

Set in the court of Phillip II of Macedonia, The Companion breathes new life into the classical era. Deake yearns for love, but Kera, of necessity, must shun it. Though their union is impossible, the gods have fated them to be together. Theirs is a journey that tests their faith in gods and their personal integrity, and finds them in an epic battle of loving versus living that keeps the suspense high and the pages turning.

## **The Companion**

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MEGAN CREEL



THE  
COMPANION

Eleutheras

“WELL,” HE SAID, STANDING up after what seemed a long time, “it’s a good thing I am not a tiger.”

Kera smiled at him, a little ruefully, as he sauntered closer. “Why is that?” she wondered aloud, no longer afraid.

“I’ve seen what they can do to their prey.” He came to a halt right in front of her, still butted against the edge of the table, so that she had to crane her neck a bit to look at him. Her voice dried up in her throat and a small thrill ran through her as he let his gaze openly rove over her face and shoulders. Again, he leaned forward and placed his arms to either side of her, penning her to the table, but this time the gesture held seductive promise rather than menacing threat.

“They tend to select the larger kills.”

Kera was suddenly, and for the first time, *pleasantly* aware of her unusual height. Captivated, her gaze nervously flicked down to his lips as his face started its slow descent, tilting to her left. She watched, transfixed as his mouth passed hers by on its course to her throat. She turned her head slightly, almost involuntarily, and was confronted by the smooth, tan skin of his shoulder.

Kera’s breath quickened as she realized she was bent slightly backward over the table and had not the slightest desire to fight this man.

As if reading her mind, he continued, “When they catch them, they bite and hold them right here, until there is no longer a fight left.”

His lips were so close to the spot where her pulse beat at the base of her throat that she could feel the warmth of his breath on her skin. Deake smiled and inhaled deeply, gliding the tip of his nose up along the length of her neck to just behind her ear. She shivered slightly in response. His voice was a soft purr behind her ear as he nuzzled her.

“At which point, he eats her slowly...”



**T H E  
C O M P A N I O N**

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**T H E  
C O M P A N I O N**

Megan Creel

Eleutheras





*For Udy,  
the best companion  
I could have.*

*And, for Mr. Dabl,  
You changed my life, sir, for the better.*



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## A u t h o r ' s   N o t e

The naming conventions and units of measurement used throughout this work have been transliterated to be familiar to the modern reader. This was a deliberate choice on the part of the author, who favors ease of reading and emotional authenticity over achieving an academic level of factual authenticity.

Where it aided the story, historical terms were used; and where it did not, they were not. A brief glossary of such terms follows. The author prays forgiveness from scholars and romantics alike.





## Glossary of Historical Terms

**“...anvil to the cavalry’s hammer”:** a reference to a combined tactical maneuver. In battle formation, the phalanx forms the center of the line and is the principal point of engagement of the enemy. Once the enemy is engaged, the cavalry are dispatched from the left and right flanks and drive the enemy onto the pikes of the phalanx from the sides and rear. (*see also phalanx*)

**Apollo:** Greek god associated with the sun, which he carried in his chariot. He is also an archer, musician, and healer, giving man his healing arts; and is also called the god of light, and thus of truth.

**Aphrodite:** Greek goddess associated with sex and love.

**Ares:** Greek god associated with the fury of war.

**Athena:** Greek goddess of defensive warfare, protector of civilized life, and the inventor of the bridle. She tamed horses for man’s use.

**Ballista:** (pl. ballistae) a war machine (siege engine) that ejects heavy darts or stone projectiles.

**Caldarium:** that portion of the bathhouse that uses heated treatments, such as hot pools, heated rooms, and steam.

**Chiton:** a type of sleeveless, ankle-length tunic made from one or two pieces of fabric that hung front and back, and was pinned at one or both shoulders, and bound with a rope or sash about the waist. A variation on this was to gird the chiton at the waist and at the hips, and blouse the fabric in between.

**Companion:** see Hetaeroi.

**Compluvium:** (pl. compluvia) An opening in the roof of some ancient homes and buildings, devised to let rainwater fall into a shallow pool (called an *impluvium*) in the floor of the atrium below. The purpose

of the impluvium was both ornamental and practical, as the presence of water served to keep cool the temperature of the room.

**Cuirass:** that piece of armor that protects the chest and abdomen.

**Dionysus:** Greek god associated with wine, the madness of intoxication, exuberance and ecstasy.

**Eros:** Greek god associated with sexual desire.

**Greave:** (pl. greaves) that piece of armor protecting the calf and shin and extending from ankle to kneecap.

**Hades:** In Greek mythology, the lord of the Underworld.

**Himation:** a large cloak or wrap worn by both sexes, and draped in a variety of ways. It covered the body and could be pulled up to cover the head. In sculpture, philosophers and statesmen are often depicted wearing the himation.

**Hena kai nea:** literally, “the old and the new”, the name of the last day of the lunar month in antiquity, which bridged the two moons and would have been followed by *noumenia*, the new moon and beginning of a new month.

**Hephaestus:** Greek god associated with fire and the forge. He is physically lame, but a brilliant artisan, especially skilled at metalwork.

**Hera:** Greek goddess and consort of Zeus depicted as being consumed by jealousy at his serial infidelity. Patron of married women, and supporter of the integrity of marriage.

**Herakles:** alternate spelling of Hercules, a demigod or “half-deity” who figured prominently in Greek mythology. He is the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, and so, being the product of Zeus’s infidelity, he incurred the wrath of Hera from birth and was beset by a number of tasks and persecutions that later became known as his Labors. One of these Labors was to slay the queen of the Amazons and return with her girdle.



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**Hermes:** a Greek god and messenger of the gods, he also confers souls to the Underworld.

**Hestia:** A goddess; the personification of fire in the hearth. That is to say, she was fire itself and protector of the hearth and, thus, the home.

**Hetaera:** In ancient Greece, a sophisticated “companion” and prostitute, often very educated, independent and influential, being the only class of woman permitted to participate in symposia, and whose opinions were respected.

**Hetaeroi:** The elite cavalry of the ancient Macedonian army from the time of Phillip II, called “The Companions.” They are generally regarded as the best cavalry in ancient times, and the first shock cavalry developed. The Companions were the personal guard of the king.

**Macedon:** alternately called Macedonia, an ancient country in southeastern Europe, north of Greece. In classical times it was a kingdom that became a world power under Phillip II, and his son, Alexander the Great.

**Peplos:** a type of women’s draped dress consisting of a body-length tube of fabric. Before it was pinned at the shoulders, the top of the tube was folded down to the waist. Then, the garment was pinned (at the fold) over each shoulder, and the portion that was folded, and thus inside out, hung in gathers to the waistline giving the appearance of a dress with a top of slightly different shade worn over it.

**Phalanx:** a tight formation of foot soldiers bearing eighteen-foot long pikes, which stick out in front of the unit, on which the enemy is impaled.

**Phalangite:** a foot soldier, or infantryman, operating in a *phalanx*.

**Piggy:** Ancient slang for the vulva, as it was fashionable for women to denude the area by plucking, leaving the skin pink and fuzzy, like that of a pig.

**Persephone:** A goddess. The unwilling bride of Hades and Queen of the Underworld.

**Porne:** in Greek antiquity, much distinction was made between different classes or castes of prostitutes. *Porne* is the term referring to a common whore. There are other terms describing those of higher regard (as *betaera*), and terms for those of lower regard.

**Poseidon:** (also Poseidon *Hippios*) Greek god and ruler of the sea. He gave man his first horse, and is honored as much for his gift of horses as his command of the seas. *Hippios* is the Greek word for 'horse,' thus, Poseidon *Hippios* is the name designating a worship of him in this capacity.

**Symposium:** (pl. symposia) drinking parties, generally restricted to male attendance, with the exception of prostitutes, who were often in attendance.

**Tepidarium:** That portion of the bathhouse that utilizes cool water treatments, and is often open to the outdoors.

**Tunic:** the simplest of garments worn in antiquity, resembling today's T-shirt. They were knee length for men, and generally ankle length for women.

**Xyston:** A type of long, wooden thrusting lance used by cavalry in ancient Greece. It was between eleven and fourteen feet in length.

**Zeus:** In Greek mythology, the father of gods and mortals. He is associated with the sky and weather phenomena, and numerous aspects of social life including hospitality, oaths and justice.



## CHAPTER I

### Return From Battle

Dust rose in chaotic clouds as the wheels of wagons and the thunder of horses' hooves pounded into the keep amid the squall of voices shouting welcome, shouting orders, shouting relief. The train of men stretched over a mile; the last of the army to find its way home after others had been let go to their respective villages. These were the king's men: nobles and laymen who had left behind loyalty to local village to fight for Phillip and a new Macedon.

Slaves were dispatched in an all-hands order to care for horses, stow weaponry and armor while extra women were called from various tasks to tend to the personal needs of the returned warriors.

Grey, a middle-aged man, stood at the ready on the steps of the officers' quarters with a small battery of young men that would serve as valets.

At long last, a group of men with war-weary faces and deliberate stride approached, glancing backward occasionally toward the organized chaos as if reluctant to release their command to the civilians. Because they had been stripped of their armor and relinquished their crests to the servants, Grey had no way of knowing their ranks or whom to address first.

Just as he began to look questioningly at the officer closest to him, the man turned to watch another approach. In fact, all six men turned to watch with unmasked admiration as this seventh man bounded up the steps with a fluid stride. He was well over six feet tall with a body evocative of the warhorse he had dismounted. Even for a slave as

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tenured as Grey, it was hard not to gape at him, so heroic was his build and so commanding his presence.

“Captain?” Grey asked, formally.

The man grinned with a sort of boyish pride that found reflection in the faces of his junior officers. “Major, actually. Soon to be official. Major Deakon Korydon.”

*Just promoted*, Grey concluded and gave a congratulatory smile. “Welcome to Pella, Major. Sirs,” he added, bowing to the others. “I am Grey, base concierge, and these are your valets.”

“Grey, my men are tired and hungry. Please tell me there are baths, food and beds ready for us,” the major said.

“Absolutely, sir. And if there is anything you want that you do not find, these young men will see to it that you are quickly satisfied.” Grey turned to the valets and ordered, “A quick tour on the way to the rooms, and then to dinner or the baths, as they desire.”

Receiving nods of acknowledgement from them, he turned to the titan before him. “I am to serve as your personal valet in addition to my duties as concierge for the Royal Officers’ Retreat. The servants here are not permitted to ask your name or rank, out of deference to your station; so if you or your men have need of anything, let me know and I will arrange for it. Please follow me and I will orient you to the facility.”

“Thank you.” Deake was impressed with the man’s service and obvious organization. He followed Grey through a large and beautiful courtyard garden full of graceful statuary and a tiered fountain, and was guided past a wing of rooms opening onto the courtyard.

“These are your officers’ rooms here,” Grey indicated with an extended hand as they walked briskly down the colonnade on the left side of the courtyard.

Deake caught a glimpse of the rooms’ interiors as his officers were settled in. They were simply but comfortably appointed. At the top of the courtyard stood an armed guard and, beyond him, a gated stair. Grey took him up to an even more stately and secluded passageway on

## RETURN FROM BATTLE

the second level, and the noise from the outer yard and nearby fields at once receded to a distant din.

Satisfaction relaxed Deake's features into the tiniest hint of a smile: *Quiet*. It was blissfully quiet here.

Grey turned right and led him to a thick wooden door. While the older man fumbled with a set of keys, Deake breathed deeply of the sweet, subtle fragrance of the tiny garden below and turned to look down the length of the colonnade in the opposite direction.

As if reading his mind, Grey offered, as he tried a key in the door, "That would be the medicinal garden there below us. We have accomplished healers on hand in the baths in the adjoining building, should the need arise. This entire section of the camp is reserved for senior field command, both the top and the bottom floors." Grey tried another key and nodded to the left. "And this particular passage connects to the palace; hence the sentries stationed along the way. You can quickly gain access to me or the palace staff through them."

A metallic click was heard, followed by the sigh of hinges. "Ah! That's the one." Grey removed the key from his ring and gave it to the major. With a flourish, he pushed wide the door. "Your room, sir."

Deake ducked his head slightly as he stepped over the threshold. The room was simply but elegantly furnished with a large bed, a washstand, and a couple of large chairs, one stationed near the bed and the other between the door and the washstand. There was a small window, which looked upon the courtyard below; and an almost delicate little table with two chairs in the center of the room. A woven rug warmed the floor, and vines twined their way around the window.

Grey vanished through a narrow doorway next to the entrance that Deake had missed in his survey of the room, given that it was behind him. Grey's voice was muffled by the stone walls. "The privy is functional, but not as fancy as the ones in Athens."

He emerged from the dark space, completing his inspection of the room, and found a fresh, folded tunic on the bed, shook it out and

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held it up invitingly. "If you would like a moment to wash, I can show you the baths before we go to dinner."

Deake at last broke into a smile as he dropped his rucksack in the chair by the washstand. *A prius!* He thought exultantly. Five years of near constant battle and camp conditions had made him forget what joy there was in privacy and material comforts: A bed. Walls. Chairs. A valet! *Quiet.*

He washed his face in the basin filled with fresh water and was pleased to find that someone, probably Grey, had floated lemon rind and bay leaf in the bowl, imbuing the wash with rejuvenating oils. He splashed the water over the back of his neck, then his arms; and then pulled the dirty tunic from his body and washed the dust from his torso and hair. Grey towed him dry and pulled the clean tunic over his head.

Deake shrugged into the soft, clean garment, heaved a tremendous sigh of relief and paused to consider himself in the mirror. "Thank you, Grey. I will see the baths in the morning. Right now, I can only think of food and sleep." He turned to face the slave. "The room is beautiful; very welcoming. I saw that you have done as good a job for the others, and I thank you for that. This..." Deake looked around him again, as if in a dream, "this is probably the best reward a man can get."

Grey was speechless. Never had he been so complimented by one of such rank with such sincerity. He understood now the adoring looks on the faces of the major's junior officers: he was an incredibly decent man, and it was his decency that inspired loyalty, not his rank or even his physical strength.

"Thank you, sir," he stammered out at last, almost breathless. "Shall we go to dinner, then?"

"At once."

The columns in the banquet hall looked like pillars of pale orange sand framing the gently rolling emerald hills that lay beyond; the gray granite walls glittered with golden flashes of reflected sun; and the

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murals that graced the recently plastered upper third of the room glowed with a divine light in the late afternoon sun. Deake stepped fully into the space, which served doubly as a temple, and was enveloped by the rich, sweet perfume of lemon, herbs, garlic, and freshly baked bread.

He took a bowl from the buffet and ladled a broth made from roasted fish with citrus and parsley, added a handful of preserved olives and goat's cheese, and covered it with a giant round of flatbread that had been oiled and sprinkled with garlic. Deake found a couch in the sun near the western face, overlooking the city of Pella, reclined with his bowl and cup of watered wine, and took a moment to really arrive and take in the scene around him.

It wasn't quite home, but it was the closest he'd come to it in quite a long time. There was peace here, and hope for a brighter future.

He lifted his cup in libation to the gods, and, like most of the others who were weary from travel, spent most of his time in quiet appreciation of the meal before him: not rushing; neither engaging nor ignoring the people around him; just savoring the quiet after years of storm.

\* \* \*

Deake awakened slowly, quite refreshed from a long night of sleep in the quiet room. He sat up and stretched languidly, and then arose, naked, from the bed. He relished the feel of the soft rug beneath his toes and teetered toward the window on stiffened legs as more stretches overtook his sinews, pulling and twisting his legs, abdomen and arms. He gave a wide yawn as he looked out the small window and noted, with surprise, that it was only first light. By the length of his sleep, he had expected it to be midmorning, at least. Inspired by the beauty of the courtyard below, he quickly made use of the privy and dressed to go out for an exploratory walk in the early morning solitude.

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The smell of wood smoke was like incense on the air, and it put him in a grateful frame of mind. How wonderful to be safe and at rest, far from enemy territory. He only wished he could be home, on his own farm in Thessaly, watching it grow, walking its fields, imbibing its scents.

The sun broke over the horizon bathing the camp below him in amber light. He let his gait loosen as he trotted downhill on the red clay road. As he passed the barracks, a few were just coming out for a morning pee, but most were taking advantage of the day of rest after their long journey home and staying in bed. When he neared the entrance to the gymnasium field, Deake's attention was drawn to the sound of the smith's hammer ringing out from a building to the left. Curious, he detoured to pay the man a visit.

No sooner had he stepped in the doorway than a congenial voice greeted him from the dark within. "Deakon! How good to see you. I was just hoping you would stop by. I've made something for you."

Deake wondered who in this place he had never been before would address him so familiarly. His eyes adjusted to the dim light of the forge and he made out the shape of a burly man not far in front of him. The light of the rising sun edged into the room more rapidly, and the figure came forward, limping, twisted, and ugly.

"Hephaestus!" Deake cried incredulously and fell to his knee in a respectful bow. "I am dreaming," he said wonderingly.

"Yes, yes, get up! Come see what I have for you," the god said jovially, pulling him up by the hand like an old friend. "I've made you a new shield."

Deake arose and approached the workbench. Hephaestus grinned proudly, and with dirty hands held up a large round shield of pure silver with an exquisitely detailed golden maiden on its front. It was so bright with the reflection of the rising sun that for a moment it appeared that the gold figure moved, her arms sweeping gracefully overhead in an arc, the drape of her sleeve flowing gently like a banner.



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Deake took the shield from him and held it, propping it against the bench. It was beautiful. He was silent as he contemplated the woman on the front of the shield. Something about her pose and the expression of tenderness on her face held him mesmerized; for represented in her expression was that indefinable something he had yearned for everyday since he had become a man, and which he despaired of ever finding as the years grew on and the wars more frequent.

“Thank you,” he said with feeling. He wondered, privately, what he was to do with it, since, as a cavalryman, he did not carry a shield into combat. He turned it over to inspect the back of it, hoping for a clue, and was stunned to find it was entirely without a means to bear it at all.

“How shall I bear it when there is no sleeve?” he asked the god.

“This is to shield you against the sorrows, despair, and emptiness that come with being a man of war. Your prayers have not gone unheard; I know you have yearned for this for many years. She will hold on to *you* when you need her most,” Hephaestus answered gravely.

Deake, thoroughly confounded by his answer, tilted the shield back and forth, admiring the mirror-like shine of the concave surface. For the briefest instant, he thought he saw his reflection shift into that of a baby with dancing blue eyes, but the image was gone so fast he wondered if he had seen it at all. He turned to look at Hephaestus, who had picked up his hammer and resumed work on what appeared to be a very small greave. Seeing such a thing gave Deake an unsettling sense of foreboding.

Presently, Hephaestus looked out the doorway. Dark, roiling clouds gathered in the distant east, increasingly cloaking and blotting out the glorious morning sun. He frowned and began to hammer more intently, as if the completion of his work had just become more urgent.

Worried, wondering if the tiny greave had anything to do with the reflection of the baby, and wanting reassurance against the knot

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forming in his belly at the sight of those clouds, Deake ventured, “What is that you forge now, my lord?”

Hephaestus grunted and looked again at the clouds looming on the horizon before returning to the armor. “This is for later,” he replied enigmatically, and then indicated the shield with the tip of his hammer. “Be sure you take her with you when you leave this place. Trust in her, and she will be your salvation.”

Deake was filled with disquiet. *Salvation from what?* he wondered. He turned the shield again to look at the woman of gold on the front, desperate to feel her magic. He lovingly admired her form, curious about her dance, and touched the curve of her waist with his fingertip.

