man, especially one as handsome and powerful as Orestes. Don't worry, little sister, you'll get over it. Things will feel better in the morning."

He turned her around and gave her a little shove toward the door. As she was leaving, she stuck her head back in. "Promise?"

"Promise."

"Phillip?"

"Will you leave and let me go to sleep?"

"It's good to have you home again." She ducked out before she heard his reply. Content, she would sleep now and leave the mystery of the Prefect for another day.

Chapter 4

Orestes woke just before sunrise. He always did, no matter how little sleep he had the night before. When on active patrol, he used this predawn time to walk the camp perimeter, check on troop readiness and have a quiet word with the foot soldiers. In his administrative roles, he used this precious private time to exercise and prepare for the day.

He rolled over in bed, sat up and groaned, slightly disoriented by unfamiliar surroundings. The night before, Orestes poured as much drink into potted plants as he had consumed at the banquets, but still his head ached. Abundantius, less circumspect, had consumed all the fine wine the good city fathers presented. Orestes rubbed his cropped head ruefully. His friend had always been able to drink and be cheerfully free of ill effects the next morning.

Orestes shook the cobwebs from his mind and surveyed his sumptuous room with a small frown. The profusion of bright silk hangings, lustrous gilded wood and painted statuary offended his ascetic tastes. He should have known the Alexandrian Prefect's quarters would reflect the Oriental splendor of the Constantinople court. A wealthy benefactor had willed the estate to the Emperor after the destruction of the Ptolemaic palace district during Diocletian's reign.

The mansion, situated south of the agora, crowned a low rise of limestone built up into an artificial hill. From the loggia, one could look over the whole city, yet have easy access to the governmental and commercial heart directly north. Orestes' suite of rooms looked out onto a central garden of neatly clipped bushes and banks of flowers. His personal quarters took up the top floor of the entire east wing.

As Orestes stood, a muscle spasmed in his back. His in-drawn breath hissed as he bent halfway over, hand on a gilded chair. The servant who'd seen him to bed, a scant two hours before, had informed him a slave had been assigned to see to his personal needs. "Demetrius!" he shouted.

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The slave – a compact man of uncertain middle age and probable Greek heritage – entered immediately and rushed to Orestes' side. "Master, what is wrong? Should I call a physician?"

Orestes waved him off. "No. My head is the worse for the celebrations and my back rebels against this soft life." He rubbed both hands on his lower back as he straightened and surveyed the room. "Get rid of that nest of pillows masquerading as a bed. I require a platform of cedar, built to half again my length and my arm span wide. Have a mattress made with close woven cotton and stuffed with something solid – straw or feathers, not down."

He made a sweeping gesture with his right hand. "Remove all statues except three of the smallest, all chests and tables except the largest, and that chair." Orestes pointed to an ugly throne-like affair sitting on a raised platform against a wall.

Demetrius bowed. "At once, Master."

"It can wait a little," Orestes replied in an ironic tone.

Demetrius discreetly cleared his throat.

"Yes, man. Speak up."

"Would the Prefect care to be shown the mansion? The steward awaits your pleasure."

Orestes groaned at the prospect of another round of introductions and insistent importunities. "The Prefect wishes a tour of the baths and a massage before facing the steward."

The one luxury he did approve of in his new home was the gymnasium and baths. All upper class homes had running water, and most had baths, but the majority of the populace frequented public facilities, hundreds of which dotted the city. The more luxurious baths charged fees and were frequented by the city elite.

Demetrius led Orestes through the colonnaded outside passage, past several carved mahogany doors to a narrow staircase in the rear of the complex. Orestes felt the humidity increasing as they descended to a chamber with vaulted ceilings. An exercise pool stretched before him. His footsteps echoed off the stone floor with a wet slapping sound. Two slaves stood at attention beside a bench piled high with thick towels.

Demetrius pointed to a series of doors on the left. "This way we have the cold, warm and hot rooms, all furnished with pools, benches and tables. The attendants are skilled in all the usual services: massage, barbering, hairdressing, skin waxing."

"Is there an exercise yard?"

"Through that door at the end of the room. There is a full complement of weapons and a weapons master could be employed if you wish, Master. The guards use the yard for practice when the Prefect is not in residence."

"Good. Arrange for the best wrestler to work out with me in the mornings. Once a week I'll want a swords master to attend me. My custom is to arise before dawn, exercise and bathe before attending the office."