The eyes on the figure shifted and looked straight at him. Deake screamed and dropped the shield with a clatter.

He started awake with such force, the small of his back tinged with pain at being drawn so suddenly. He was dripping with sweat in the dark of the night, Hephaestus’s laughter still ringing in his ears.

A knock boomed at the door. “Major! You all right in there?” The sentry. Deake unlocked and cracked open the door. The guard’s face was alert and concerned. “I heard a shout.”

“Everything is fine,” Deake told the man, groggily.

The sentry looked through the crack at Deake’s naked, sweaty body, and his face softened into an interested leer.

Deake’s voice hardened in disgust. “Battle dreams,” he growled through bared teeth and slammed the door shut in the sentry’s face.

Sleep eluded him for some hours as he tried to decipher the enigmatic dream. He didn’t know whether to take it literally and search for a shield, or whether he should seek a more metaphoric meaning. Was it a woman? But that didn’t make sense, either; for how could a woman act as a shield against sorrow? As far as he was concerned, women were just as easily the cause of misery; and even if it were a woman, he couldn’t bear her into battle, could he?

Deake wished he had taken better note of the maiden’s features. Suppose he met her tomorrow and failed to recognize her? Damn. He

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decided to assume it was literal. Tomorrow he would seek out the enchanted shield and be sure to carry it with him as a talisman.

He yawned into the darkness and felt much better. Gradually, he dropped off into a sleep that was filled only with blackness and peace. Tomorrow morning, he would tour the remainder of the palace and retreat, keeping an eye out for the shield, before meeting his friends at the gymnasium for sparring practice.





## CHAPTER II

### G o d d e s s e s

Kera turned her head slightly at the sound of the approaching voices. During the lull between breakfast and the midday meal, most of the men were training at the gymnasium; and those who were here were typically convalescing from illness or injury in the tepidarium. She was, for the moment, practically alone in the giant room.

*It is just Grey, touring another new officer,* she concluded and returned her attention to the leaflet she was reading, which had been left behind on the terrace this morning.

Grey's voice rang clear in his customarily boastful spiel about the technical features of the bathhouse as they rounded the corner into the room.

The major was quite impressed with the number of innovations Phillip had installed in the palace since he had moved his seat from Vergina just three years ago. He scanned the sweeping expanse of ceiling and the newly frescoed walls as Grey described them, then followed the line of the tall colonnade leading to the terrace outside, and finally glanced downward to notice the three sunken gardens beneath the compluvia.

*Sweet Aphrodite!* Deake thought, and felt his jaw drop slightly. There, perched in the corner was the most erotic vision he had ever seen. The woman held herself with a casual grace that a queen would envy, and her body could only be described as luscious.

Fortunately for him, his mouth was still closed, so he didn't appear as completely stupid as he felt. Grey's voice became a distant,

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irrelevant drone at his side through the pleasant buzzing which seemed to fill his head.

Her knees were drawn up with one foot propped and the other dangling from the edge of the wide bench, and her cobalt blue peplos, pulled down to expose her breasts to the morning sun filtering down from above, draped down between her thighs from a golden rope that encircled her hips. She was leaning back, braced with one arm behind her, raven hair cascading down her back, breasts jutting forward juicily as she read the piece of parchment. Her skin was creamy, golden, and glowing from the baths, her nipples like coral roses beckoning him to sample their heady fragrance.

His guide caught on that Deake was no longer listening to the list of amenities and technical features he had been reciting. He smiled, noting the path of the major's attention. "Ah, yes. That is Kera. She is much the crown jewel of the baths."

"Indeed," he replied, willing her to turn and look at him.

"Quite literally, I might add. She was captured a few years ago from a villa in some neighboring territory or other, the daughter or betrothed of somebody or other, caught in the middle of high treason and a feudal conflict of lineage. Couldn't get anything done. At any rate, our king tired of the squabbling and saw fit to end the dispute by hostile takeover, and this young miss was brought here as 'spoils of war,' to be enjoyed by the officers of the army. There hasn't been any quibbling of the nobles in that area since!" Grey cackled. "Remarkable woman, highly educated, you know. Took the transition rather well."

"Really," Deake commented with grave interest, still willing her to look at him.

"Indeed. Her greatest comment on it was that, as women are property in any case, all was slavery for women, and this was merely a different sort of slavery, 'a more honest sort' she said." The old man bubbled. "And true to that spirit she has been. One of the few women here who actually seem to make work of the work! The gentlemen adore her and find her very pleasing indeed."

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At this last, Deake bridled, and what little smile there had been vanished from his face. He chastened himself for even giving a damn. He didn't know her; why should he care that others had tasted of her? His face nonetheless darkened with anger.

Kera couldn't help but overhear Grey's remarks. In the three years she had been here she had learned every sound of the bathhouse and had learned to listen between the sounds; for everything, no matter how quiet, everything echoed in here. You only had to listen for it. She noticed the man had no reply, and felt as if he was burning a hole in the side of her face. She damned herself for it, but couldn't help wondering who he was that he should suddenly feel so put out.

She carefully schooled her features into nonchalance and studied the pool before her for a moment before turning her head to the left to see who was with Grey. But when she turned toward the entry she was dazzled by how detailed and almost magical the entire space had become just by meeting his gaze. Kera's lips parted in surprise.

The unpolished granite floor, whose mixed block pattern had before seemed pleasing and attractive, became the floor of a fantastical arena. The walls seemed suddenly further apart, and the golden limestone blocks that formed them were, each one, glowing with a soft light of their own that made their earthy texture look sumptuous and refined.

Deake's heart stopped. She was a goddess. Her eyes were like sapphires glittering with intelligence and awareness. And her mouth, oh, what he could do with a mouth like that!

Three beams of light separated her from him: rays falling through the compluvia that lined the entrance to the baths. Three veils of sun-gilded mist falling softly on the ponds and plants below. Three squares of light warmed the granite floor.

*Fires of Hephaestus!* Kera's heart slammed alarmingly in her chest. His eyes were golden brown and mad as hell. Outrageously, that made him look even more appealing.

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Magnificent barely described him; he was unusually tall but perfectly proportioned, like a well-built athlete. His hair was cropped fairly short, and the large golden-bronze curls that lay against his head accentuated his heavy lidded, almond shaped eyes, strong nose and full mouth. In fact, he looked very much like the heroes depicted in the murals which ringed the atrium walls above her: Broad of shoulder and lean of hip with gorgeously muscled legs that swept forward more than they stepped forward when he walked.

Panic seized her as she realized he was coming toward her. Kera, a little too late, pulled her peplos up to cover her breasts protectively, feeling absurdly afraid that he was going to devour her. She had never really wanted any man; enjoyed them, sure, sometimes; but she knew that to ever really want one was to become a slave well and truly.

But Kera knew herself well enough to know that she truly, really, unequivocally wanted this man, and she wanted to be unforgettable to him. So, she did the only sensible thing there was to do in such a position: she looked him over well, lithely got down from her perch, turned, and walked in the opposite direction, disappearing into the steam.

*No!* He wanted to shout, but restrained himself from doing so. He stopped abruptly, hands clenching at his sides, and watched her swift retreat with acute disappointment and a burgeoning ache in his loins. He could watch the flutter of her peplos from this angle all day and never tire of it.

Grey saved him the embarrassment of having to look back at the distance he had unknowingly covered by casually taking his place at his side. He looked from officer to slave, and hummed with amusement to himself.

“As I was saying, sir, this bathhouse is for your use, day or night; and one of your rank is always at liberty to have any services delivered in your private quarters. You need only wish it aloud, and I will have her brought to you this very hour.”



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“That won’t be necessary, Grey. It may surprise you, but I do not enjoy forcing my attentions on a woman. Not even a slave. Clearly, she was less than taken with me.”

Grey hummed with laughter again, his eyes twinkling. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that, dear sir. I know Kera very well, and that was not distaste. Fear, perhaps, but not of you. Shall we see the gymnasium, then?”

But even after a fierce workout on the sparring field Deake was in a bad temper. Particularly since he had concussed and bloodied the noses of three compatriots who, and it was not lost on him, had commented about the previous night’s exploits and entertainments at the baths with a certain blue-eyed goddess. He’d had too little sleep and too much wine with the previous night’s dinner, and the fact that she had spoken to them but run from him rankled him to no end.

The day dragged on uncharacteristically unsatisfying. He had checked every place he could think of to find the shield or some clue from Hephaestus, but to no avail. Not even his private mid-night soak in the heated pool, which usually brought him great solace, provided any relief from the damnable sense of frustration and ennui.

Now, it looked like sleep would again be a long time coming as he lay awake in his bed, unable to get the image of Kera, sensuously kissed by the sun’s rays, out of his mind. He concluded the picture would be forever seared in his memory as one of the most irresistible and alluring things he had ever seen.

He again attempted to analyze his dream, trying to bring sleep, wondering where to look for the shield, or how it would manifest itself; but his mind kept coming back to Kera. Perhaps tomorrow he would look in the temple of Ares and make an offering.

*Fear, Grey had said, but not of you.*

*Fear. The man had no idea.*

A few hours before dawn, Deake at last found sleep.

\* \* \*

## THE COMPANION

“So, who is he?” Kera asked in a breathless rush.

“Whomever are you talking about, dear?” Grey rejoined in a voice affected with false boredom as he checked over the supplies of folded towels, oils, and whatnot, to ensure all was in order.

Kera laughed at herself. “Did I look as desperate as I felt?”

“No, darling, he was properly put off by your dismissive strut.”

“Oh, thank the gods!” she laughed again. “I have never felt like such a slut in all my life!”

“Well, the gods know you’ve certainly acted like one on more than a few occasions,” Grey said as they fell together laughing like old friends.

“And the gods know I was *acting*. But today... Oh, I was electrified. I was *terrified*,” she trailed off dreamily.

“Well, if it gives you any comfort, he seemed to be at once taken by you.”

“Oh, they’re all ‘at once taken by me,’ thanks to that whole ‘crown jewel’ bit you give them.”

“Well, it’s the truth. You are the best and prettiest—” Grey started.

“Oh, spare me the flattery. You’re just marketing the product,” she interjected with a playfully scolding tone.

“Oh, now don’t be a bitch about it. You know you have some fun, too.”

“You’re right, you’re right. I could be somewhere up in Thrace, fully clothed, standing behind a throne, owned by one man, dying of boredom. Instead, I am owned by the king, shared amongst his finest officers, and I get to run around half naked, knocking the piggy all day!”

They both howled with laughter. These end-of-the-day quips with Grey were among her favorite times. He was right. She would much rather be a slave in a place where she was free to communicate than one where she wasn’t. It was, at least, a forthright arrangement, one that didn’t try to dress itself up with civilized self-righteousness.

“So, what is he like?” she asked again.

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“Well,” Grey started in all seriousness, looking her in the eyes, “he is surprisingly decent. Courteous, even to the servants, always gives his thanks, and even declined my offer to have you brought up to him—after your dramatic exit this morning—saying he didn’t care to force his attentions on women, even if they were slaves.”

Grey frowned at her wistful smile. “What was that nonsense you said about being terrified of him?”

“Not terrified of *him*, Grey. It’s that I really want him that scares me. I don’t even know him.”

“Well, I don’t blame you, dear. He is magnificent! And his ass is like iron—”

“You old esophagus!” Kera cackled and slapped his arm. “What do you know of his ass?” she followed eagerly.

“I helped him dress for dinner last night. He wouldn’t turn around, so I can’t advise you in that department. Could be tiny, could be gigantic. Could be nothing at all,” he said with a wave.

She said nothing in response to that. Grey was intrigued, and stood across from Kera to polish her fingernails with a bit of clay-embedded cloth. “You’re really worried about him, aren’t you?”

“You know, Grey, the only way I have ever kept my sanity about all this,” she gestured to the walls around them, “is that I know as long as it is just a job to me, I still have some shred of dignity and a sense of...well, still being *me*.” There was a quiet understanding between them as their waggishness faded.

“Do you remember Anika?” Kera asked softly. There was a sad silence as they remembered her fate. Grey didn’t have to answer. “I don’t ever want to fall in love with one of these men. There is only hopelessness down that path, and that is the worst sort of slavery there is.”

“Well. That is a good point. Maybe you’re just infatuated with him. You know, a passing fancy brought on by the largeness of his shoulders. I think you should just treat him like any of the others. Have your fun, give him something to remember, and get on with the

## THE COMPANION

usual. There! All done.” He held her hands up to the light of the setting sun to admire the shine of her nails.

She still seemed a bit pensive, so he added teasingly, “Besides, five coppers says he’s got a tiny prick and isn’t worth your trouble!”

Kera’s laughter echoed again through the halls as she sauntered out of the closet with an armful of fresh towels to distribute.

\* \* \*

Kera moaned, astonished by the multitude of sensations rolling across her body. Layers and layers of pleasure bloomed and flowered inside her like a dozen different melodies played in perfect harmony. Her back arched and she curled her hands into the soft, silky hair brushing against her thighs. She opened her eyes, startled, when she encountered not the head of a man, but that of a tiger. She was lying between the beast’s powerful forelegs, gently cradled by his massive paws, and he was licking her most delicately.

Horrified, she kicked away from the animal, scrambled backwards in fright, and pulled her tunic down to cover her body. Kera looked about in wild confusion and discovered she was in a meadow surrounded by dense trees. Lightning flashed overhead, and it began to rain. The tiger’s amber colored eyes danced with mischief as he smacked his lips with satisfaction and tipped his head up to snap at a raindrop. Apparently pleased with himself and the effect he had created, he rose, now aloof, and trotted away into the night.

She began to shiver with cold, and in the moonlight she saw a woman approaching from the same direction as the tiger had gone. Walking alongside her was a rather large, orange tomcat, and a little boy about four years old with dark curling hair. Relief coursed through Kera; perhaps they could tell her where she was. She stood and ran toward them, hoping to get out of the rain by meeting them beneath the canopy of the trees.

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The woman was carrying a basket filled with bean pods on one arm and smiling attentively at an adventure the boy was sharing as he swung on her other arm playfully. Kera was just about to call out her salutation when the woman looked up at her.

“Kera! What a delight to see you here! I have been thinking about you a great deal, lately.”

Kera stopped, astounded that the woman knew her and embarrassed that she did not recognize her in return. She pulled her hair out of her face and wiped the rain from her eyes to cover her awkwardness. “Madam, how good to see you, too” she murmured truthfully.

The woman just smiled benignly at her. The little boy hid himself shyly in her skirts, peeping out with vividly blue eyes, and the cat (whose eyes, Kera just noticed, were a suspiciously familiar hue of amber) squinted at her conspiratorially. Thinking her vision had deceived her, she narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. To her astonishment, the cat winked back and licked its nose. Blushing furiously at the thought of what had just transpired between her and the tiger, she turned breathlessly back to the woman, avoiding any further communication with the cat.

“What strange weather we’re having tonight,” Kera ventured lamely, unsure of what to say in such a bizarre circumstance.

The woman looked up at the sky through the veil of rain and smiled knowingly as lightning flashed again, illuminating a single small, wispy cloud in an otherwise brilliantly clear sky graced by a full, heavy moon. “Quite so. I think Zeus must be toying with us a bit.”

Kera blushed uncomfortably at the thought, and asked awkwardly, “Could you please tell me where I am? I seem to be lost.”

The woman smiled broadly, as if she knew a secret that Kera was just about to guess. “Why, Olympus, of course.”

Comprehension was swift for Kera as she looked from woman to child to cat; lightning again flashed overhead and her stomach suddenly felt filled with lead. “Hera!” she exclaimed dreadfully and fell

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to her knees, tears springing to her eyes. “Forgive me, please, I didn’t know! I was sleeping, and the tiger—the cat—I got away as soon as I realized it! Please!” she keened pitifully.

Confusion briefly passed over Hera’s face, then understanding of what must have occurred. She turned and looked reproachfully at the cat.

“*Little Cloud,*” she said to the cat, “have you been getting into mischief again?” He walked away a few paces in response, sat down and began to lick his left paw, decidedly ignoring both women as beneath his notice. Hera pressed her lips together disapprovingly and gave him a severe look. The rain stopped.

“Come, daughter,” she said to Kera, “I am not angry with you. You have done no wrong. Come, sit with me and talk for a little while.” Hera extended her hand and helped Kera to her feet. Hand in hand they walked to the steps of a small house with a thatched roof, which evidently had just appeared as the goddess desired it, and sat on the stoop together in companionable silence. Hera placed the basket of pods between them and pulled a small bowl from just inside the door and began shelling peas. Kera watched the little boy chase the cat round the meadow in the moonlight and glistening grass, and smiled at what a magical picture they made.

“Have you ever wished for children of your own?”

Kera was caught off guard by the question, for she had never really had the opportunity to consider it. She said as much, and concluded that, given her present circumstances, she doubted she would ever have the pleasure.

Hera pursed her lips disapprovingly and said, “Yes, I was more than a little piqued at that ugly turn of events; but I must say, you have done me proud.”

“What?” Kera breathed, disbelieving. “Forgive me, but how can I have made you proud when I am neither married, nor a mother, and, well, let’s face it, I am by default an adulteress as at least some of the men I have been with are likely to have been married.”

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“Yes, but you did not seek them out, and one must consider that you are not in a position to decline their advances. Let us not concern ourselves with that, for it is more their error than yours. I have watched how, despite your involuntary assignment,” she paused delicately, “you have made every sincere effort to comfort and aid your countrymen in times of their greatest need. Have you any idea what a man feels inside when he has been about, slaying other men, and when he has been doing so, purportedly, for ‘country and family’? Out he goes with chest bared and sword swinging to rip and rend, sack and pillage the lives of his neighbors. Inevitably, at some point on the battlefield, with his hands and head caked with blood and grit, he recognizes that his foe is there for the same reasons as he, and that that man is a father, a brother, a beloved—or not so beloved—son. He slays him anyway! And in so doing slays in his own heart any love for himself, for his future, and even for his race. When it is all over, he must bury his comrades in arms and offer libations to gods he no longer feels worthy of; for he has defiled himself and must call it ‘honor’. You cannot imagine the sense of futility and despair that comes with every battle, victory and defeat alike.”

Kera listened and let the tears fall, unabashed, remembering the officers she had served or comforted on their return from battle: The young lieutenant who lost both his brother and his lover in one battle; the captain who lost over half his squadron and could do nothing but command the remainder to trample the bloody corpses of their friends and advance to slay the enemy. There were others. And whether they came to her in grief, in self-hate, in numbness, or in anger, she had touched each one, had looked at him, had spoken to him, had served him.

Hera looked at her face and her reverie. “Well, perhaps you *can* imagine. You have been doing the work of a wife and mother all along, and you have done it without complaint, without bitterness, and with a fundamental love for your countrymen. You have helped them with your easy smile, your laugh, your wit, your hands, and yes, at

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times, your body, too. And do they thank you? Do they even comprehend it was you who helped them to heal?”

Kera sniffed and wiped futilely at her tears. The sound of the hulls splitting and dropping to the ground filled the silence; the soft clink of peas dropping in the bowl the only punctuation. Kera could not recall a single thanks.

Hera continued with a flippant shrug and a small smile, “Ah well, they are, after all, men.” She turned, caressed Kera’s face, and brushed her hair back in a motherly way. “Such is the lot of Woman; such is the lot of a wife. You, Kera, have simply been a wife to many.”

Kera was humbled to her very core. “No, my lady, I am but a slave who refuses to defile her soul along with her body.”

Hera took her by the chin and forced her to look her in the eyes. “And that, my dear, is exactly why, despite your station, you are not a whore. It is also why I have decided to bestow on you a gift, such as it is,” she added, glaring at the cat for his misbehavior.