"Might I suggest the Prefect plan to attend the public baths on occasion? Much important city business is conducted as the city fathers take their ease."

Orestes rubbed the bridge of his nose. He intended to add frequent trips to the public baths to his schedule. The imperial court had been much the same. "That is sound advice. When is the most auspicious time of day to arrive at the baths?"

"After the afternoon council session and before the evening meal."

"I'll enjoy my own facilities this one day." Orestes surveyed the beckoning rooms then started for the one with steam pouring from under the door. "I'll soak in the hot pool, have my massage and finish in the frigidarium." He snapped his fingers at the body slaves. "Attend me."

Orestes lay on a marble table draped with a warm towel of soft combed linen. The material felt silky against his skin. A slave pummeled his sore muscles, kneaded sweet-smelling oil into his skin and scraped off the oil and sweat with a strigil, a small curved knife. Orestes caught a whiff of wintergreen under the heavier scent of sandalwood.

Demetrius stood against the wall, an unobtrusive shadow, sparking Orestes' curiosity. "How came you to this state of servitude, Demetrius?" Orestes asked.

A blank mask settled over the slave's face. "It's a common enough tale. My widowed father drank heavily and ran up debts against his shipping business. A run of bad weather and spoiled cargo ruined us. My sister and I were seized and sold into slavery to pay the debts. My father died shortly after of a wasting disease of the liver."

"And your sister?"

Small lines of bitterness puckered the corners of Demetrius' eyes as he replied in a low, flat voice, "She was put to work in a brothel. She died a year later in childbirth, as did the babe."

"I see. No patron? No business associates of your father's to look after you two?"

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The slave stiffly shook his head. "His business associates pressed the magistrate for our enslavement."

"And what path were your feet set upon before this tragedy?"

"I was a student of history and languages. The former for my pleasure. The latter to be useful to my father in his business."

Orestes had observed Demetrius during the morning, carefully testing his abilities as a body servant and his knowledge of the estate. His tone toward his master was always deferential, his advice well considered. Demetrius took no notes, but made quiet requests of waiting servants. The others accorded the slave a level of respect not usually offered to one of his rank. Orestes did not doubt his every wish would be dealt with efficiently and to his satisfaction, but hoped Demetrius might prove of even higher worth in another capacity.

"Based on your study of history, what do you recommend I do first as Prefect?"

Demetrius blanched and bowed his head. "I would not presume to advise you, Master."

"Come, man," Orestes said with some impatience. "You have already given me excellent advice. I am new to this city and require people I can trust to give me assistance."

"I'm a slave."

"Precisely. As a slave, you go places I cannot. You hear things I do not. You do not have the same interests as the nobles or councilmen who try to influence me. I need someone to balance their views."

"My first advice is to take your time finding advisors. You know nothing of me. You do not know if I am wise or trustworthy."

"By your very words, you prove both." Orestes smiled. "Most men would cut off a finger to be a privy advisor to the Prefect. What else would you advise?"

Demetrius squared his shoulders. "A close relationship with Patriarch Theophilus. He is the spiritual leader of this city, and most influential. You can do little without his approval. Hypatia, the Lady Philosopher, is also an able advisor. Her wisdom has guided several of the Prefects, although the last gave her words little heed."

Orestes sat up as the body slave towed off the remaining oil. "Any others?"

"Many to be wary of, a few to listen to." Demetrius frowned in concentration. "I will make a list for your perusal. I also advise a tour of the

province and as many public appearances as you can. The people need to know their governor and feel they can appeal to you."

"My private life will become the stuff of gossips and dinner conversation."

"As it would anyway. Your history is already making the rounds of the salons, Master. If the gossips do not get something new to talk about soon, they will make up their own stories."

"Very well." Orestes dropped his feet to the floor. "Let's go to the frigidarium. A cold dip should be just the thing to prepare me for the day."

"At your pleasure, Master." Demetrius bowed low.

Later, after disappointing the hairdresser ("I've worn short hair all my life"), the barber ("I know beards are fashionable, but I like to be clean shaven") and the cook ("Water to drink in the morning, bread and soup at midday, simple fare for dinner"), Orestes retired to his office.

On the way, Demetrius commented softly, "The staff is most eager to serve you in any way, Master. They feel your refusal to use their services is a reflection on their abilities."

"You mean they fear they will be dismissed."

Demetrius shrugged. "If the Prefect has no need for a service, it is logical to conclude the Prefect has no need for the servant."

"I have no time or inclination to indulge in the elaborate rituals of a nobleman. However, I will be entertaining many local and foreign guests, who will require the services of a skilled staff. The cook will yet get to dazzle me with his art." Orestes rubbed his smooth-shaven jaw. "Arrange for suitable gifts to be distributed to the staff in honor of my arrival, and assure them of their positions."

"Yes, Master." As they approached a mahogany door, Demetrius informed him, "Isidore, the steward, awaits you in your office."

One corner of Orestes' mouth quirked upward. "The first in a long line of appointments, I suppose. I hope it is an auspicious one."

They entered the room, Orestes in the lead. An officious little man, whose thin beard failed to cover the blemishes from some past disease, rose to greet them. The man's sallow skin was not enhanced by the garish yellow-orange of his robes. "I hope everything is to your satisfaction, Augustal Prefect." Isidore minced forward, hands fluttering. "Would you care to inspect the grounds now?"

"I've seen what I want of the estate. I've left instructions with Demetrius for ordering my quarters and my schedule. Give him all due assistance."

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Startled, Isidore cast a suspicious glance toward Demetrius. "Your Excellency will need assistants. I've taken the liberty of recommending three young men for the position of personal secretary. They come from the best families and await your pleasure, Sir."

Orestes put on a polite smile. Isidore might just be overly efficient and trying to please the new Prefect, but more likely he was taking gifts from the fathers or patrons of the young men. Many would give good money to know what business the Prefect conducted in private, what decrees would be made and when. "Thank you, good Isidore. As I am new to this city, I would not give offence by elevating one family above another by taking a son into my employ."

Isidore hid his disappointment with a bow. "As you wish, Excellency. Should I seek others more to your liking?"

Orestes turned to his body servant. "Demetrius, you read and write, do you not?"

"Yes, Master. I speak, read and write Greek and Latin. I also speak the local Egyptian dialect fluently and know some Hebrew."

Isidore's head bobbed. His eyes grew round with consternation. "But..."

"Good." Orestes interrupted. "Until I can better assess my situation and choose for myself, Demetrius will be my personal secretary." He ushered the steward out of the office with a firm hand on his back. "Thank you again, Isidore. I expect regular reports from you on the running of the household. I would see the accounts tomorrow, and once a quarter hereafter."

After the door shut on the outraged Isidore, Orestes surveyed his office. This room was more to his liking. It had a functional lived-in look, though still ornate. A massive table with legs carved in the shapes of fish dominated the room. Orestes feet sank into a rich carpet woven in greens and blues as he approached the table. He ran his hand appreciatively over the highly polished surface inlaid with various types of wood and ivory showing scenes from life along the Nile.

"Should I arrange a suitable gift for Isidore, as well, Master?"

"What?" Orestes looked up. He thought for a moment then smiled. "Would I be mistaken if I thought Isidore has been helping himself to 'gifts' from the estate for years?"

"That is not for me to say, Master. I know only that he purchased a large villa in the outlying precincts last year. He has many business interests, all profitable. The last Prefect seemed satisfied with his service."

Orestes smile turned sour. "My predecessor was satisfied with a great many things that I am not. That is why I am here – to rectify his mistakes. I

see no need to enrich Isidore further and I want you to point out the excesses in his accounts."

Orestes lowered his lanky body onto a green leather chair sitting behind the table. Four smaller matching chairs sat along the wall. Fresh sheets of papyrus, quill pens, bottles of ink and wax for seals sat at the ready on a side table, along with initial reports on the city. "Well, Demetrius, let's begin."

The next day, Orestes, accompanied by Demetrius, journeyed to the Prefecture where he had another set of offices. The cavernous seat of provincial business was located next to the city council building. In an endless round of introductions reminiscent of his first day, Orestes met dozens of civil servants, both permanent and temporarily elected to preside over the vast and intricate bureaucracy of the city and province.

Unlike his servants, these men seemed confident in their roles. Prefects came and went, but civil servants held their positions through connections with powerful city patrons. Many of those patrons paid handsomely to have a son, nephew or client installed in an office that collected taxes or regulated trade and workshops or engaged in public works. Orestes found it prudent to maintain good relations with the nobility by allowing them some profit from such lucrative appointments if it wasn't too excessive.

The lowering sun found Orestes with his entourage of city officials and their assistants on the bank of Lake Mareotis. Mud brick buildings sprawled along the shore behind them and stone docks thrust into the lake. The harbormaster, a bluff man with graying beard, barrel chest, and the bandy legs of a sailor, greeted them with a bow. "Lord Prefect, welcome! All is ready for your inspection."