The cat trotted over to her curiously and didn’t protest when he was scooped up and dropped onto Kera’s lap. Absently, she rubbed the back of his neck, and he arched up into her hands, purring loudly, kneading her legs with his paws.

“This is Little Cloud,” Hera began dramatically. “I believe the two of you met earlier today.” Again, Kera blushed. “I know him very well, and he is a very good cat, despite certain peculiarities of personality.”

Kera smiled at the cat and began to scratch his chin and pull his ears affectionately. He squinted his eyes in ecstasy, arched his shoulders with all his might, and fell over in her lap. “What sort of peculiarities?”

“Well, for starters, he has a very fluid disposition. One moment sunny, the next like a clap of thunder. He is a changeling. He can be aloof, even absent for days on end, all business and hunting; then he shows up and demands food and affection, both in large quantities. Furthermore, he has the remarkable ability to appear unexpectedly, almost out of the mist. Hence, the name.”



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Kera smiled at the propriety of it.

“Then there is the fact that he dislikes most men, especially those who favor an unnatural love of boys; and, for that matter, he is rather cautious of women as well. And on rare occasions, he has been known to take things which, strictly speaking, do not belong to him.”

Kera laughed out loud. At the sound Little Cloud stood abruptly, getting to his hind legs, and began nuzzling her neck and nibbling her earlobe. “So he is moody, a sometimes-thief, and doesn’t like people! What are his other merits?”

“Ah, see, he likes you,” Hera joined her laughter. “On top of that, he is an excellent judge of character, and fiercely loyal. He will defend you against any and all infamy.”

Kera smiled into his amber eyes. He touched his paw to her nose, then began a series of repetitive turns and nuzzles under her chin, caressing her with face and tail by turns.

“I want you to take Little Cloud and love him for the rest of his days. Love him no matter what, even if he has been a naughty kitty. Promise me this, Kera, for he has been looking for you for a long time. Even should he become wounded and doubt you, love him still.”

“I promise,” Kera said and kissed the cat on the nose. He sagged against her, spent, and started to drift into sleep, still purring.

“Mother! Mother!” the little boy clamored excitedly in the near distance, breaking the quietude.

“You have a beautiful son, my lady,” she said admiringly. Hera looked blankly at her, and then looked at the boy.

“Mother! Mother, look what I can do!” he exclaimed.

“Oh, this little scamp?” Hera asked. The boy leapt into the air, and just as his body changed into a tiger cub—whereupon Kera screamed in fright, dropped the peas *and* the cat—the goddess said with a proud grin, “That’s Little Cloud’s boy.”

Kera sat bolt upright in bed and then slammed back down into her pillow as she suffered another fright. There were faces above her in the candlelight: her three roommates watching her with rapt attention.

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She was panting and her heart was pounding. She found her hands were being clasped by two of the women.

“What has happened?” Kera asked, alarmed.

“You were visited by the gods!” exclaimed Agatha, breathlessly.

“And from the looks of it, it was Zeus himself,” giggled Chloe.

Kera sat up, blushing furiously and starting to snicker. “What did I do?” She said, flushed with giddiness.

They told her, each one vying for a chance to speak or re-enact what they saw her doing, and they spent the next couple of hours cackling and laughing together as Kera told them what she dreamt, keeping Hera’s praise to herself, and they each in turn tried to analyze what the dream foretold.

By the time Grey appeared in the doorway—his head elaborately wrapped in a cloth to protect his carefully coiffed curls—to chastise them for wasting wax, Kera was glad for the respite.

Their combined conclusions had been that she should likely avoid all blue- or brown-eyed tigers, assuming they were the embodiment of Zeus the trickster trying to seduce her under Hera’s very nose; and, certainly, she should avoid sex with tomcats under any circumstances. Kera smiled in the darkness. She was not overly concerned about the symbolic identity of the cats in her dream or how she might encounter them in life; but it was great fun to try to find meanings in things.

She was, for the first time since she was torn from her parents’ home and brought to this place, deeply comforted by the words paid to her by Hera. *That* was the gift, in her opinion: it was the reassurance that she was not forsaken in this place, and that she played an important, if thankless role in the story of Macedon.

Kera let go of any fear she had of falling in love with scoundrel or rogue, or of living or dying in loneliness and despair; for she had given her solemn vow to Little Cloud, and whether he existed in fact or not, the promise put her heart at ease and reassured her that Hera was watching over her. Surely no harm would come to her.

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She hugged her pillow to her bosom and peacefully went back to sleep.





### CHAPTER III

#### Cat And Mouse

Deake was in peak hostility after four nights' ruined sleep and no progress made on finding the shield or forgetting the woman. As much as he hated coming to the baths by day and enduring the ribbing, innuendo, and suggestive leers from many of the other officers, he needed help.

His shoulders were on fire from the intense drilling with the *sarissa*, the double pointed, eighteen-foot long pike used by infantry in formation. The weapon was more than twice the length of the lance he used as part of the Companion Cavalry, and his body was unaccustomed to it since his promotion out of the infantry a few years ago. Only in extreme cases during battle had he any call to take the arms of his former unit, but, when called upon, he could easily fall in with them and be the anvil to the cavalry's hammer. As such, his skill was so renowned that he was still asked to assist with the training of new recruits from time to time, and to lend his expertise from both sides of the combined tactical maneuver. He had been teaching what to do when the formation breaks, and had drilled each student, personally, to proficiency.

But damn, he could scarcely move his torso, his muscles were in such a spasm! He winced as he pushed up and out of the small heated pool and stalked into the corridor of the caldarium. He was given a private room, and, once inside, he shucked his wet loincloth, dried his body with a towel, which he wrapped around his hips, and lay face down on the warm stone slab. Within a few minutes, a petite woman

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and a manservant arrived with oils, salts, a large urn of steaming water, and additional linens. The manservant gently set down the urn and left.

Deake said nothing, but his temper filled the space with edgy tension. The woman placed her hands on his back, across his ribs, and began to rub him gently. Irritated by the motion, he snapped at her, cursing her skittishness and feathery touch. The guard in the hallway stepped in to translate between them, as she neither spoke nor understood Macedonian Greek.

Exasperated, Deake demanded, "Isn't there a man who can do this? She hasn't enough strength to ply my body."

The guard replied brokenly "Sorry. No men for the men. Too much loving. Only women serve the men."

If it was possible, Deake became even more upset, half in horror at what the man assumed he was asking for, and half in disgust that the man was absolutely right about the 'too much loving' part. Outraged, he stood up, towering over woman and guard alike, and said emphatically, "Get. Someone. Bigger!" He gestured above and around the woman's body to show he meant an increase in strength.

"Oh!" The guard said, seeming to understand suddenly.

He relayed the message to the small woman in her language, who likewise brightened up and, beaming, said brokenly to Deake, "I get you man-woman. She very thorough," and left the room.

Galled, he sat down on the wooden stool, crossed his arms loosely over his knees, and wondered what would happen next. Minutes ticked by, and he started to joggle his leg in restless agitation.

At last voices approached. He thought he heard the words "horrible man" uttered in the same soft, sing-song voice of the petite woman who had left, followed by quiet laughter and the correction, "no, Tashka; 'painful man.'"

Deake covered his face and sighed with embarrassment; for he probably did seem like a horrible man to the little woman. He shouldn't have spoken so roughly to her, he admitted to himself. A

## CAT AND MOUSE

shadow fell across the doorway and he looked up, loath to discover who this “man-woman” would be, and in an instant, his ire was calmed.

*Kera.* Beautiful, curvy, and tall as the guard outside the door. She stood there, smiling a secret smile at him, with one hand held almost shyly behind her back. She said nothing to him and walked into the room, adding the vial from behind her back to the collection of bottles in the box the other woman had brought. She rummaged for a moment, reading labels, then stuck her head out the door to ask the guard for the serving boy. He came at a run, heard Kera’s request for an additional cream from the dispensary, and just as quickly reappeared with it.

Deake busied himself meanwhile by watching the sway of her hips as she moved around the room, and the curve of her bottom as she leaned out the door, which was particularly lovely when viewed from his station on the low stool. Presently, he was fascinated with the arch of her neck as she twisted her hair into a long, black rope and tied it in a clever knot on the back of her head. She poured a fair amount of viscous yellow oil into her hands and rubbed them briskly together.

She turned to face him and looked at his eyes for just a moment, still smiling secretively, before placing her hands on either side of his thickly corded neck.

“What are you doing?” Deake asked when she just stood there motionless.

“Listening,” she replied.

She ran her palms round to the back of his skull, one hand above the other, and lightly squeezed his neck with a milking motion. Inevitably, his breath quickened and his gaze dropped to her bosom. He opened his mouth to say something stupid, but before he could speak she turned her head to the side to hide her fiendish smile and grabbed two handfuls of the now-relaxed muscles at the base of his neck, lifted them together and squeezed with all her might.

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His jaw fell open silently and his eyes squeezed shut as she held him there and shook him gently back and forth by the scruff of his neck. She looked down and saw his fists balling and un-balling alternately in his lap, and was reminded of Little Cloud from her dream the night before. She smiled privately and released his neck. His head fell forward with a soft thud against her stomach. She grabbed the flesh a little higher up, squeezed and shook him again, and this time a very heartfelt sigh of relief wheezed out of him.

He looked up at her when she released him a third time, and the look in his eyes was so defenseless and filled with gratitude she almost laughed out loud, so reminded was she of a cat giving his most soulful look to gain more affection. His eyes slid closed helplessly as she continued to ply his neck.

Deake felt deliciously vulnerable as weeks of tension began to seep out of his body. Even his shoulders were finding release, and he let go of his hands and arms; which led to his shoulders slumping, his scalp releasing, and, evidently, to the utter loosening of his tongue and wits.

“I thought you would never lay a hand on me, the way you walked away from me the other day,” he said unguardedly, thinking aloud.

*What in hell—?* Shocked, Deake wondered at his sudden and astonishing lack of pretense. To say such a thing—they were the first words he had ever uttered to her, and here was his heart, delivered on a silver platter with parsley sprigs on top! He squeezed his eyes shut and swore silently, horribly embarrassed at his slip, and was glad he couldn’t see the smirk that must be on her face.

“Hmm,” came Kera’s soft reply as she began kneading the base of his neck, passing the flesh from one hand to the other. “When I was captured, I was brought here in a cage, alone. One morning, the caravan I was carried in was joined by another, bound for Rome, from the East. They had captured this massive tiger—he must have stood as tall as my hip and was at least as long as this table—and put him in a cage, much the same as mine, and all day long the beast paced in circles, glaring at anyone or anything that looked his way.”



## CAT AND MOUSE

Kera's hands moved lower down his neck, working the diamond-shaped muscle that spread down to the top of his back, gripping and squeezing him with easy strength.

"His gaze was so menacing, his body so incredibly powerful—" she paused to sigh dramatically. "He was the most gorgeous, graceful killer I had ever seen. I stared at him for hours, fascinated, and he just glared back at me. He was at once terrifying and magnetic; beautiful but deadly. Though I knew he could tear me limb from limb, I wanted nothing more than to touch him, to hold him, and rub my face in his fur as if he were a kitten, so deeply was I drawn to him." Kera paused, enjoying the reverie. "Seeing you appear, well, it was like coming face to face with that same tiger; only he was free and I was caged."

Deake's heart soared at her words, and then crashed into a thousand pieces as guilt and a sickening sort of self-disgust settled over him. He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. She laughed and stepped back from him.

"That's it! That's the look exactly!" She laughed again, and resumed her ministrations.

He despised himself so much in that moment, he wanted to make her hate him, too, before he could desire her friendship any more than he already craved it. He closed his eyes and made himself aloof.

"You are surprisingly well spoken for a barbarian's queen," he said, mildly.

All the mirth went out of her eyes as the import of what he had said hit her, full force. Her hands stopped on his shoulders, and her heart slowed with the weight of her disappointment. She knew a deliberate dig when she heard one, and knew also when a man was wallowing in old regrets. She had only one prior experience where a soldier's strike was truly aimed at her personally, and it was ugly indeed.

"How do you know of Thrace?" she asked coolly, referring to the man by his kingdom.

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Deake kept his eyes closed, deliberately avoiding her gaze. She would hate him truly, he thought to himself, feeling a keen sense of disappointment, which he told himself was relief.

He schooled his voice into flippancy, even boredom. “Because it was I who recommended taking you captive.”

Kera’s vision clouded with a white-hot rage that washed over her with a force that was dizzying. In a flash, her mind was flooded with memories: fighting with her father, objecting to his betrothal of her to the invading prince whose armies had slaughtered their countrymen, pleading with him not to pledge her to such a man, and her pleas falling on deaf ears. Her disgust that, for self-importance and status hunger, her father had refused to ally himself with the Macedonian king—*their* king—*three times*, to fight the invaders, and had chosen instead to ingratiate himself to the barbarians through intermarriage. And finally, his utter cowardice when *she* was seized, not he, in punishment for his treason: He had been sitting on his throne, head in hands, lamenting how he was ruined when the Companions broke through the door of their villa and tore her from the arms of her mother and her tutor.

And now, this man sat before her, confessing his part.

Suddenly, all the anguish and bewilderment, bottled up with no outlet and held repressed for the last three years found focus. The sharp, electric pain that shot through her arm as her palm connected with the officer’s cheek jolted her, horribly, back into the present.

Deake was on his feet at once, chest heaving with anger. *She had struck him! Struck him while his eyes were closed!* he thought with savage self-righteousness.

Horrified by her lack of control, Kera looked into the very intimidating, very piercing gaze of the man standing before her in stunned disbelief that she had actually slapped him. But there was no denying it: there was her handprint blooming like a flower on his cheek. Comprehension of the magnitude of what she’d done was swift, and where remorse or fear of punishment should have filled her

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bosom, an hysterical sort of glee bubbled up there instead, transforming the very real threat of a whipping or worse, into a surreal, slow-motion, dance.

The guard darted into the room at that same moment, and the second guard down the hall, seeing the intense intervention of the first, was fast on his heels. The officer walked toward her predatorily. She backed away from him fearfully, and her mind was flooded, insanely, with visions of tigers and tomcats with amber colored eyes.

Just as her bottom bumped against the stone table, effectively trapping her, the guard demanded of her, forcefully, making her jump, “What do you say to him?!”

Frantically, her eyes darted from the guards with their hands on their swords to the officer, who was just this moment penning her to the table by placing his arms on either side of her and boring into her eyes balefully with his own.

“What do you say!” the guard boomed.

In a whisper choked with panic, she said to him, “*Bad, kitty!*”

Deake froze, astonishment mingling with relief and hilarity all in the same instant. Soft, throaty laughter rasped out of his body as if it did not remember how to make such a sound. His lungs filled with air and he stood up straighter, a smile forming on his lips, and laughed clearer. He put his hands on his hips and turned around to laugh at the walls, only to sag down, hands on his knees, with the contractions brought on by fresh gales of guffaws.

Bewildered, the guards looked from slave to officer, unsure of who was more unstable. Unable to speak, Deake waved them out of the room with a hand as he turned around to consider his lovely assailant. He sat down on the stool, seeming to get himself under control at last, and then dissolved into new waves of sniggers. Finally, he gave a few high-pitched sighs and took several cleansing breaths, and looked at Kera in wonderment.

Kera looked at him sheepishly and stayed where she was, doubting her own sense of judgment as she returned to reality. She noticed his

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countenance had lost the savagery of moments before, and was aroused to see his entire carriage had changed: That hard, glaring officer was now softened, relaxed, and decidedly provocative in his demeanor.

“Well,” he said, standing up after what seemed a long time, “it’s a good thing I am not a tiger.”

Kera smiled at him, a little ruefully, as he sauntered closer. “Why is that?” She wondered aloud, no longer afraid.

“I’ve seen what they can do to their prey.” He came to a halt right in front of her, still butted against the edge of the table, so that she had to crane her neck a bit to look at him. Her voice dried up in her throat and a small thrill ran through her as he let his gaze openly rove over her face and shoulders. Again, he leaned forward and placed his arms to either side of her, penning her to the table, but this time the gesture held seductive promise rather than menacing threat.

“They tend to select the larger kills.”

Kera was suddenly, and for the first time, *pleasantly* aware of her unusual height. Captivated, her gaze nervously flicked down to his lips as his face started its slow descent, tilting to her left. She watched, transfixed as his mouth passed hers by on its course to her throat. She turned her head slightly, almost involuntarily, and was confronted by the smooth, tan skin of his shoulder.

Kera’s breath quickened as she realized she was bent slightly backward over the table and had not the slightest desire to fight this man.

As if reading her mind, he continued, “When they catch them, they bite and hold them right here, until there is no longer a fight left.”

His lips were so close to the spot where her pulse beat at the base of her throat that she could feel the warmth of his breath on her skin. Deake smiled and inhaled deeply, gliding the tip of his nose up along the length of her neck to just behind her ear. She shivered slightly in response. His voice was a soft purr behind her ear as he nuzzled her.

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“At which point, he eats her slowly...” he slid the tip of his nose down to her jaw and sensuously nudged her, before continuing, “hungrily, and selfishly, until there is naught left but *pneu'ma*,” he concluded, choosing a word that could mean either ‘breath’ or ‘spirit’, depending on the context. He glided his nose under her chin before lifting his face, his lips tantalizingly near but never touching her, then stood stock-still, inches away from her, looking into her hooded eyes and appreciating fully her parted lips.

Kera was panting, held motionless by his gaze and the promise there. She stopped breathing altogether when he tipped his head slightly and moved his face closer still, believing he was actually going to kiss her.

“It can take days for him to become sated,” he murmured, his eyes flicking downward once more before he grinned wickedly and stepped back from her, withdrawing his embrace.

Kera looked at the floor and filled her lungs with air so as not to fall over from shock. She felt him boost up to sit on the table next to her, sprightly, and he asked with a voice that was suddenly rather cheerful and unconcerned, “Do you want me face up, or face down?”

Feeling like someone had plunged her unexpectedly into a cold pool, she turned to see him grinning smugly down at her. Vastly irritated that he was evidently unaffected by the same urgent sense of arousal she was presently in, she moved to stand at the head of the table and grumbled, “Face down, I’m sure,” and resisted the urge to push his face into the folded towel as he lowered his head.

Just before she placed her hands on him, he tipped his head to look at her, solemnly. “For what it is worth, I am sorry,” he said. “Please say you forgive me.”

Kera was thunderstruck by the amount of comfort she felt in hearing those precious words. His eyes were hypnotically beautiful. “I forgive you,” she heard herself answer, and then added shyly, “I am sorry I struck you.”

He smiled gratefully and said, “No, you’re not.”

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Kera looked away momentarily, her face warming up once more, and he was enchanted to see there was a small dimple near the corner of her mouth when she smiled. He looked at her contemplatively before he lay down his head and said, “Oddly enough, I found it strangely therapeutic.”

Kera placed her hands on his back in the valley between his shoulder blades and listened. He breathed deeply under her hands, and, with his exhalation, she slowly slid her hands down the length of his spine until her thumbs were in the well at its base and her fingers wrapped around his waist. She held her hands there for the space of two breaths, and Deake realized, with a sudden awareness, that she was breathing along with him, and even, it seemed, breathing into him. He was struck by the feeling of intimacy this created, and a little unsettled by it.

“So,” he cleared his throat unnecessarily, “what does my body say?”

Deake didn’t believe for a moment that she would have a sensible answer to his question.

She smiled and stepped back, her hands brushing up the sides of his ribs as she released him. Kera thought it over for a moment as she poured oil from a small earthenware flask into her hands. She began to smooth the oil over him, starting at his neck and sweeping down and outward across his shoulders and shoulder blades.

“You ride heavy cavalry, probably a leading horse, rather vigorous with your lance, favoring it over the sword, and you occasionally serve as a phalangite,” she said. “Your shoulders have been screaming in pain for some time now,” she added confidently.

Deake was flabbergasted. How could she possibly know this from a simple touch? “Surely you have heard these things from other officers,” he challenged.

“Perhaps I have. But how would I know it was of you they spoke? I do not know your name, and they would only have referred to you

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by rank in front of me; and I do not know that, either.” Her hands swept across his skin in smooth, efficient strokes.

*Good point*, he thought, still disturbed that she could know so much about him by touch. Rankled, he sullenly defended, “And no part of me is ‘screaming in pain.’ Women and cowards ‘scream.’ The closest an officer comes to screaming in battle is a—*Owww!*” Deake howled painfully and swore when Kera moderately pushed one finger into a muscle that ran under the inside corner of his shoulder blade.

“A battle cry?” she finished for him, holding her finger in place while he huffed through flared nostrils and tried to flatten his body evasively. “Well, that wasn’t a very fearsome one, now, was it?”

Deake was moaning and laughing at the same time, which produced a rather odd noise. Gradually, the intensely painful throbbing subsided and his breathing returned to normal, at which point she began to massage the same place, rolling his flesh with her thumbs to smooth the knot flat.

Once it became a tolerable agony he was able to speak again. “I said I was sorry;” he started with teasing belligerence. “You said you forgave me—*ouch!*”

She had found another knot. He whimpered and began to fidget with his arm, trying to give her more flesh to work with on his back. She took his wrist and placed it at the small of his back, pressing his shoulder blade up, and indicated with a tap that he should relax the arm completely.

“Oh,” she said with dramatic understanding, “the forgiveness was for me. The penance is for you!” Relentlessly, her thumbs burrowed deeper into the muscle.

He started to laugh, but it ended up as another groan delivered into the now balled up towel he held against his face. Kera tipped back to look at him and became concerned at the very real pain in his eyes.

“You did sit in the hot bath before you came in here, right?” she asked worriedly.

“Yes, for about half an hour,” he grated out.

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“This is still so rigid, I am going to put a hot towel over your shoulders.” She turned and prepared the towel in the urn.

Deake smiled sensuously behind her back as he stared at her *derriere*, gently bobbing up and down as she crouched and wrung the towel. When she stood and turned, he closed his eyes to savor the image.

“I have extra linens to cover you if you get too cold,” she said as she placed the steaming cloth over his neck and shoulders.

“And what shall I do if I get too hot?” he asked silkily.

“Anything you like, I am sure.” Kera gazed appreciatively over the length and breadth of his rather stately back. “However, most men simply fall asleep, in which case I will wait for you in the tepidarium.” She slid her hand under the towel and touched her finger to the opposite side of his spine, whereupon he flinched and flattened out silently.

They passed some time in comfortable silence as Kera used hands, fingers, and even elbows to iron the kinks out of Deake’s body, each lost in his or her own thoughts, satisfied to communicate by touch. After some time, Kera pressed down the sides of his spine with circular courses of her thumbs, and Deake felt his body growing heavier and heavier.

His mind wandered back to the things Grey told him when he first saw Kera perched gorgeously in the morning sun. In particular, he was curious about how one could “transition well” into slavery, being of noble birth. He wondered about a great many other things as he started to nod off, but one thing in particular prevented sleep.

“How is it that you do not hate me, knowing who I am?” he asked at last, unable to pass another moment in silent speculation.

Kera’s hands paused for a moment on his back before they resumed their work. “I suppose it is because there is a subtle but important difference between captor and enslaver, and I happen to know that you were not my enslaver.”



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“How could you possibly know that?” he asked, beginning to feel upset with himself all over again.

“Because I have already encountered him,” she said soberly. “He bragged about it.”

Deake abruptly pushed up to look at her, a storm of emotions battling within him, anguish and remorse chief among them. Kera was stunned: never would she have guessed she would be comforting someone else—a soldier, no less—for what *she* had been through some years before.

She smiled wanly and touched a lock of his hair before she spoke. “Did the tiger hate his captor? No. He was angry with himself for having been captured and only wished for escape. It is the ringmaster, who starves and provokes him for his own entertainment that he wishes a plague upon.”

The officer was clearly troubled by her fate, and she was touched. “Please do not worry yourself so. It was no worse than what awaited me had I been married to Thrace, and that may have been worse still as I would have had such an ugly experience every day, as my due, until death. At least in this place, it hasn’t been horrible all the time. I am, after all, among my countrymen; and I have friends. And don’t you think I know I could have been sold to much lower places?” Kera coaxed him to lie back down so she could resume her work. “It could have been worse. Far worse.”

“Do you mean to say you like it here?” he wondered aloud, dubiously.

“Humph!” she squeaked, and said precociously, “It has its ups and downs.” Kera was delighted by the sudden eruption of Deake’s laughter under her hands. It was a good sound. “A truer statement would be that I have found things to like about being here. The steam, for example, is just marvelous for my skin; and the work is diverse and educational.”

Deake misunderstood her meaning to be completely lewd, and they shared more laughter on the subject before she clarified that her work

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wasn't limited to bathing officers. She had, in fact, served in the clinic and aided the recovery of the wounded and ill; attended a few births and examinations as an assistant to the midwife and learned much from her about women; she had worked in the fields and kitchen one summer during an early and abundant corn harvest; and just this past winter she had the pleasure of helping the painters as a model and a filler.

The more he learned of her, the more arresting she became to him. She was, as Grey said, a remarkable woman. But what he found most extraordinary, indeed, inspiring, was though she had every cause to hate, to blame, and to suffer her experience here, she did not. And it was the quest to understand this about her, to make it "make sense," that would, Deake anticipated, keep him awake for nights to come.

She removed the now-cooled towel from his shoulders and tossed it onto the bench, then finished his back with broad sweeping strokes, continuing downward to knead his buttocks and the backs of his thighs, which, beneath her professional demeanor, she secretly enjoyed a good deal more than he did. Far from being erotic, it was heavy work kneading iron into ass, and Kera took a perverse sort of pleasure in having such an imposing man under her charge.

Deake's mouth was completely soft, his eyes half-closed; for if it were not for the heavy measure of pain mixed with the incredible pleasure of release, he would be asleep, dreaming of her, no doubt. As it was, it felt as if she was bleeding off a current of suffering from his body, and he only felt it as it passed through and away from him. He was just reaching a pleasant plateau of comfort when she leaned into him with her elbow and pressed the back of her arm into his hip joint, just below his buttock.

He flinched in response and turned to scowl at her, "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"I suppose I am, sir, but not because it causes you discomfort," she replied, pleasantly.

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Deake sighed heavily and forced his body to relax under her hands. She continued working down his legs, finding points of tension and releasing them, smoothing them out and restoring to him a greater awareness of his body. She scrubbed both his feet with salt and then wrapped them to steam while she massaged his calf muscles, spending a good half-hour on them while he dozed.

Kera found a tall stool in the corner of the room and pulled it near, taking a moment to stretch her back muscles before she placed it at his feet. She fetched a robing cloth from the stack of linens, and stood at his side, ready to cover him.

“Turn over, please, sir,” she commanded quietly and enjoyed the somnolent glow of his eyes when they opened.

Watching him turn over was like watching a mountain do a tired flip. First, his shoulders pushed up like twin peaks overlooking the valley and knoll of his back and buttocks, then, slowly, his head became their curly-haired summit. He pulled his left knee under his hip causing the white-wrapped knoll to rise and twist before falling with a thud onto the warm granite plank beneath him. This was followed immediately by the loss of one peak by landslide as he tucked his arm, and his right shoulder sagged and slid under the left, which came tumbling upward to land with great finality where the first one had disappeared. His legs, not to be outdone, contracted together and followed the torque of his hips before the one came to a rest upright, lightly placed atop an elegant foot, and the other crashed with an ungraceful drop, fully extended.

Awestruck, Kera watched his arms unfold and open wide as his body arched in a sinuous stretch, unleashing little tremors here and there in a ripple that finally ended with the flexing of his toes as he yawned. She let out her pent-up breath, stepped forward, and covered him with the robe before taking her seat. She refastened the steaming wrap around the foot of his raised leg, took the other in her hands, and liberally coated it with oil. She squeezed and released his heel,

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running her thumbs deep into his sole, flexing and articulating the joints, and even gave each toe a mini-massage.

His moans and mutterings of relief were copious, almost sexual in their intensity; and it was no wonder: the man had just walked or rode seventy miles bearing full armor after three months of battle on somewhat rocky terrain with only socks and leather sandals to cushion him. His feet were in serious need of attention.

“Gods! That’s more like it!” He exclaimed, his head tipping back with pleasure.

She worked his feet over until they were flexible again, and then unerringly pierced his mantle of delight with a well-placed thumb in the arch of each foot.

“You are a vengeful woman,” he said mildly, no longer surprised by the pain.

She laughed, pleased with the banter. “I have been here for three years, thanks to you. Surely I am entitled to my three hours’ retribution?”

“But, if it were not for me, you would now be suffering a barbarian’s attentions,” Deake defended.

“Yes, well then it would be he, not you, on such an altar, suffering at my hands, and you would still have no recourse to complaint,” Kera rejoined and pulled a jar of cream from the kit, relishing the sound of his hearty laughter.

She dipped the cream out of the jar, placing it on her palms, and with a flourish, pushed the robe up to expose his thighs. He abruptly sat up, yanked the robe down over his raised knees, conspicuously modest, and asked frostily, “What are you doing?”

Kera was poised between his legs, hands palm up and covered with cream. She had taken care to keep him appropriately covered, and so was dumbfounded by his sudden and extreme reservation.

“I am putting a salve on your legs, sir, for the chafing,” she explained.

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“I can do it myself; give it to me,” he ordered and held out his hand. Deake was truly concerned. He had managed to avoid embarrassment up until now, and preferred to keep it that way. If she touched him there, between his legs, no amount of sheeting would preserve his privacy.

Kera cocked her head at him curiously, wondering what he thought he needed to hide from such as she. It wasn't as if she were an innocent maiden whose modesty needed protection; and quite frankly, he had already established she had no desire to fight him off. She recalled how he had toyed with her earlier, and decided two could play.

She smiled and said soothingly, with deliberate misunderstanding, “Do not worry, sir. I will be gentle,” and placed her hands under the robe at the inside of his knee.

Deake sucked in his breath and sat back on his elbows, eyes burning: Gentleness was exactly what he was afraid of.

Her hands, warm and slick with the stuff, slid up the inside of his thigh until her fingertips were almost touching his groin, at which point she encircled his leg and retreated, slowly, achingly. He felt drugged with desire, his mouth softly agape at the extreme sensuality of the motions she made. Kera looked at him briefly, through her lashes, causing his imagination to become fully engaged.

Finally, her hands arrived again at his knee. Deake blew out his breath slowly, covered his face with both hands, retreated down to the table, and cursed.

“I know it is tender, but this will only take a moment,” she said sympathetically from behind the sheet. She dipped more cream and her hands started their gentle course once more, on the other leg.

Deake breathed deeply, stared hard at the ceiling and tried to think of anything, *anything* but the vision of her bare breasts kissed by the sun: *waterfalls, mountaintops, horses; stone blocks*. But her eyes, her mouth, her laugh infiltrated every vision he called up.

She passed her hands over the top of his thigh, circling out and around to cup his hamstrings from beneath and began rhythmically

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squeezing the back of his leg with a milking motion. His breath was quickening, and he could feel the heavy swell begin to stir. Heart pounding, growing more desperate to preserve his dignity, he thought savagely: *Fat women. Hairy women. Fat, hairy women. Fat hairy men!*

“There, that’s done!” Kera said cheerfully, relishing the evident effort on his face as she withdrew from him. She turned her back before he could see her wicked smile and brought him another folded towel. She placed it across his hips as if it were the usual thing to do, and hummed to herself as she perused the bottles of oil once more.

Deake wasn’t fooled for a minute. He had seen that impish glint in her eyes before she gave him her most innocent look. He smiled in spite of himself, taking deep breaths to bring calm; she was nothing if not fair. She was delightful.

The slow scrape of the stool on the stone floor was the first indication of fatigue he had seen in her. She pulled up alongside him and sat near the crook of his waist with her back to him, crossed her legs at the ankles, and lightly leaned across his hip bone as she smoothed the oil over his thigh with long firm strokes.

Drowsiness soon fogged him once again, and he sleepily contemplated the line of her back curving in to him and the delicate muscles at work there as she plied him so expertly. With languid acuity, he watched a drop of sweat make the slow journey from the nape of her neck down the length of her spine to where it disappeared behind the drape of her peplos before he succumbed, at last, to sleep.



## CHAPTER IV

### Apollo Smiles

Kera stirred awake with the subtle brightening of the room, and pushed herself up to sitting. Refreshed, she looked about, appreciating for the hundredth time the glow of light in here. She loved this room at dinnertime; it was a shame she did not often get to enjoy it. On days like these, when a massage was running late, she relished the opportunity to experience the magic and solitude of the tepidarium.

It was a white room with wooden benches lining two opposing walls in two tiers for patrons to sit at various levels and converse with each other across the steam. Though the room was small, it was taller than the adjoining areas, so that its walls, when seen from above, projected out of the rooftop like the tiny temple it was.

In the center of the floor was what on first glance looked like a round gazing pool, but was actually a large, shallow ceramic basin filled with water and heated from below to create steam. The basin was simply but beautifully decorated with a relief sculpture depicting Apollo healing and purifying the injured and sick. A simple gold band inlay on the floor circumscribed it. The circle motif was repeated in the cutwork of the benches, and, with stunning simplicity, in the single round vents high up on the eastern and western walls.

Kera liked to think that the room was designed to bring an especial sense of peace to patrons who were fasting; for twice each day, at midmorning and in the late afternoon, when meals were traditionally taken, the sun's rays extended like loving fingers through one of the circular windows to shine directly on the water's surface, which then

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cast its refracted and shimmering light onto the opposite wall in the shape of the sun. The combined effect was that the sunbeams and their shimmering reflection silvered the mist in the entire space while highlighting the centrality of the pool and casting the recesses of the room into shadow. It created an atmosphere of pure, healing magic, as if one were being touched by Apollo himself.

She heard footsteps approaching and her pulse quickened in anticipation of the officer's arrival; but no, these were too swift and too light. Grey stepped through the door in the western wall and closed it behind him, so as not to lose the steam into the hallway. In one hand, he held a bowl of soup with a piece of bread balanced on top, and in the other a cup of water with a mint sprig sticking out of it.

"I saw your officer was still slack-jawed on the slab, and thought I would bring you a bite to eat," he said and handed her the food. She took it from him gratefully and began to wolf it down.

"Thank you so much, Grey. I am starving," she managed after a bite or two.

"My, my!" He said, noticing her appetite. "Did he give you extra work?"

"Hush!" She kicked his foot with her own, playfully, and wiped the soup from her mouth with her wrist before taking a bite of the bread. With a full mouth she continued, "This is a sacred place."

He handed her the cup, closed his eyes briefly and held his palms up to Apollo's gaze. "I stand before you, purified," he smiled at her, mischievously.

Smirking at his manner, Kera returned the cup to him so she could use both hands to eat. She chewed hurriedly, and teased her friend. "He was very tense," she explained between bites, "and very large."

Grey leaned back against the wall, closed his eyes and said mildly, "Ooh, wish I could have been there!"

Kera had a fit of coughing and had to take the water from him again. "Stop it!" She gasped, giggling. "Does your blasphemy know no end?"



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Grey balanced the cup of water between forearm and belly, closed his eyes again and opened his hands toward the sky, grinning. After a moment, he opened his eyes and reported smugly, "I have been cleansed of my putrid thinking."

"Doubtful," Kera said, laughing silently, and managed to finish her soup without incident. She wordlessly took the cup, drained it, and chewed the mint sprig. Smilingly, she handed the dishes to Grey with her thanks, and he walked away, saying he looked forward to a full report, later, in their more secular quarters.

Alone again, Kera shrugged, lifted her shoulders tiredly and pulled her arms overhead, trying to loosen the gathering tension in her muscles. Her body was starting to draw up from fatigue, so she decided to pass the time waiting for her officer by stretching. She went to stand by the east wall, out of the way of the door, and closed her eyes to center herself.

Beginning her routine, she inhaled deeply of the mist around her, gracefully lifted her arms overhead as she opened her hip and raised her right heel to rest on the inside of her standing leg. Kera exhaled slowly, opening her eyes, and was enchanted to find the first rays of light upon the pool, creating the magic around her. The shimmering reflections danced upon and around her like tiny fireflies, and she smiled tenderly, feeling utterly at peace in this completely aesthetic space.

Deake looked at the ceiling, bleary-eyed, wondering where he was and what had happened to his body. He felt like someone had filled his skin with lead, his mouth with cotton, and his blood with pitch. It was hot as hell in here.

Slowly, recollection came to him, and he smiled thickly. *Kera*. Kera had happened all over him. With tremendous effort he pushed to sitting and swung his legs over the side of the table. He must have been asleep for at least an hour, he reckoned; probably longer.

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He noticed a water pitcher and cup had been placed on the stool beside him, and he reached for it, feeling like he was wearing someone else's hands. When he realized how badly he craved the water he put the pitcher to his lips, forgoing the cup, and drained it thirstily, water dribbling down his neck.

That seemed to help considerably in unfogging his mind and cooling his body. His eyes opened wider and he sat a little taller. Deake wiped his mouth on his forearm and let the pitcher dangle from his limp fingers for a moment while he stared, blankly, at the wall before him. He felt his entire body pulsing like a heartbeat.

He set the pitcher down and pushed forward with aching arms, dropped his meaty legs down to land on over-padded and extremely tender feet. Grimacing, he tipped his head from side to side, stretching his neck muscles, and slowly straightened his back, which had evidently gone hoarse from 'screaming'.

He remembered with a smile how Kera had slapped him; but he couldn't seem to recall the beating his body said she must have given him. Even his face felt stupid.

He was beginning to feel the edges of hunger and wondered if he had missed dinner. He found his loincloth, now dry, and a robe, and covered himself. Slowly, limping on both feet, he walked out of the room to find, first the privy, then the tepidarium.

Kera breathed slowly in measured breaths, loving the feel of her body's strength and stability as she stood poised on one foot. She turned her head to the right unhurriedly, breathing in, and then, slowly exhaling, she lengthened the back of her neck until her chin touched her collarbone and gracefully tipped her ribs sideways toward her hip and knee, chest held up, sternum to the sun, her arms making a gentle sweep overhead through the mist as they completed the Arc of the Moon.

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She stopped and held the pose, her face soft in concentration, and then, without breaking her form, her eyes flicked up, toward the entrance.

Deake stood in the partially opened door, one leg inside, his head and hand resting against the edge of the oak slab, his chest swelling with emotion at the awesome vision of Kera standing there in the mist: The refracted sun had painted her figure gold and emblazoned upon the wall behind and all around her a shimmering, silver disc: Hephaestus' shield.

*My shield*, he thought possessively. He felt a momentary sting in his eyes, and asked in a voice husky with response, "Is this a dream?"

Kera straightened and quickly swept toward him, concern on her face. "Are you well, sir?" She asked him in the shadow by the door.

Her nearness brought him into full awareness. *Not a dream*. He stood taller and smiled down at her, loving how her features relaxed when she smiled back. Deake stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, pleased with the sense of total privacy and possession the simple gesture created. He just stood before her, taking in her beauty, giving a silent prayer of thanks to the gods.