Orestes looked around curiously. Trade was the lifeblood of Alexandria. All the goods to and from the Egyptian hinterland went through this city. Dock workers swarmed like ants to discharge the cargo: amphorae of wine and oil, barrels of fruits and vegetables, bales of wool and linen, stone from the quarries, pottery from the kilns. This bustling freshwater harbor saw as many boats and more barges than the seaward harbors. Orestes marveled at the sheer volume, as well as the variety of goods that moved through this port, but his primary responsibility lay with one particular export.

"I should like to see the granaries first."

The harbormaster bobbed and waved a hand to the east. "This way, Your Excellency. This month of July the Mother Nile begins to rise, bringing life to the land. Last year's harvest is arriving from the central granaries established along the river. We are in the middle of our busiest season." He

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waved toward the lake. "See, even as we speak, more barges arrive from the south."

Orestes squinted at a small fleet of nine barges crawling across the horizon toward the grain docks. The flat-bottom boats wallowed with their heavy loads. Bargemen strained at their oars. The last barge straggled some distance from its fellows.

Orestes and his entourage continued down the docks toward the towering stone granaries. The harbormaster explained the intricacies of wheat inspection to insure its quality was "unadulterated, with no admixture of earth or barley."

As they approached the docks in front of the granaries, a shout went up.

"There, Master." Demetrius pointed to the incoming barges.

A dozen men in small round boats attacked the straggling barge with spears and slings. The other eight raced for shore, leaving their companion to its fate. One bargeman was in the water. Two others fended off the coracles with their oars, but there were too many. A pirate climbed over an undefended side, clubbing one bargeman, before the others tipped the marauder into the water.

"You!" the harbormaster shouted at several lounging sailors, "take *The Egret* and go to their aid." He pointed to a trim little sailing vessel tied to the dock.

One of the sailors stood up and spat something dark on the ground before putting his hands on his hips and cocking his head. "It's too late. By the time I get'er under sail, the pirates will be back in the reeds."

The harbormaster's face turned red. "There might be survivors, man!"

The sailor spat again, this time marking a stone bollard.

Orestes stepped forward and flipped a silver coin at the sailor's feet. "Another one for every live man you bring back. I'll make it gold for a live pirate."

The sailor picked up the silver coin and tucked it into a pouch. "Yessir." He turned to his crew and cuffed the nearest one on the head. "You heard the man. Git!" They raced to the end of the dock and jumped aboard, loosening the lines from the bollards and raising sail. The crowd watched helplessly, as *The Egret* sped away.

The pirates grappled the barge, pulling it toward tall reeds screening the bank.

"If the pirates make it to the reeds, they will disappear into the hidden by-ways. The barge will be lost, its cargo disappearing into the villages on

the shores," the harbormaster explained. "My apologies, Augustal Prefect. I've asked for shore patrols, but the council has yet to hear my petition."

"Do you lose many ships?"

"More as the season waxes. Mother Nile was not generous last year and the harvest thin. There is hunger in the hinterland. Desperate men do desperate deeds." He bowed his head as if expecting a blow for his honesty.

"I see." Orestes gazed out at the concluding drama. The pirates made the reeds just ahead of *The Egret*. The crew tacked back and forth sending the odd arrow into the waving reeds, but to no avail. They stopped their useless pursuit to pull bodies from the water.

Orestes detached a pouch from his belt and handed it to the harbormaster. "See that this purse goes to the families of the lost men. I'll take up your petition with the council."

"Thank you, Excellency. Your help and generosity is much appreciated."

"We will postpone our tour of your fine facilities." Orestes nodded toward the returning ship. "You have other duties to attend to." He spoke briefly to Demetrius who departed with some haste. Orestes then made his roundabout way home via the agora dropping off members of his entourage as he went.

Demetrius and Phillip waited for Orestes in his private sitting room. Phillip's bearded face split into a dazzling smile at the sight of his traveling companion, and he rose. They clasped shoulders, thumping each other on the back. "Well met, my friend! How go your first days?"

Orestes motioned him to sit and took a comfortable couch next to a cold brazier. "It is much as I expected – too many people to remember and too few I can trust. Thank you for coming at my summons, Phillip."

"It is my pleasure to serve." His friend shrugged. "How can I be of assistance?"

Demetrius left, presumably to fetch refreshments. Orestes suddenly became aware of the emptiness of his stomach. It had been a long day, with little sustenance.