Kera flustered when he continued to stare at her with such intimacy. It was like a complete, spiritual quiet, shared wordlessly but no less fully shared for lack of speech.

Part of her thought, *it is just the magic of this room*; but then she noticed he was not looking at the room: he was looking at *her*, and continued to do so until a flush began to bloom in her cheeks. The officer smiled slowly, and the warmth spread all the way to her toes.

"How are you feeling?" She was relieved to find herself still in possession of her faculty of speech.

"Entirely useless, thanks to you," he answered easily, still smiling at her. "What are you going to do to me now?"

He started to walk forward, giving her the choice to either back away or come into full contact with his chest. At the last moment, she

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stepped back lightly and turned, walking to the center of the row of benches to their left.

“Traction,” Kera answered and gestured to a spot on the bottom bench where he took his seat. He quirked his eyebrow at her, doubtfully.

“You don’t think I can pull your weight?” She asked, challengingly.

“Madam, my trainer outweighs you by half a man’s weight, and he finds difficulty with the task,” he smirked.

She confidently stepped closer to him until he had to tip his head up to look at her. “I believe I have one small advantage over him,” she said and continued at his smile of encouragement; “you like it when I touch you, and so you do not resist. Furthermore, you want to touch me, and so you reach.”

The silver mist hung about her like a divine aura, scintillating with the sun’s reflection in the pool. She stood between his thighs, an easy distance from which to encircle her with his arms, he recognized; but he found himself entirely content to sit inside the circle of her attention. Deake looked up into her eyes, his smirk broadening into a smile, as he obediently raised his arm.

She placed one hand back of his triceps and the other at his wrist, and extended his arm straight up over her shoulder to rest against the side of her head. When he relaxed it completely his fingers curled into the soft, wavy hair that fell behind her ear.

He exhaled through his grin, looking straight ahead, as she stepped to his side, leaned against his flank and pressed his arm behind his head using her torso to push, and her arms to hold his form. At the limit of the stretch, he closed his eyes lightly and forced his muscles to relax again. She leaned deeper into him, her bosom coming so close he could feel her warmth on his cheek.

“And will you feed me, too, when my arms cease to function from your ministrations?” He asked.

Kera smiled, privately pleased at the thought of hand feeding him, and that he would suggest such a personal attendance. “After this, I

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think you will find your body functioning a good deal better than it did when you arrived here. And as for the other, Grey will have brought your dinner to your private quarters. If you need someone to feed you, sir, I'm sure he will see to it." She released his arm and stepped away from him.

Deake heard himself say, in an astonishingly casual voice, "Perhaps I could keep you, and you could take care of me forever." He was, once again, surprised at himself; for it seemed that only in her presence did he unwittingly speak his thoughts aloud, without any awareness before the fact that he was about to do so.

Well, it was out now, and this time his face was not hidden, so he did not miss the look of sad dismay that flickered in her eyes before she looked away from him and moved to his other side.

For a moment, he felt the old tension in his stomach, the hot bile of humiliation near his heart at the thought that someone must have told her about him; but then he remembered Hephaestus's command: *Trust in her.*

Deake took a deep breath and released it slowly, overcoming his instinct to harden himself in defense. He touched her gently on the back with his free hand and she looked down at him. "I meant no offense by it," he offered.

She considered him thoughtfully, looking into his eyes as she pressed his arm behind the back of his head. He didn't flinch or look away; just quietly submitted his body to her control and waited for her reply.

Kera felt him breathing with her as she pulled him, their bodies moving together like dancers. She felt something loosen inside her and decided she believed him. She jerked her head in a nod of acknowledgement. "Did you mean it?" she asked him, frankly, and released his arm.

Deake felt his face redden and his breath catch in his throat with sudden and very uncharacteristic self-consciousness. He had only just

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thought it; he didn't even know he was going to say it aloud! How should he know if he meant it?

*Did I mean it?* He wondered, a bit giddy at the thought, now fully examined and held up for judgment. He looked away from her and sat in dumb contemplation for a long minute.

Kera swallowed her disappointment at his lack of response and guided his arm into the next position. She pointed his elbow straight up and pressed his hand down over his shoulder blade.

"Forgive me, sir. I have overstepped myself," She said softly into the awkward hush.

"No. No," he said haltingly, meeting her gaze again and letting his arm drop to his side. "It is just that I seem to speak my thoughts aloud to you, unexamined, and I am quite unused to such occurrences. I am sure you see it all the time, with others, you know, getting so relaxed around you." He stopped short, noticing the sudden cheeriness on her face when she released him.

He sighed and said plaintively, "You don't, do you," clearly abashed to learn he was the only one who made a fool of himself around her.

She shook her head from side to side, mirth dancing in her eyes.

"All right," Deake started, covering his embarrassed grin with his hands and sitting forward, as if turning over some plot in his mind. He reckoned he could not really do any worse than he had today, so he may as well lay it all out for her. He smiled up at her from beneath his lashes. "All right, then," he uttered anticipatorily.

Kera was filled with delight at his sudden boyish manner: he was completely and adorably disarming in this flustered state. She waited to see what he would do or say next, he was suddenly so different from what she thought she knew of him.

"You see," he started and then calmed his voice before starting again; "You see, I never intended for you to be a slave. I didn't think it was politically necessary. I had suggested," Deake's voice faded abruptly as a freak surge of terror overtook him: He had almost told

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her his suggestion had been that she be married to an officer, and looking into her eyes now the thought occurred to him for the first time, *What if she had been married to me?*

All at once he was mortified; overwhelmed by a maelstrom of what-if's, what-might-have-been's, and wishes he dared not dream aloud. *What if I had spoken aloud and she had laughed with disbelief, or—*He quelled the thoughts and looked away.

Kera was astounded to see the flash of fear in his eyes. What did he hide? she wondered. What did he fear?

"Someone else suggested enslavement." He muttered reticently.

"You mean 'The Lieutenant'?" Kera asked as she lifted his other arm. His head snapped round to look at her. The officer said nothing, but his eyes shone with obvious dislike. Kera continued. "Well, that is what the others called him. But they say it like, 'The *Lieutenant*,' like it is a curse or an insult."

"Did he touch you?" Deake asked in a quiet but truly chilling voice; for, the reason the man's name *was* cursed was that he was a known rapist. Indeed, he thirsted for opportunities to hurt women. Even in the rather grisly business of being a soldier, there were codes of conduct and codes of honor, and there was the undeniable fact that even the gods could be penalized for such a crime: It was sacrilege. But this man honored no such codes and cared naught for the wrath of gods.

Deake felt a cold chill in his gut at the sight of Kera's face, now hard and remote. He asked her again. "Did he—"

"I survived him," she said quietly and moved to stand behind him, unwilling to meet his gaze any longer.

Deake caught her hand where she rested it briefly on his shoulder when she stepped up onto the bench. He held it under his own, against his throat, and turned his head to the side to look at her.

"Kera," he began without really knowing what he would say to her.

"I do not wish to speak of it," she said curtly, and then more gently, "please."

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He nodded his head once, brushed his lips across the back of her hand and released it. He stared ahead broodingly.

Kera sat down behind him and stared wonderingly at the place he kissed her hand. Her eyes unclouded and she felt a little lighter somehow. She braced her knees behind his back, tucked her toes under his rump and instructed him to move to the very edge of the bench. When he had done so, she leaned forward, hooking her arms under his and cupping his shoulders from underneath, and placed her nose in the crook of his neck. She drew in her breath and pulled his shoulders up and back over her knees.

Deake closed his eyes and let his head fall back onto her lap rapturously, feeling the already intense pectoral stretch deepen.

She was right: his trainer couldn't hold a flame to traction like this. They exhaled together, he in the total bliss of being in her arms, and she in deep contemplation of the uniquely personal, sweet scent of his skin.

He smelled like sunshine and strength.

They passed the remainder of the relatively short session in silence, Kera moving all around him, positioning him, pulling him. Throughout, they worked in silence, moving together, breathing together through several poses that stretched and lengthened every major muscle group in Deake's body. As the last rays of the fast-descending sun filtered into the room, Kera sat behind him once more and finished the routine by pulling his head back to rest against her abdomen while stroking down the column of his neck, pushing his opposing shoulder away from his ear. Then she stimulated his scalp briskly with the pads of her fingers.

Sensing the finality of the move, Deake opened his eyes and found her looking down at him with that same look of quiet concentration he had yearned for in his dream. He lifted one hand to her face and twisted round in her lap, raising his lips to hers before she could think to withdraw.



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The kiss was as brief and caressing as the brush he had given her hand earlier, but it sent slow, warm tingles from the backs of her ears, where his fingers touched her, all the way down her spine.

“Thank you,” he said softly, admiring the way her eyes dilated at his touch.

“Of course,” she replied, stunned. Kera watched him leave the room and touched her fingers to her mouth when the door closed behind him. She understood now why there was a standing policy at the baths to not engage in mouth kissing: it could either be really horrible and often unsanitary, as in the case of drunken revelry; or it could be exquisitely, dangerously beautiful, as in what that officer had just bestowed upon her.

Distracted, Kera gathered up the towels and left the tepidarium, sparing one last glance for the bench where he had kissed her before she closed the door.





## CHAPTER V

### S k i r m i s h e s

Deake was in good spirits today. He had learned shortly after waking, during his conditioning exercises, that his physical perceptions and responsiveness were much keener than before, just as Kera had promised.

Now, on the back of his mount, Isadoros, he felt positively jubilant galloping at full speed at the head of his unit, unencumbered by armor or stiffness in his body. He turned to see the elite warriors of the Companion Cavalry, his fellow *betaeroi*, as they crested the hill, and saw his elation mirrored on the two hundred faces of his squadron: This was their victory run, the dash of triumphant champions glorying in their return home, reveling in the freedom afforded by sanctuary.

Down they went, the lush fragrance of verdant fields filling nostrils of horse and man like a sweet intoxicant, the clods of rich soil flying from so many hooves like tribute thrown in parade. The wind whipped hair and mane into proud banners undulating in the crisp morning air, so that any witness could see in every glossy strand that victory had been won.

Deake raised his hand in signal and felt, even before he saw, their ranks split into the wedge formation. Isadoros lowered his head in charge, and Deake leaned in close to his neck, guiding him left, gripping his mane, blowing with him as he ran with all his might. Their muscles pumped in unison as they led the thundering charge, now fanning out behind them like a turning flock, every man and horse in

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close and furious embrace, hell-bent to blow through the ranks of the imaginary enemy flank before them.

As one they recognized when they had overrun their unseen foe, and a great cheer was raised as the horsemen sat up, slowed their mounts, and ran circles around each other and the unseen vanquished they had put to rout.

Deake took his position at the crest of the hill they had cascaded, and called his men to formation. Once assembled, he addressed them.

“Brothers, I trust you have enjoyed your few days’ rest and recreation, and I hope your bodies and spirits are feeling refreshed. I wanted to take this opportunity to thank you personally for your tremendous show of valor at Crenides—forgive me, at *Phillipi*,” at this another cheer went up for the conquest and resultant renaming of the fallen city on Thasos Island in honor of their king, Phillip II. “...and also for your ready efforts on the fast construction of the garrison there. The spoils are great: this has been a fruitful year for our people; and by the end of this week you may see the Royal Paymaster for your share.”

At this last, there was so much whistling, ululation and clapping that the horses stamped their feet and started to rear.

Deake continued solemnly, “However, our victory was not without loss. Let us never forget our fallen brothers, for it was through their sacrifice that we rode onward. We will honor them on *hena kai nea*, and always in our hearts. Also, our good friends Phineas, Lycippus and Demetrios are recovering in the clinic behind the baths, and hope to be rejoining us soon. Finally, I would like to offer my deepest acknowledgement of my nomination by you in the Soldiers’ Assembly. I am humbled by your esteem. The Council has completed their review and the rank of major will be officially conferred upon me three weeks hence.” Again the men cheered in agreement and congratulation.

“I do not know if I will yet have direct command over the Second Squadron, or whether I will be assigned to a new regiment. It has truly

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been an honor to serve with you,” Deake paused to look at each man, remembering their faces and the battles they fought together. He smiled, proud to call them friends.

Standing with the morning light falling over his shoulder and onto his men, seeing them whole and healthy and refreshed, seeing the same trust and regard he held for them reflected on each face filled him with a sense of utter fulfillment. Here he had, at last, found the sort of brotherhood and unity for which he had left his homeland, sustained only by thin hope and a vision shared by precious few, eight long years ago.

The men were silent, needing no words to give their acknowledgement. A breeze lifted their hair and fluttered their clothes; a bell jangled softly in a horse’s mane.

“I still have you until then, so, how about today we keep to games, give the horses their play, and tomorrow we return to drills and maneuvers?” Over their pleased comments he shouted, “Lieutenant Ennis, I’ll take the first and second line, you take the third and fourth. Lieutenant Kaplan, you will be keeper of scores.” Deake tossed the ball to Kaplan, who caught it easily despite a bandaged arm.

The men divided into their teams on the mock battlefield, untied their mallets from their mounts, and waited watchfully for the play to begin.

\* \* \*

Kera sat on the rim of the pool, listening to the conversation of the men before her. They had brought their wine bowls with them from dinner and were getting increasingly into their cups as they discussed the latest rumor about Philip’s wife, Audata.

Kera attended with bemusement, ever watchful for the moment of fallen logic and opinionated pronouncement passed off as indisputable fact.

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“If you ask me, it is entirely inappropriate for him to allow her to continue training in the martial arts,” began one man with elegantly slurred speech. “Aside from the fact that she is a daughter of the recently deposed Illyrians and should not be trusted for a moment near Phillip with a weapon in her hand, it certainly sets a poor example of wifely conduct to our women. I don’t care if she is a foreigner, her obligation to uphold Macedonian mores couldn’t be more clear-cut.”

“Surely nothing is more Macedonian in these times than to permit, or even welcome the strong suits of our former foes to become our own?” Kera volunteered, stirring an eddy in the water with her toe.

“Strong suit?” sputtered the man. “Armed harpies marching into battle alongside father and husband a *strong suit*? Next you’ll be saying the Athenian women should have lopped off their breasts and taken to horse after the Amazons were defeated by Herakles.”

“Hardly, sir. I am rather fond of my breasts, as, I daresay, the Athenians are of their own,” Kera laughed with the men. “Yet there is much to be admired in our queen; for men can be long absent and die, and it would seem the very face of providence for a woman to have a final defense for her home and children against encroachers in much the same way a she-wolf trains her cubs to hunt and fight despite the provision and defense given by the pack.”

“She makes a valid point,” said a rather pretty man with dark eyes, from outside the circle of drunken friends. “Not many generations ago, when Sparta was at her height, such a need arose when the Spartans overran the Argives: Their army had been defeated and the survivors burned to the last man. Sparta marched on to the city, now defenseless without its men. And there, an old poet, Telesilla, rallied the women to fight in defense of their homes and children. They took whatever weapons they could find, in temples, in homes, and, after heavy battle, repelled the enemy. The Spartan general was killed when he was struck on the head by a roof tile thrown by a woman. To this day, the Argives commemorate the victory.”

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“Hah! Where’s the honor in that? To kill a man by throwing a roof tile?” jeered a supercilious one.

Kera countered passionately, “Those women were not fighting for honor, they were fighting for their lives and their city. What does it matter which weapon bested the foe? Dead is dead, a victory is a victory.”

The first man drained his bowl and waded over to stand before her, lifting her hair caressingly. “You are so like an Amazon: As big as a mare and almost as smart.” He leaned in to kiss her neck as his friends broke into cruel laughter. “You are so mannish it nearly excites me.”

Kera turned her head away, her face hot with anger and humiliation.

A man with a bruised nose and two black eyes said, “Aye! And if it were an army of Amazons we faced, we’d know just how to penetrate their ranks.” He stood and stroked the bulge in his loincloth as another man laughed and slapped him on the back approvingly.

“And Hammer would be the first one to break through!” He crowed, causing the entire group to dissolve into bawling laughter, all but the pretty man with the dark eyes.

“Do you love our king?” Kera asked them challengingly.

They stopped laughing and bristled at the impudence in her voice. The man who had insulted her met her gaze with sharp disapproval and frank disgust. “Aye, we are his Companions. There is no greater love.”

Kera leaned back and smiled with triumph. “The next time you see her, won’t you thank his mother for defending his life and the throne when he was helpless to do so?”

The silence was deafening. Five pairs of eyes beat at her hatefully for a moment before a menacing voice crackled from directly above Kera’s head, making her jump.

“How is that nose healing up? It looks like it’s beginning to spread.”

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All eyes swung upward in surprise, for none had seen Deake's approach. The man with the two black eyes touched his nose self-consciously with a hand and looked a bit rattled when he met the gaze of his senior officer. "It's coming along, sir," he mumbled before he nervously looked away.

"I told you: You need to work on your blocking skills," Deake crossed his arms over his chest and scratched one shoulder thoughtfully. "In fact, I think all of you should go work on your blocking skills. Right now." He stared each of them hard in the face, lingering on the man who insulted Kera. "And while you are drilling, I want you to practice your rhetoric."

"Rhetoric, sir?" The man asked, attempting to hide his slurred speech.

Deake knelt down by the poolside to meet the man's gaze. "Yes, so that you can persuade me not to demote the lot of you for getting so completely sotted the night before such a sacred event."

Kera recalled from reading the leaflet that the purification of the soldiers was to be conducted tomorrow morning. It would be embarrassing indeed for these men to appear before the king in such bad shape.

The men sullenly but obediently left the pool. Deake took off his sandals and tunic, discarding them on a nearby couch, and lowered himself into the pool.

Kera did her best not to stare at him. Though they had flirted much in the days since his massage, she hadn't seen him unclothed since then, and was impressed anew with his build. Her gaze met briefly with that of the pretty man, and they shared a knowing smile before she turned and watched the retreating boors with obvious relief, stating, "I suppose that makes you their commander."

Deake smiled, glad she hadn't guessed anything else. "I suppose it does. I cannot tell you how gratifying it was to see that one put in his place. A better man on the field would be hard to find, but at a



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symposium, it is the same every time: the most irritatingly offensive logic proffered like gems of wisdom.”

She smiled and asked, “Are you sure they will not injure themselves, sparring drunk?”

He returned her smile, flirtatiously. “But there would be a certain honor in that, would there not? To be injured on the sparring field rather than tripping over their loincloths in pursuit of serving girls?”

Kera flipped her hair over her shoulder and laughed heartily at the vision conjured by his words. Her eyes skimmed over the grand pool and the many people populating it this evening: The men were like sun-bronzed demigods brandishing bowls and flaunting their bodies; the women like water nymphs wearing gaily colored, short silk tunics, legs flashing beneath the filmy folds. Serving boys were just lighting the torches around the room before the sun could set, and the orange rays of the late afternoon sun slanted in obliquely, palely illuminating smoke and mist.

Deake loved the sound of her laughter and the dance of her eyes as she looked over and past him, stirring the water with a long, shapely leg. He saw in his periphery the pretty-faced man, who had been content sitting on a submerged ledge a few paces down, abruptly stand up, his face clouding with hate.

Like a specter, the same look began to supplant the light in Kera’s eyes, the warm laughter dying on her lips. Deake turned to face the room, and his whole being stilled with a wrath lethal in its potency: There stood the *lieutenant*, simpering, not five paces in front of him. Deake closed in on Kera’s right protectively, and noticed that the other man did likewise on her left.

Her two allies glanced at each other briefly, frowning, but, recognizing protection in each other’s manner, turned again to the greater foe, saving petty jealousy for later.

“You. Come with me,” the lieutenant commanded Kera, regally.

She stilled, her eyes locked with his, and her stomach knotted so violently she thought she would be sick. She felt each of the two

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officers near her place a hand on her leg. In unison, they said, “She is busy.”

She turned toward them, her lips still parted in dismay, and looked at their faces. Their eyes gave her comfort, their hands a reassuring squeeze.

“Oh, come now. She always has room for one more,” the lieutenant said greasily, his green eyes raking over the two men. He lowered his lashes seductively and quirked one perfectly manicured eyebrow at the pretty officer with the dark eyes. “Isn’t that right, Captain? She is a natural born whore.”

So intense was the wave of enmity spawned by her two champions, it rolled out from them like a palpable blast. Quiet fell upon the people closest to them as the easy sprit of the room was disturbed.

Kera felt like a piece of meat being fought over by rabid dogs, and though two were her protectors, neither was appealing in the grip of his hatred. She kept her back to the lieutenant, nauseated by the entire circumstance, and watched with dark awe as the larger of her defenders, apparently enraged beyond words, actually bared his teeth.

“You were banned from this facility,” the dark-eyed captain coolly replied, disdaining the question.

“Every exile has its expiration; even if only at the death of its imposer.” The lieutenant looked antipathetically at the captain, his simpering manner vanishing momentarily as he mirrored his hostility. Then, like a magician’s trick, his smooth, smirking smile reappeared as he turned to contemplate the major. “And at last you have come to taste the prize you would have wasted on some noble husband. Welcome home! What do you say we share like old friends, first come, first served?” He laughed sickeningly at his own joke and stepped closer to Kera, as if to touch her. “Perhaps together we can make her scream.”

Deake’s body shot out of the pool in one smooth motion. He grabbed the lieutenant’s hand, twisting his arm around to point toward the floor, and drove him backward in two more steps. A full head

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taller than the lieutenant, he was dripping wet, his muscles tensed for combat. The entire room fell silent at the prospect of bloodshed. The lieutenant blanched seeing that the major was battling the urge to snap his limb in two, and from the look of it, 'to do' seemed intensely more appealing than 'not to do'.

Deake heard footsteps behind him and knew at once that the captain had left the pool. He stepped into Deake's line of vision and looked at him, soberly prompting him to recall that no Companion was permitted to injure another unless defending the king himself against treason.

Deake's eyes were locked with the lieutenant's; his jaw flexed and a muscle ticked at his temple. He took a deep breath, reluctantly released the man's hand from his death grip, and stepped back from him. Into the pregnant pause the major said loudly, his voice crackling with barely suppressed violence, "How is it that you have shared the king's closest conference for, what is it, eight years now, and in all that time, you have yet to be promoted, even once?"

The lieutenant was taken by surprise; having hoped to provoke the larger man into an emasculating scene of slave-defense, he suddenly found himself being publicly unmanned. The simpering smirk, which had been so quick to return to his face upon his release, vanished and was supplanted by a look of unclothed paranoia.

The rapt attention of the many bystanders, moments before so glorious in its focus on the major's misbehavior, was now pressing in upon the lieutenant like a cloth upon his face. His heartbeat was too slow and too hard, and suddenly the room seemed to tilt and jerk around him. The titters and barely concealed giggles breaking out around the room were like knives under the his skin. It vaguely occurred to him that there was insufficient air for so many people in this place.

Deake continued ruthlessly, "Could it be that, excepting your pursuit of the female scream, you have proven yourself almost entirely incapable of successfully completing a single mission?" Deake paused

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to straighten the wrinkled, now wet tunic of the junior officer and added, patting the man heavily on both shoulders, "One wonders how long his grace will sustain you."

Choking on his own venom, the lieutenant rejoined almost inaudibly, "She does not belong to you, Korydon. Mark my words: within the week you will be gone, she will be transferred to the palace, and I will do as I very well please with her."

"I quake," Deake said just as quietly, pointedly looking down at the smaller man.

The lieutenant turned on his heel and fled the hall at a brisk walk, fists balled at his sides, avoiding eye contact with any person. Deake stared holes in the man's back until he was gone from the hall, and turned just in time to see Kera disappearing in the other direction. He made to follow.

"Let her go." The captain's hand fell heavy on his arm, restraining him. Deake glared at him with disdain. The captain glared right back.

"Just who in hell are you?" he asked the pretty man.

"Relent, sir. Your manner offends. When a man looks at me like that, he either wants to fight me or knock me; and I assure you, I want neither from you." Deake said nothing but continued to glower. The captain continued, not releasing him. "So, which is it: jealousy or desire?"

Deake roughly jerked his arm free, and growled, "What are you to Kera?"

"Ah, jealousy," the man proclaimed, smiling at him. "Then there is yet hope we can be friends. Let us strike a bargain: I won't hold my pretty face against you, and you won't hold your legendary phallus against me?"

There was a shocked pause as Deake comprehended the double entendre. Helplessly, he broke into a grin and clasped the man's arm in salutation. "We are friends already." The tension in the room diffused, and the crowd returned to their original business, sparing only occasional curious glances at the two warriors.

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“Captain Damon Artemas, commander of the fourth squadron *hippotoxotès*, under General Parmenio, just returned from the Illyrian conquest.”

*A horse archer*, Deake thought, feeling a sudden kinship with the man. “Major Deakon Korydon, commander of the second, heavy cavalry, under Phillip our king, just returned from Thasos. Please, call me Deake.”

The men grasped each other’s arm and exchanged their admiration and congratulations to each other on their recent campaigns.

Wasting no time on niceties Deake asked again, “What are you to Kera?” and cringed at the challenge still evident in his voice.

“A good deal more than *you*, I daresay.” Damon ignored Deake’s brief scowl, bristling at first, and then relenting. “You’re in love with her,” he observed quietly, noting the other man’s disconsolate glance in the direction of the slaves’ quarters.

“Are you?” Deake countered softly, not denying it.

He contemplated the question momentarily before answering, “Not in the same manner as you.” Damon looked around, noticing many eyes were still watching them. “She will be fine. She just needs some space to recover. Join me on the terrace for a drink?”

Deake wasn’t easily dissuaded. He glanced toward the main entrance, where the lieutenant had retreated, and then toward the terrace. Damon gathered his tunic and sandals from a nearby bench, and with a nod subtly commanded Deake to follow him to the wall. He handed him a towel from the service shelf and casually directed his attention to a heavy door visible through the passageway to the steam baths. On the farthest wall of the room where mist hung low in the air over the heated pools, a massive sentry, fully armored and armed, stood before the door menacing anyone who approached and did not have business there.

“Do you see?” Damon offered, drying his face. “That sentry permits no one but slaves, healers, and the half-dead beyond that

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point. There are two more, just like him, guarding the pass between the hospital and the women's dormitory. She will be safe in there."

"How do you know this?" Deake asked, comforted, and now curious. The captain chuckled as he shrugged into his tunic, and Deake noticed a large, star shaped scar under his arm that radiated out over his breast like flames.

"Because I was half-dead once, and that is how I met Kera." Sensing the major's desire for a full accounting, he promised, "If you will call a moratorium on nose-breaking, I will tell you what you wish to know, though you may not wish to hear it."

With a nod, Deake indicated that he would, and the two went outside, pausing briefly for Deake to collect his tunic and sandals.

They took a table at the foremost corner of the wall overlooking the city of Pella to the west and the winter camp to the southwest. The sun was setting splendidly, casting pink and purple shadows even into the southern sky, no doubt making the perfect backdrop for the theatre tonight. A serving girl poured for them, and they were left in peace away from the prying eyes of onlookers.

Deake took a draught of the crimson water, shelving his naggingly real jealousy for the moment, and started the other man down the path of reverie. "How were you injured?"

Damon's look became distant as the recall overtook him. "The Illyrian invasion, the last time around. It was nightfall; we were already three thousand dead, including Perdiccas, our king. It was our last, desperate attempt to rout the Illyrians, and what was left of my regiment was sent to harass their supply line and, perhaps, to deem whether it could be successfully pillaged. Our own line had long since crumbled to the most stalwart few, and those who remained were at such a distance that getting enough food was a scarce proposition. We were hungry, and we were hopeless."

He drank and looked into Deake's eyes without really seeing him. "Death would have been a relief, such was our state of mind on that last sally. We rode through their line from the rear, firing over the ass

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as we flew through the smoke of fires that made us slaver with the smell of meat. A young boy of about thirteen years rushed after me, grabbing a javelin from a store as he ran. He took aim, we both released our flies, and we both hit our marks. His stick caught me right under the edge of my cuirass, just inside my holding arm, and pierced me straight through the sinews of my shoulder. Such was the agony, I dropped my weapons, and by the grace of Athena I caught my mare's mane before I fell. The boy fell with my arrow sticking from his chest, a triumphant smile on his face. I saw his cap fall backward before he slumped into death, and a cascade of hair tumbled down over his face: it was a woman."

The two men turned and watched the first embers light up in the sky, quiet at the thought of killing a woman in war. Deake caressed his bowl, not drinking.

"It was another two months before we made it back to Pella. I kept my arm, obviously, but I had lost all hope of regaining full use of it. It burned constantly and I was half-mad with infection, and when the surgeon here offered to reopen and clean the wound, I welcomed it as a second chance at death." Damon laughed, his gaze sharpening. "Forgive me. You want to know about Kera, not my pathetic convalescence."

Deake was encouraging, and expressed his gratitude that Damon was sharing his experience.

Damon continued: "One evening after dinner, when I was staring morosely out the window, cursing my ill fate instead of getting some sleep or enjoying the colored sky, there was a commotion coming from the direction of the women's hospital, across the hall from the men's ward. Abruptly, the door was thrown wide and this tall, black-haired beauty strode in, swathed in the silk of the *porne*, but with the carriage of a queen."

A slow smile spread across his features before he took a deep drink and wiped his mouth with his arm. "There were eight of us berthed in that room, and all who could do so sat bolt upright. She looked us

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each in the eye, like a general, and she said, 'I am Kera Berenyse, daughter of Doiran the Traitor who would have married me to Thrace to march against our king. I do not know my father's fate, but this is mine,' and she read the order from a slip of parchment, 'as spoils of war, to the baths to service the officers of the Companion in whatever capacity they see fit.'

"We were all silent as her meaning began to take root in our minds. Undaunted, she drove on and said, 'I have been tutored in the ways of war, and I am sure you are all familiar with the adage "to the victors go the spoils?" Tonight, I have learned that one among you, called simply by his rank, a certain lieutenant, intends to have me first and take by violence what I am here to give without argument.'"

Damon looked into Deake's eyes and swilled the wine around in his bowl before drinking. "You know of whom she spoke, as we all did at the time. She had the attention of one and all at that point, and she settled upon seeing this. She looked out the window above my bed with a wistful air, the amber light burnishing her skin, and she told us something like, 'If I am to be your servant from now on, I would serve you with friendship in my heart, not hating the lot of you for the deeds of one. I would be ever grateful if you would teach me, gently, the work I am here to do. After all, it is you in this room who have seen battle, and, as I understand it, this man who comes for me rarely visits the field. And thus, you must be the victors of whom Phillip speaks.'

"At that point, I spoke aloud the general sentiment of the men assembled, reminding her we had lost the Illyrian campaign, pitifully, and even lost our king; failing utterly in our purpose to guard him from death."

Deake had to wait for him to speak further, as, for the moment, Damon seemed overcome and was silent. The sky changed colors from shades of violet into shades of orange and red.

"You have to understand how without pride we all were, feeling our losses had been for naught, feeling like lesser men to have lost Perdiccas. She stepped toward me with a soft and curious look, her



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manner as gentle as a balm, and said to me, 'But you stayed with him until the very end, even when it was hopeless, and even after he fell. *You stayed.* Surely, for him, there was victory in that?'"

There was another gap in which both men paused to stab at their faces with thumbs, for suddenly their eyes pricked and their noses ached. More wine soothed Damon's voice and whetted Deake's ear.

"We were all quiet after that. Then, one of the others asked how she could be certain she wasn't intended for the lieutenant. She answered simply that he had not been 'victorious:' her father had yet planned to carry out the marriage; she said also that there was no mention of it in the written order. She had only heard of it a few hours earlier from the chief servant, that man Grey, who had overheard the lieutenant boasting of his intent earlier in the day. Into the silence, she said again, 'you are the victors. If it can be taken, I want you to take it before he does. I want no surprises, and nothing left undone when he comes for me.' Then, she unlaced the rope about her hips, let the silk fall to the floor, and said simply, 'I do not want him to be the first.'"

Deake was silent, shocked to the core. He recognized in her entreaty the principles of scorched earth and spoils denial. He rocked back in his chair, amazed and horrified at her genius and courage under such a threat. "*Eros and Ares!*" he murmured at last from behind steeped hands.

"Yes, well, we were in much the same state of wonder, but it was complicated further by the ultimate in masculine anxiety: Kera had propositioned us, a bunch of disheartened war cripples, to school her in the art of love in preparation for an act of hate, and had so treated us with her beauty and her encouraging words that we wanted it to be pleasing for her."

Damon could only gesture helplessly as he chugged more of the red brew. "It was fiendish. How could we refuse such an elegant invitation to help her execute such an ingenious tactic of defense against a man we all detested, and to do it with such bold rakishness?"

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Were it not for her small request that it be pleasurable for her, too, we would have each been the first to volunteer.”

“No one did?” Deake asked, understanding why, but still incredulous.

“No, man! How does one go about deflowering a girl, introducing her to debaucheries she cannot even imagine, and to do it all under pressure of the imminent arrival of a man whom *she knows* is intending to wreak savagery upon her?”

“So, what happened?”

“She looked at me and said, ‘I would begin with you.’”

“Why you?”

“Those were the first words out of my mouth: ‘why me?’” Damon drained his bowl and looked at the lewd depiction inscribed in its center, feeling condemned: It was a scene of drunken licentiousness characteristic of the most degenerate symposia. He turned the bowl upside down and set it away from him, resolving to drink no more tonight.

“She said, ‘because you are the only one looking at me.’ And I looked around, finding not a man whose eyes were not upon her, and when I met her gaze to confront her with this, I understood: I was the only man who was looking her in the eyes.”

“So?” Deake gently nudged him to carry on with the tale, for Damon was again distant and sad.

“I was her first,” he said simply. “We schooled her, five of us did, bandages and all. Afterwards, she was in as fair a state as can be expected: calm and resolute as a soldier before battle; after all the fear is gone and all the realities are real.”

Damon blew out his breath dejectedly. “He arrived shortly thereafter, and was enraged that find she was no longer ignorant. He threw insults at her and threatened her; he said, ‘I’m going to knock you so hard your father is going to scream;’ to which she cheekily replied, ‘If it is my father’s screams you want, save us both the trouble

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and go stick it in him! He cuffed her across the face, hard, knocking her to the floor.”

Deake snapped the handle off his bowl with silent rage, and the captain continued on, unaware and helpless to stop the release of the long-festered memory.

“She made not a sound, but picked herself up and looked at him, calm as you please. He took her off by the arm, down the slaves’ corridor to the caldarium. A little later she returned, trailed by the sentry. She carried the torn silk in her hands, and though she was erect, her eyes were dark and remote. As she passed by me, I saw that her entire backside had been roughly abused, and a bit of blood ran down the length of her thigh. She glanced at me where I sat on my bed, and smiled ever so faintly. It was like looking into the eyes of the Illyrian woman I had slain but two months before.”

Damon sat like a hollowed shell for a moment before he reached across the table and took Deake’s bowl from him, draining it desperately. Deake waited expectantly, his eyes like burning hells.

“I questioned the sentry and asked why he did not prevent this, and he told me she would not cry out. This man, this lieutenant had come to make her scream, and she had deprived him of it, even when he drew blood. It was only then the guard could stop him. In the most horrible way, Kera had triumphed over him, and, as you witnessed, he still seeks vengeance on her.”

“Why did you tell me this, Artemas?” Deake asked hoarsely, needing an outlet for his renewed rage. The captain met his gaze with one of equally dark threatening.

“Because I want you to know exactly who it is you ply with your seduction. I said I do not love her in the same manner as you, but understand this: Kera gave me back my honor with a comment that was, to her, but a simple observation, such is the love that flows in her heart. She taught me that defeat is only a matter of personal decision, effectively ending my long sojourn into self-pity. I tell you this because

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if you are toying with her, if you hurt her, if you *ever* put that look back into her eyes, I will find you, and I will exact payment from you.”

Deake was humbled and relieved to find in Damon not a contender for Kera’s heart, but an ally and defender of it. He welcomed the brotherly menace, clasping Damon by the arm and swearing, “If I ever hurt her, take my own sword and carve out my heart.”

Damon stared at him, gauging his sincerity. He gave a curt nod, accepting Deake’s promise.

“She is an incredible woman, and you a true and valiant friend.”

“Had she been born a man, I would follow her into battle,” Damon replied, fiercely.

They stood with arms locked, and then embraced each other fully, slapping one another on the back, conveying their gratitude to make each other’s acquaintance before they walked inside in companionable silence to bid farewell at the edge of the pool where they had met, little over an hour before.

Deake stood motionless, considering his options, unsure of his course. He wanted to see Kera urgently, but knew his rage was yet too fresh, too alive to enjoy anything but the delivery of a good beating.

A slow smile spread across his face as he thought to himself. *Perhaps I should check on my officers’ progress down at the gymnasium.* He looked forward to testing their blocking skills; and, *if* they passed, he would skip the rhetoric.

He downed a bowl of undiluted wine on the terrace before making his way down the western stair, past the temple of Poseidon Hippios with its friezes of the fierce-faced deity tending and training his magnificent horses, and onto the road leading to the training grounds. The sun with all its colors was gone from the sky, and all that remained was a cool light that illuminated all, seemingly without source.



## CHAPTER VI

### S h a d o w s

Kera entered the tiny room, closed the door, rested her head against it and gave a melancholy sigh. In three short steps she stood before the small bedside table, contemplating the last of the pale purple sky through the tiny window as she unbound her hair and combed her fingers through it.

*Some days, she thought wearily, some days.*

There was really nothing more to expound upon, for the thought, in its inarticulate ponderousness, captured her mood perfectly.

Her eyes focused on a small furry lump in the center of the windowsill. Curious, she stood on tiptoe and, by leaning forward, was just able to make out tiny claws and dry, pink, skin: a dead baby bird. She made a small sound of revulsion and flicked it away with her fingertips, hoping it would not hit anyone far below on the hillside.

After her retreat from the baths, she had worked in the clinic changing dressings, administering tonics, and doing other assorted tasks. It had been a much-needed break. Just the simple act of exchanging the filmy bathing tunic for the long, heavy chiton had restored to her a sense of pragmatism and rationality she found immensely stabilizing.

‘Work,’ she could do; ‘sit and be pretty’...well, technically, she could do that, too, if you called that ‘doing’, but it seemed to be the more trying of the two tasks. Kera would just as soon know that she could truly benefit a person through more objective means.

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At this moment she was very tired, but it was a tiredness not absent some sense of accomplishment. Her only disappointment was that her visit with the big, honey-eyed officer had been cut short and tainted by the insults paid her by the lieutenant.

And then there was the officer's obvious jealousy toward her dear friend, Damon, which was as gratifying as it was disquieting. She fretted briefly over what might come of it, and then dismissed it from her mind, reminding herself that both of them were very capable, very decent men. She was sure they would work it out amicably.