"I saw something disturbing at Mareotis harbor today." Orestes described the pirating incident. By the end of his tale, Demetrius returned with servants bearing platters of steamed fish wrapped in grape leaves, grains and vegetables cooked with a rare yellow spice from India, fresh breads of a light delicate brown sprinkled with sesame seeds, and a generous flagon of strong red wine.

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"Join me, Phillip. The cook will be most disappointed if I return this savory food barely eaten."

"My pleasure." Phillip's eyes sparkled at the delicious smells emanating from the various platters.

Demetrius sent the others away and served the food. Orestes raised a spoonful of grains and vegetables; the spicy scent tickled his nose. He hoped the cook had not put too much yellow powder in the dish. The last time he had tasted this spice, the food left a fiery taste that no amount of water seemed to quench. He tasted the grains and chewed with satisfaction.

"I asked the cook for simple fare." Orestes admitted, "I'm glad he ignored me. Try the grains, they are quite good."

Phillip tucked into his food. After many compliments, he returned to their previous topic. "I've also seen disturbing things."

"Such as?"

"On the trip home, people clogged the road. Not merchants or pilgrims, but whole families with bundles on their backs, heading for the cities. I've traveled these roads to visit my father's estates. I have never seen such sights. There must be famine in the land." Phillip paused, thinking. "And the brigands we encountered! The countryside used to be safe for unarmed pilgrims. Now all must go armed or escorted."

Phillip stared into his cup, swirling the wine into a miniature whirlpool. "My friends tell me the mood in the inns is sour and black, as if an evil spirit sucked all joy from life. Old women on the street cry doom, young women and men openly sell their bodies. I'm afraid your predecessor did little to keep such sights confined to the poorer neighborhoods."

"I've found little to impress me about my predecessor's practices. He seems to have let the church keep the peace and used the money allocated for that function for his own comfort. One of my first tasks is to build up the guards. I will call on General Abundantius for military troops till that is accomplished. How do you think the city nobles will react?"

"To troops on the streets? As long as they can do business as usual, they will care little." Phillip finished his wine and set the empty cup on a low table. "They will probably welcome the additional security."

"And the council? I will need their support."

"They're a pricklier bunch." Phillip scratched at his bearded jaw. "I don't know. My father would be a better judge of that."

"I would like to meet your father and talk with him at greater length. Do you think you might return the favor of this meal and invite me to your home?"

"Consider it done." Phillip smiled. "Selene will be very pleased."

"Your sister?" Orestes was startled.

"You made quite an impression on Selene at the reception. She'll be mooning about you for weeks, along with every other eligible maiden in Alexandria. You may have to arrange a marriage to escape constant pursuit."

"I shall never marry." A shadow of pain flitted across Orestes' face. "I enjoy the company of women from time to time, but have little patience for their intrigues and wiles. The court in Constantinople overflows with the plots of women, priests and eunuchs. The Emperor's sister Pulcheria is chief among them."

"She's a year younger than Selene! What plots could a girl concoct?"

"Children grow up fast in the royal palace or they sometimes do not grow up at all." Phillip looked thoughtful as Demetrius poured him a second cup of wine. Orestes commented, "Selene did not strike me as the type to plot. She seemed altogether too straightforward and innocent."

"Selene was always headstrong, but never devious." Phillip shrugged. "But I've been away three years. Much has changed – in my family and in the city." He sipped his wine pensively. "I fear we have troubled times ahead and would do all in my power to avert it. How may I be of service, other than arranging dinners?"

"My immediate needs are for information. I need people who can walk in all parts of the city and report to me what they hear and see. Can you do this?"

"It seems a noble cause, and more intriguing than running my father's estates."

"This assignment is not without its dangers, my friend. Think carefully before you decide. I have no wish to impose on our friendship in this way."

"It is no imposition." Phillip gave him a crooked smile. "I think I will enjoy such work."

"Who else might we enroll in our intelligence gathering?"

"I know some trustworthy fellows who would be glad to do the Empire a service."

Orestes raised his cup in a salute. "Good. I've already given some thought to your first assignment."

Phillip leaned forward as Demetrius cleared the platters.

Selene strives to be a doctor-hard enough for women in AD 412 in Alexandria, Egypt. Add a Machiavellian bishop, a powerful governor and a famous Lady Philosopher; and Selene must survive riots and political plots, as well as plague.

Selene of Alexandria

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