A knock sounded at the door, and Muriel entered carrying a mirror and brush, a basket of cosmetics and fragrant oils, and a candle in her hand. Over her arm was draped a creamy, pale blue peplos. She greeted Kera with a smile, set the candle on the table and placed the basket and gown on the neighboring bed.

The midwife was still beautiful despite her middle age, with deep olive skin, thick, glossy black hair with an elegant streak of silver; and eyes as large and dark as a doe's. She wore the smile of a woman who knows many secrets; wonderful wisdom gained through the experience of generations of careful study and sharing.

Kera suffered a momentary panic at the implications of the cosmetics and elegant dress, recalling the lieutenant's sustained threat that she would be transferred to the palace and into his grasp.

"Who has called me?" Kera asked, hand over heart.

"Relax, child," Muriel admonished gently, reading her mind. "The king will honor his word to your friend. You will be kept from Pausanias's grasp." Muriel was the only person Kera knew of who referred to the lieutenant by name.

"Is my fear so transparent?" Kera asked, plaintively.

"Only to those who know and love you," Muriel replied quietly.

She let out her breath shakily, wishing for the same calm confidence that emanated from this woman.

"Have you been owned by Philip all your life?"

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“No, for I was a woman when he was yet a babe. But, yes, I have been owned by his family all my life, and my mothers before me for five generations, since Xerxes’s defeat in Persia, and even then we belonged to someone else!” Muriel chuckled and motioned for her to sit on the bed. She took Kera’s hair into her hands, smoothing olive oil into the locks with her palms. “Do not worry yourself. Philip is a good man, though occasionally misled. He will keep his word to one of his Companions.”

Kera sighed, showing her frustration. “Does one ever get used to slavery?”

Kera could hear the smile in Muriel’s voice as she answered. “I often asked my grandmother the same question when I was about your age, and she would tell me, ‘after the third generation, it stops wearing on you so much and becomes almost acceptable.’” Both women laughed, relaxing into their task. Kera rested her hand on Muriel’s thigh and luxuriated in the brief scalp and neck massage she gave.

Muriel said, “In my life, I have seen that we are all ‘slaves’ to something: The king to his dynasty, the soldier to the king, and so on down the line. Everybody has his master.” She parted Kera’s hair with her fingernail, divided it into four sections, and then reached for an ivory comb with which to disentangle the shiny black tresses.

“This notion of the slave, this person with no power over their lives, much less their master, is not necessarily true in all cases. In fact, on the whole, I think it mostly a contrivance to make the slave forget to think about his own power, and to convince him there is none there to cultivate.

“In my country (if I can still call it mine after more than a hundred years), a concubine is a slave, yes; but she is also a jealously guarded prize, and a person who is herself considered a guardian of ancient pleasures. Her master knows this, and even though he daily asserts his will over her life, during the time of his seduction and pleasure, he reveres her for her beauty, her knowledge, and especially for her

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power over him. The ladies in your temples have the right of it: they are looked upon as the sensual conduits for divine gifts. They are priestesses; they wield power and yet they are called 'slaves' because someone bought them, or made a gift of them. We may not be called 'priestess', but are you and I any different?"

"I should think so. Particularly when a man is shoving against you, forcing himself on you, stuffing your face or behind. Though it does not happen so often as to define our work, it is a reality: This is not the work of a priestess. Do you not think those times express the essence of domination and slavery?" Kera asked philosophically.

Muriel dropped a finished segment of hair over Kera's shoulder. "Physically, yes. He shoves a woman's body because he cannot shove her mind or her spirit, no matter how he tries. This he knows, and he knows also that these will remain shaken only so long as she is utterly convinced that she has no power whatsoever, and is helpless. But, when the woman decides to recognize her own power, her own..." Muriel waved the comb in a circle, searching for the right words, "her own force, whatever it is, she will no longer be shaken."

"Muriel," Kera asked, sensing another purpose than rhetoric, "what do you mean by this? Why are you saying this to me?"

"Kera," Muriel took her face in her hand, much like Hera had done in her dream a few nights ago, "You are free within this cage; you have power and yet you shrink and hide from this man if he threatens to touch you."

"But Pausanias—" she began, uncomfortably, only to be cut short by the midwife.

"Only tries to shame you, personally, because you remind him of his own failings. It is not your body that interests him, for he has other preferences. What I am talking about are the simple notions of power and capacity in the mind of a so-called 'slave' and their ability to live, whether they are deprived of stature temporarily or permanently."

Kera calmed and nodded, beginning to understand.



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Muriel's comb resumed its work while she continued. "Here is an example you may have seen in some of the births you have attended with me: If the woman is absolutely convinced the baby will not pass, her body is not likely to pass it, no matter the measures taken. The whole process of birthing can become a cruel master, and she its slave, powerless to perform or endure it. It is the same with people and experiences, with pain, with violence; even with love: If you fear it, if you do not think you can experience it, survive it, and then send it on its way, you will have very little exercise of will over it, whatever 'it' is."

Kera was silent as she contemplated these words and remembered her friend, Anika.

After a moment Muriel went on. "The best soldiers have a capacity that the cowards simply lack: they can take the blood, the passion, and the violence; they can have it in their hearts and minds, though it may sicken them, and they can either contain it or purge it from themselves in some way. It is the same for a courtesan or concubine, or whatever you wish to call her: To live, she must have capacity, no matter what else she does. She can fight or she can submit, she can love or hold herself aloof; and there are a variety of ways to do either. There are many possibilities. But someone who has lost all will, who has either discarded or forgotten his choices, that is a slave, whether king or prostitute. It has little to do with ownership, and everything to do with capacity."

Kera's thoughts turned to the lieutenant and his thirst for cruelty. Since the time she first encountered him and silently endured his assault, she had learned that Samira, a Lydian concubine from the palace, had employed theatrics with him, feigning terror with his approach and agony with every stroke he made. Apparently, the encounter did not last long, whether due to his premature release or utter disgust, it was unclear; but he did not repeat his visit to her and she had been left relatively uninjured.

Was one approach inherently more valid than another? Could there be more than one way to address such a problem? Was there even

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such a thing as a 'better way' of handling it? She was encouraged by the notion that power lay hidden in almost any situation if one only knew where or how to find it; the key being that one didn't discard one's choices simply because of their unpalatability.

"Your words have given me much to consider, Muriel. Perhaps there is more than just fear to think upon." Kera replied softly.

"Indeed!" she confirmed, cheerfully. "So, should you find yourself disgruntled at being in the undignified position of having sausages stuffed in your face, just you look at whose meat is in whose mouth: Who has power then, eh?" The two fell together, laughing.

Kera squeezed her leg in an affectionate hug and turned to give Muriel access to the other side of her head. She wondered about her unique force as the comb picked through.

"So, who has called for me? Do you know which one tonight?"

"I think you are going to like this one. Grey was not here, and so I answered the call. This man is very tall, well built with a powerful manner and golden eyes. He wishes to take you to the theatre."

Kera turned to face Muriel in a breathless rush. "The tiger?" she asked, her cheeks suddenly very rosy.

Muriel sat back, comb in hand, smiling her surprise at Kera's response. "A tiger, eh? Well, you certainly will have little need of cosmetics tonight," she said, pinching her cheeks affectionately. "Who is this 'tiger' that makes you bloom so prettily?" Muriel demanded, sorting the tangles out of the last section.

"I first saw him seven days ago. I have never had such a strong and immediate reaction to a man," Kera began, and then told her of all that had transpired between them, and what, frustratingly, had not. "I do not understand it, Muriel. I have made it plain that I would gladly have him."

"Is he the same one who defended you today against Pausanias?"

"Yes, but what has that to do with anything? Damon has defended me against him and that has never stopped him from seeking my embrace."

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“Protection he has given you, dear, but never defense; I heard your tiger was poised to tear Pausanias’s limb from his body! What would motivate a man to do such a thing, I wonder?” Her voice implied romance. Muriel paused, smiling as she brought forth the heavy silver hairbrush and held it above Kera’s head

Kera rounded on her, squinting her eyes scoffingly. “Oh, don’t be absurd. I am quite beyond being regarded as some lady of honorable repute whose reputation must be defended. What nonsense!” She shook her head, shaking the separated locks into one mass of waves as if doing so would debar such unlikely and naively romantic ideas from taking root in her mind.

Nonetheless, she did wonder, what *would* motivate a man to do such a thing? The memory of the officer’s words in the tepidarium and the soft brush of his lips across her own whispered to her, softening her resolve against the possibility of a sincere romance.

“I would not be so sure of that. A woman of your beauty and education is hard removed from her birth, and do not think that others fail to see it that way.” Muriel said.

Kera considered the ongoing difficulty she had in forming close friendships with the other women here. They seemed to separate her out despite her best efforts to share their experiences; almost all of them had done so, it seemed, except for Anika. Grey and Muriel were her only true friends among the slaves.

She defensively called to mind another memory, protecting herself from the loss of all rationality with regard to the officer. “And another thing,” she vented, “he seems unnaturally concerned about his body. When I came close to touching him, he became intensely agitated even though I kept him covered. Who can understand the motivations of such a man?”

“Was this before or after he learned of your encounter with Pausanias?” Muriel’s thoughtful question gave pause to Kera’s rant.

“I had only mentioned that I met him, but it was before he knew I had been touched.”

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Kera was disturbed by the notion that had just occurred to her: perhaps he had seen her as ‘damaged,’ or worse. But then again, she obviously did not put him off; he *had* reached for her. She was hopeful the older woman could shed some light on why he would hide his body yet be so otherwise bold and flirtatious.

Muriel made a few noises of feminine contemplation as she brushed, then stated, “Well, it would be difficult to guess at. It is an odd behavior for a man of this country. It could be a matter of personal beliefs, or of bad experiences, or perhaps an embarrassing injury. Shall we engage our full arsenal of tactics to lure him out of this disrespectful courtesy he has leveled at you?”

Kera laughed at the irony of being offended by the officer’s distance and modesty. Wouldn’t most women dream of being treated with such propriety? *Not*, Kera thought, *if she desperately wanted to be devoured by him.*

She smiled slowly and said, “Muriel, make me irresistible.”

Muriel glowed with her, and together they made a few selections from the vials of scented oils and cosmetics. They kept the applications sparse, quite out of step with the fashion, lining the eyes with kohl and tinting the lips with a balm of crushed pomegranate. The natural flush in her cheeks needed no accent, and her hair took little more decoration than a single braid and a hint of fragrance.

A knock sounded at the door, and the sentry called, “He grows impatient.”

“She is but a moment away, please stand by,” Muriel replied as she shook out the folds of the soft blue linen garment. “Hurry,” she whispered to Kera, who pulled off the pragmatic chiton, with its lack of clingy folds, and let it fall to the floor.

She impulsively dabbed a tiny spot of fragrance between her breasts, stepped into the sky-colored peplos Muriel held for her, and held her body erect as her mentor expertly arranged the drapes and tied it to accentuate her curves. She gently lifted the hem of the gown

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and stepped into the matching leather sandals, and then asked for the mirror to check herself over one last time.

Kera smiled with quiet delight at her reflection, seeing herself as a wild, water sprite. She checked her breath, and, finding it sweet, stepped outside the door to meet the sentry, whispering her thanks to Muriel over her shoulder.

The sentry looked her over. She could see he smiled from within the shadows of his helmet. "Aphrodite walks with you tonight," he said quietly.

"Thank you." Kera peered deeper into the shadows of the Y-shaped opening of his helmet and found a pair of familiar brown eyes and an errant lock of curling, brown hair. "Leandros?"

"Aye," the burly man confirmed and began to walk with her down the hall.

"How good to see you! How is the baby? And your wife, is she well?" Kera asked him in an interested whisper. She had attended the delivery with Muriel three months before, and it had been very enlightening to see a softer side of this fierce defender while he waited for the arrival of his fifth son.

"They are both doing very well, thank you. He is already so strong; he eats all the time! Peri is tired, mostly, but seems well enough."

"Good. I'm glad to hear they are both doing well."

"Kera, watch yourself with this one," he said gruffly. "He gets nasty violent when he is provoked. And there are rumors that he...ah...well, I just don't want to see you get hurt again."

Kera cocked her head at him curiously, surprised by the warning and touched by his concern. "Thank you, Leandros. I am sure I will be fine; he has been a perfect gentleman so far."

Still, the guard seemed unconvinced, and his manner hinted that there was something he wasn't saying or wasn't permitted to say to her. He nodded curtly, and then stopped before the heavy wooden door that lead to the baths. He hesitated a moment longer, silently contemplating her, before opening it. The iron hinges groaned under

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its weight as the door swung inward, and Kera stepped into the room, four small pools steaming ahead of her. It was entirely empty.

“Has he left, then?” Leandros asked the sentry on the other side of the door.

“No, he’s just there, on the terrace.”

Kera’s gaze followed the direction of the guard’s arm, and could just make out the man’s silhouette by the wall in the waning light. His back was to her, his shoulders hunched, arms spread wide as he leaned forward, supporting his weight on the wall in a pose of weariness. She approached him, giddy at the thought of being in his company by twilight, under the stars.

“Forgive me for keeping you waiting, sir. I did not expect to be called,” she said softly.

Deake turned to face her and was stunned, breathless at her beauty. Her hair, which he had only seen bound up in a knot like a rope, save for that first momentary glimpse of her sunbathing in the bathhouse, was held up and away from her face by a solitary braid that encircled her head like a crown leaving the remainder freely cascading down her shoulders where it cupped her breasts and caressed her back in shining waves. The soft folds of the peplos were like a tantalizing veil, by turns camouflaging and clinging to the lush curve of her body, the pale blue fabric highlighting the silken texture of her skin and the depth of her eyes.

He was thankful she had not hidden her face under heavy makeup, and his gaze was inexorably drawn to the slant of her eyes and the pout of her lip. Her subtle fragrance wafted to him in the evening breeze and enveloped him, intoxicating his mind: It was as haunting and seductive as the notes of the pipe. She was, in a word, arresting.

He breathed again, finding his voice. “How can a mortal woman look so divine?”

Kera was immensely pleased with his inspection and reaction. She stepped closer to him and smiled up at him, radiantly. “And you, my dear officer, look every bit the dashing and brave champion after a

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round of cups.” She touched a small cut on his cheek with her fingertips. “Did you make friends with your juniors, then?” He covered her hand with his own, turned his face into it, and breathed in her scent as he nuzzled her palm with his mouth and nose.

Kera felt slightly tipsy at his gesture, so intimate and tender. She touched her fingertips to a glossy, bronze curl that fell over his forehead and couldn’t resist sliding her fingers deeper into his hair, curling her fingers lightly, delighting in its soft, silken texture. He opened his eyes, the reflections of the torchlight behind her like embers within them, and looked at her smolderingly as he placed his mouth across the pulse at her wrist.

Her heart raced at the sensation. He favored her again with a crooked smile as he looked up at her, peering through his lashes as he closed his lips on her skin and then withdrew her hand from his face to hold it within his own.

“Only after they proved themselves worthy of my leadership,” he said in answer to her question. “Come with me to the theater and regale me with your wit.” He found his rucksack, stuffed with a blanket and other unknown lumps, and shrugged it onto his shoulder easily.

“The show must have started by now,” she said apologetically. “We are so late, we will have to sit in the back with the peasants. Are you sure that is where you wish to go?”

Deake’s chest constricted with desire as he looked down into her eyes, pools of deep indigo, beckoning to him. She placed her hand on the center of his chest and he felt her warmth spread across his skin through the fabric of his tunic. Her meaning was plain: she wanted him, right now. He had never felt so flattered by a woman’s attention in his life.

Kera watched his eyes as they first registered surprise, then deep satisfaction. Her gaze dropped to his mouth as his lips spread into a slow smile, revealing even white teeth and the points of incisors a breath away from a beautifully curved lower lip. How she would like to

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feel those lips against hers again, and to feel the nip of those teeth on her neck and shoulders! Kera shivered at the thought, and felt the skin tighten across her bosom.

Deake noticed her response with pleasure. He took her hand from his chest and lightly kissed the pads of her fingers.

“You please me, Kera, very much. Tonight, however, I would like nothing more than to sit with you in the dark among people who do not know me and who do not know you, and who have no slightest interest in what we have to say to one another. Tonight, I just want gaze upon you and listen to your voice.”

Kera did not know what to say. In a way, she was embarrassed for her very forward advance, and at the same time she felt a surprising sense of relief that he had declined.

“You are a rare man,” she said, marveling at him.

“Let us go, then,” he said and, with her hand tucked around his arm, escorted her down the southern stair leading past the library and down to the lawn. Once they were out of the range of the brightly lit palace and into the darkness of the path, he let his arm drop from its formal angle and caught her fingers in his own.

They walked in silence, enchanted by the twilight and the sound of insects humming and chirruping. The carpet of pine needles crunched beneath their feet, and the soft light of a post lantern illuminated a cluster of white crocus growing beneath the trees. The officer stooped and picked two of them, then turned to Kera and placed the star-shaped blossoms in her hair, tucking the stems behind her braid. He brushed the backs of his fingers across her cheek, admiring his work before taking her hand again and continuing along the path. Some paces later, he snapped a piece of cypress from an overhanging bough, fondled it beneath his nose with obvious pleasure, and then carelessly put it in his mouth.

Kera beamed at him with delight on seeing this, and asked, “Are you from the high country?”



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“Both high and low,” the officer said conversationally. “As a boy, I lived with my parents in the river valley, near Larissa. I worked our farm and thought I would die every summer from the sweltering heat. Each day I would look to the peak of Olympus nearby, and wish I had been born to a family of great riders instead of farmers; and every chance I had I would steal away to the hills on one of my father’s horses and ride.”

“Were you not born on a horse, as they say?” She asked.

Deake sighed and looked at her pitifully, playfully lamenting her ignorance.

“I thought all Thessalians were horseman,” Kera admitted, sheepishly.

“No, no. Some are ‘too big’ to be horsemen, and so they farm, pulling the plow with the animals,” he said. “I was that sort until the summer of my fourteenth year. The river went stagnant, and a fever spread across the land. Both my parents were taken ill, and they sent me and my siblings to live with an uncle, higher up, where it was cooler and drier.”

Deake fell silent and took the cypress from his mouth. Distantly, he twirled and snapped the twig with the fingers of his free hand, crushed it into a tiny ball, and flicked it away into the night. Sadness hung about him like the resin perfume of the broken twig. “I was never to see them again. They were taken within a week of our departure.”

“I’m so sorry.” Kera flattened her palm against his and laced their fingers more closely.

Touched, he looked down at her head as she leaned into him, and said wistfully. “So am I. I miss them, all of them, which is something I never thought I would say, except of my sister, of course. I hated farming the whole time I was a farmer, and wished only for the horse and mountains. I got that wish at the expense of my family and home, and once in the mountains under my uncle’s care, I soon learned to

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wish for other dreams, even further away. Hence, Macedonia and Phillip.”

They had arrived at the top of the theater. Deake stepped forward of her and scanned the crowd, looking for a space to spread his blanket at the rim.

“It sounds like there are many interesting turns to that tale,” Kera encouraged.

He turned around with a smile and promised, “Perhaps another night,” before resuming his survey.

He took her hand and led her through the crowd, excusing them politely as they stepped over and around other people and their blankets. He found a small place at the farthest edge of the rim that had a better view of the countryside than it did of the stage. It was the perfect place for watching the show while listening to each other, and it was removed enough that they would not disturb others or be disturbed.

Kera held the rucksack for him as he pulled out the blanket, kicked some rocks out of the way and spread the cover over the grass. Deake wordlessly took the bag from her and squatted down to investigate the mysteries within. Realizing he was not going to give her direction to sit or stand, Kera decided to sit, and curled her legs beneath her. The officer smiled at her as he set a basket of black grapes on the blanket, followed by a large lump of cheese wrapped in linen, after which came a small round of bread, and, finally, a goatskin flask.

“Grey never misses the mark,” he murmured with anticipatory delight. “Forgive me, I missed dinner earlier. Are you hungry? There is plenty to share.”

“No, thank you. I have eaten,” she replied.

He stretched out on his left side, his head near her feet, and gathered the food close with a sweep of his arm. He took a big bite of the bread and tipped his head toward the stage below. “Do you know the play tonight?”

“I am unfamiliar with the story. *Lysistrada*, I believe, is the title.”

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“Hmm. I don’t believe I have heard of it. Is it new?”

“Yes, relatively.” Kera answered. She watched him eat his food with gusto, taking turns to watch the barely audible play so as not to stare unbrokenly at him. She unfolded into a delicate stretch, having grown uncomfortable with her legs tucked beneath, and kicked free of the unfamiliar sandals. She rubbed the soles of her feet on the blanket sensuously, and crossed her ankles, bracing herself up with arms outstretched behind her.

Deake studied her bare feet as he absently licked his fingers, finishing up the bread and cheese, and then spun his body round to put his head next to hers. He propped up on his elbow and gave her a long look as he took a draught from the flask.

“Your feet are a work of art.”

Kera laughed, stretching her toes and turning her ankles to offer him a better look. “Thank you, sir!”

He reached the basket of grapes a bit closer, and looked up at her for some time, his face unreadable as he watched her watching the play. He admired the light of a nearby torch dancing in her hair as it moved with her breath and her laugh. After a while, he looked down to the stage briefly, and then returned his gaze to Kera, finding her infinitely more interesting than the actors far below.

After a time of ignoring his persistent study, she smiled at him sidelong, as if finding his manner amusing, before returning her attention to the stage below them.

“Tell me what makes you laugh at me so.” Deake commanded, scooting his body closer to lay his head in her lap. Kera chuckled out loud as he snuggled the back of his head into the soft well formed by her hips and stomach.

She pulled her knees up slightly, and pulled her fingers through his hair. “It would insult you, sir.”

“Madam, I kill for a living. I demand you report what you see in me that gives you such mirth. Please?”

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Kera caressed his head and face while she considered how to put the thought into words and watched many different emotions flicker across his eyes like flashes of gold in pools of amber.

For Deake, the moment was suspended in time. Her face was like the moon surrounded by a cascade of black night coming down around him, tickling his neck with its silken strands; and her eyes were like the twilight sky itself: deepest blue, their depths winking with stars of laughter and love.

How could he keep her? He knew he must, but he did not know how to accomplish it, or even whether she desired to go with him.

She seemed to have arrived at a reckoning, and her hand fanned out over his chest, stroking and exploring the terrain there with feminine curiosity. As she traced the line of his collarbone out to his shoulder with her fingers, she tilted her head and began.

“I just thought it ironic how the king’s success depends upon the might of these great shoulders; the fantastic fear they inspire, and the destruction they can and do wreak. And yet beneath all this...battle gear,” she stroked across his breast once more in an encompassing sweep, “beneath all of this beats a heart as sweet and genuine as a child’s.”

Deake exhaled, and in that one breath a lifetime of confusion, frustration, and rage was lost upon the wind. He stilled, and in his mind something opened to Kera that had not been offered in quite some time, something that he had presumed lost forever. He lay silent as the soft winds of hope blew across an ancient yearning and, for the first time, it was not agonizing to feel it.

Kera turned her attention back to the stage, unaware of the profound effect her words had on him. Deake continued to lay with his head in her lap, in awe of the raw delicacy of feeling that she had exposed to him like a brilliant, new vista. It stretched before him like a snowy landscape viewed through a secret door that, having been discovered, was carelessly left open: It was breathtakingly beautiful, fearsome in its ruggedness, and suddenly more appealing than the

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warm familiarity of the den. It beckoned to him, powerfully, to come and adventure, to come and sample the delights of scaling the distant glistening peaks and of running wild through its whispering woods.

He sat up and looked around at the people below in the theatre and at those nearby on the rim, their heads tipped together in communion, their bodies touching and withdrawing only to touch again; and it seemed to him that there was something there; something not quite tangible, but nonetheless perceptible, like a current of wind that twined around, among and through them, forming eddies, making zephyrs, and in some places—at the edges of the shadows barely lit by flame-making gales.

Deake breathed and felt the current waft closer to him. He turned his body toward Kera's, propping up so that his torso faced hers.

"Supposing I did mean it, what I said in the tepidarium?" He asked her. "Would you go with me, or must I yet win your favor?"

Kera traced the line of his eyebrow with her fingertips and caressed his bottom lip with her thumb. "There is nothing to win, sir: I am owned by the king," she said, and added with a sad smile, "It would take a royal decree to remove me from this place." Kera turned her eyes away from him and stared, unseeing, toward the players below, twirling dramatically in their brightly colored clothes.

He smiled in the darkness and softly declared, "Then I shall visit the king first thing in the morning."

Kera laughed, looking back at him. "You *are* drunk," she said conclusively.

"Only with desire," he murmured, reaching up with his hand to stroke the side of her face.

Her lips parted in surprise, and though she said nothing, a current, soft as breath and warm as sunshine stretched across the distance between them and touched his face. It was *Life*, Deake concluded.

He watched the response in her eyes as he breathed more of himself into her, and more of her into himself, delighting in the ripples and waves that eddied between them.

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She shivered again, and he moved to sit behind her, supporting her weight against his chest, and extended his legs at her sides. He rested one hand against her belly, then buried his face in her hair, nuzzled her neck, and purred. Kera closed her eyes, sighed at the moon, and cupped her hands lightly around his thighs.



## CHAPTER VII

### Whispers

Kera watched the officer disappear into the night as he followed the palace wall northward, toward the officers' quarters, his white tunic reflecting the moonlight. Her sigh of disappointment was crushing, and she was glad no one was near enough to hear it.

*Not a kiss; not even a promise of "later,"* she thought morosely.

She looked to the top of the stair and caught sight of Grey standing near the sentry, accounting for the girls who had gone out and were due back, others like herself. Her spirits lifted somewhat, for she had missed her friend last night, and had not seen him at all today.

She lifted the hem of her gown and briskly trotted up the steps. Grey held his arm out to her in anticipation and then embraced her around the shoulders.

"You look gorgeous!" He said, beaming like a proud uncle. "How was your evening with your 'tiger'?"

Kera tried her best to smile, but it was an obvious effort. "He was a perfect gentleman," she said and slipped her arm around Grey's waist.

"How very disappointing," he murmured, making her laugh. "Muriel told me what an exciting day you have had, what with bathing duty, a party of five drunken philosophers, and not one but three suitors fighting for their share of the 'crown jewel,' and now—"

Kera made a sound of disgust. "Gods! Stop calling me that. I think I would rather be 'the royal shit-carrier' after today."

The sentry grinned, and Grey hooted with laughter as he walked with Kera, arm in arm, toward the supply room. "That can be

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arranged, my love, that can be arranged! And tonight, it is almost as good. With Parmenio's forces just returned and the additional dignitaries and their families arriving for the end of season ceremonies, the laundry has at least tripled. We are all staying up late for a folding party, and you are the guest of honor."

Kera swore again and took the flowers from her hair just as they rounded the corner into the supply room, which was sweltering hot from the heat of torches and lantern-light.

"Well, well, well; if it isn't our princess returned from a night out with her champion," Merissa drawled.

She was dressed as beautifully as Kera; her butter yellow peplos falling gracefully around her slender figure; her hair a pile of shining chestnut curls, artfully pulled to spill down and around her face and neck, splendidly framing her big brown eyes. "Tell us, did he treat you as good as 'dog's meat,' savoring every juicy bite?" Merissa asked

"Oh, shut up," Agatha quelled tiredly, shooting a reserved glance toward Kera. "We've all had a long day. Can we just save the cat talk for another night? Jealousy so turns your pretty face, Merissa."

"Jealous!" huffed the offended beauty, "Of what? Some highborn slut and her--"

"Enough, ladies!" Grey commanded. "Any other night and I might pay to see the two of you oiled up for a wrestling match, but, honestly, there is too much to be done for any effort to be wasted on this nonsense. Now, we have just had twenty-five more officers arrive today, and after they have rested tonight they will be needing services in the morning, directly after the purification rites. That means some of you may be called from the baths to perform medical services as needed, and we can expect to be using the poolside slabs as an overflow. I've got six extra serving boys to help keep the braziers burning, the linens stocked, and the oil flowing, but be prepared to assist one another when you see a need for it."

There was a general murmuring, a blend of excitement and complaint, around the gigantic heap of towels regarding who would be



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returning, which favorites would be back at last, and who might be missing from the ranks of well-loved, or not-so-well-loved men.

Kera pulled her hair into a knot at the back of her head, and her thoughts turned to Damon, and how relieved she was to see him this morning, returned safe, whole, and happy after a yearlong absence. Though it had been her shift in the baths today, he had requested her for his massage, and, once alone in the small, heated room, they had shared their pleasure at seeing one another again.

Mechanically, she pulled a linen from the pile and folded it while she reflected back on their brief conversation. The voices around her receded until they were a vague murmur.

“What is it, Kera? You seem so different; more...distant than before. Have I displeased you?” Damon asked, tenderly.

“No, Damon, not at all,” she reassured him, touching his face. “You were lovely, as ever. It is just I *am* different. Wiser, I had hoped; but, I met someone recently, and now I don’t...I don’t quite understand it myself, I can’t stop...” Kera faltered, embarrassed.

Damon nodded his understanding as he gently pulled her tunic around her shoulders and re-arranged the drapes to cover her breasts. “You want him,” he said simply.

“Gods help me, but I do,” she answered with a sigh of relief, glad that this didn’t upset him. “I don’t know what to do about it. He is driving me mad: he touches me, then pulls away; he leans in, and just when I think he is going to kiss me—oh, and I *want* him to!—he retracts. And about the time I conclude that he is just toying with me, I look into his eyes and I see the same tortured desire in him that I am feeling, and it just leaves me feeling so...so disappointed in everything that isn’t him.” She put her arms around Damon’s shoulders and rested her head against his jaw, grateful for his embrace and his friendship.

Damon looked at her with affection and said, “You point him out to me later, and I will discourage him from irritating you further.”

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Kera laughed softly and shook her head. “That is very sweet of you, but I don’t think you would have much of a chance. He is a bit taller than you, to say the least, and I believe he has been about discouraging others from making any overtures toward me.”

Damon raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Really?”

“I couldn’t help but notice that the three men who were with me the first night of their arrival returned the next day with various minor injuries; and since then I have been somewhat pointedly avoided. I don’t mind the lack of bathers to tend to, but the other girls would be so disappointed to see your pretty face get disarranged, especially if it were on my behalf.”

“And what about you? Wouldn’t you miss my pretty face at all?” he teased, pulling a lock of her hair.

“Oh, Damon, you know I’ve always loved you like my sister,” she pulled a lock of his hair in return, and he gave a very stilted, false laugh in return.

“Oh, very funny,” he said, stepping back from her before he playfully smacked her bottom and upped onto the table.

Kera smiled ruefully at the memory, and became aware of her surroundings once again. The going conversation had already taken its predictably lewd turn, and she felt assured she had missed nothing of importance. Agatha, her roommate, stepped near to get another armful of linens from the pile in the center of the table.

“Thank you, for what you said earlier,” Kera spoke softly, nonchalantly, as if she were only making a passing comment.

Agatha nodded her head once, meeting her gaze, and walked away with the linens. The curt response stung a little, as it always did. She wished she could join the spirit of camaraderie, no matter how debauched it was; at least with her own roommates. It would be so much better than being ever alone, even among a crowd. How many years would it take before she would be one of them, safe enough to address outside of their bedroom, safe enough to publicly befriend?

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“So Kera, tell us, what was yours like tonight? Mean? Pleasant?” Beryl inquired.

“Big, or small?” Chloe chimed in, wiggling her eyebrows, making everyone laugh.

“He was—” Kera began before Merissa loudly upstaged her.

“Stuck up, full of himself, and too proud to walk among the rest of us, I am sure. Quite unlike your friend, the archer. Now there is a man to go out with! Honestly, I don’t see why you waste any time on that other one at all.”

The room fell silent as many sets of lips pursed tightly, restraining the torrent of words that burned like pressurized acid in the mouths of so many.

Kera ignored the bait and answered into the silence, “As a matter of fact, he was very pleasant company, very congenial. He shared some details from his life, picked some blossoms for me, and even offered to share his food with me.” At this last, there were startled gasps of surprise.

“But he didn’t tell you his name, did he?” challenged Thelma, a petite woman to Merissa’s right.

Merissa smirked her approval at the shorter woman and snapped the towel in her hands, as if to punctuate the implications of the question.

Thelma rolled her eyes at her sideways in agreement with her comrade, and started her diatribe. “The ‘nice ones’ always tell you little details about their life; their little battle tragedies, the little hardships they’ve suffered—even the names of their ex-wives—in short, anything to get your sympathies, your ‘big eyes,’ and, if you are really stupid, your love. But, in the end, if they don’t tell you their name, it only means one thing: they intend to forget you as quickly as possible, and want you to forget them, too, once they are gone!”

There were a couple of bitter comments in the circle validating her remarks. Kera flushed, rankled to hear the same lecture she had been giving herself being spoken aloud by one of her rivals.

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“But you already know that too well, don’t you, Kera?” Thelma purred. “I am sure you learned especially from the mistakes of Anika, who—”

Now it was Kera’s turn to snap her towel. “Let us not speak of Anika tonight. She was a sweet girl who genuinely—”

“And it’s always the ‘sweet girls’ who—” Merissa joined in.

“You. Shut. Up.” Kera pointed her finger at Merissa’s face with each word. The room went completely silent with shock.

None had witnessed Kera in such a mood before, though they had certainly heard it whispered that last week she had slapped an officer. Most of them, however, had dismissed it as just that: whispered rumor. But now, they reconsidered.

If her birthright had ever fully shone in this place, it was now, dressed as she was, on fire with rage, her bearing regal. And yet, somehow, despite her natural authority, she managed to be neither pompous nor arrogant in her use of it.

Her voice was soft, certain, and inherently commanding, “You will not speak of her thus. Out of respect for the dead, which I should think even *you* would hold, we will not speak of her this night.”

Tension crackled in the room, but now the surreptitiously disapproving looks were aimed at Merissa and Thelma. Kera saw the balance of power begin to shift, and despite her yearning of moments before, she suddenly, violently wanted none of it. Before anyone could start to slide toward her and level insults at these new scapegoats, she turned to the first woman who had addressed her tonight, Beryl, a friendly girl with a fitting name.

“I say, Beryl, that color is entirely divine on you. It positively lights up your eyes.” Kera said in her most dispassionate voice, complimenting her green gown. “How did you enjoy yourself at the theatre tonight?”

“At the theatre? Hah! We didn’t even make it past the library before I was up against the wall. And for a man so large, I must say I

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expected more of him: it was over and done with before I could work up a satisfactory moan of encouragement!”

Laughter prevailed and the tension eased out of the room. Kera was very glad to lose the intense attention of the women, and dropped back into her quiet otherness, quite relieved to abstain from such games of “friendship.”

“It would have been nice to have then gone to see the show,” Beryl continued on, for her audience, “but, no! I spent the next hour fending off his kisses and gagging on foul breath as he kept stabbing me with his wretchedly rank tongue! If it were not for the urgency of this folding party, I would, at this moment, be standing beneath the lions, praying for rain with which to cleanse myself!”

The lions were a set of ornamental downspouts at the corners of the central compluvium, which poured torrents of water onto the island sculpture below. The vision of Beryl gargling under the force of such a downpour had many of the girls laughing and volunteering their worst kissing stories.

The noise of the room dimmed around Kera as she stared blankly ahead, her hands methodically completing their task, as she remembered a kiss that was as far opposite to disgusting as one could imagine. She sighed. She wasn’t likely to ever forget this officer, name or no name.

“Speaking of which,” said Gaia in response to something Kera had missed, “has anyone encountered this mysterious man they call ‘The Hammer?’ I keep hearing these awful little stories of whores getting their cunts ripped open by his gigantic tool!”

“Yes, yes! I’ve heard it, too,” began the flood of anonymous retorts. “‘Hammer the Slit-Splitter’—and you should hear that from the mouth of a drunk! It took him three tries before he got the ‘shit’ out of his mouth, and got the—”

“—I heard that in a brothel right here in Pella, he found a whore who would take him on, but she begged him off after only a few inches and gave him a partial refund!”

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“Oh, come, now how would someone know that unless they were there? Surely you didn’t hear it from the whore!”

“You never know—she might have heard it from her own mother!”

“No, honey, I heard it from *yours*.” The women cackled, en masse.

“You know men and their wagers! The one that told me said that he heard it from someone who said that he and a few others had paid to watch it from another room, unbeknownst to this ‘Hammer,’ and he said that he won the bet at four inches—” gushed Anina, a very young one.

“What? Was he there with a measuring rod?” Chloe was skeptical.

“That is the point! *It* was the measuring rod! Men like that practically put markings on it to keep track of things,” insisted Anina, very sure of herself.

“I heard the only thing that will let him in for a bit of slip is his horse, and even she screams.” Beryl imitated a horse’s agonized neighing, to the delight of her audience. “Imagine if he appeared before one of us and wished to have his hammer spit-polished!”

“Then a gargle beneath the lions would be a welcome and gentle rinse!” quipped Gaia, and the whole room dissolved into hilarity as the turn came full circle.

“Gods! Let us hope he is dead or among the general ranks down below!” someone called out.

“Too right!” Another shouted among various cheers of assent before the tide of gossip washed ashore some other tasty tidbit to feed upon.

But Kera stood alone, disheartened by their sense of mirth, depressed by their oblivion to any notion of humanity, and dispirited by her bondage to such society.

Another hour later, when at last the folding was done, she was too glad to bid the group goodnight. Once in her room with her three roommates, all of them exhausted from the work and weary of talk, she gratefully slipped into bed and descended into a dark and troubled sleep, Thelma’s words still echoing in her thoughts: *But, in the end, if they*

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*don't tell you their name, it can only mean one thing: they intend to forget you as quickly as possible, and want you to forget them, too...*

\* \* \*

*Four steps, breathe in; four steps, breathe out.* The wind rustled the trees around him in the predawn light like wild spirits, dancing, whirling, and racing around him.

When it came to music, Phillip was a lover of the steady, beating drum as much as he was a lover of the wild, strumming cithara. It was that kernel of sanity in the center of chaos, the predictable among the wild and improbable, the calm within the passion that was his anchor as well as his impetus, much like the sound of his feet beating the earth beneath him: changeless, persistent drumming between breath and breath, its perfect regularity anchoring and pulling him through the mad swell of thoughts that faced him at the start of each day as he readied himself for the choices he must make for his people.

*Four steps, breathe in; four steps, breathe out: eight beats, one breath.* Such was the simplicity of life as he ran through the wood, two guards flanking him and slightly to the rear; the path his chief certainty, the trees a blur at his sides.

Soon, he would break free of their shadow and their invigorating perfume and feel the sun's first rays on his chest; but, now, he savored the mental picture of the theatre, just passed, lying in the purple morning shadow like a great vessel still swirling and alive with the spirit of Dionysus, the spirit of wildness and gaiety, of laughter and passion.

He exhaled as they broke through the trees, and the temple of Poseidon Hippios rose before him, pale blue in the morning light, its columns rising in majestic salutation to the earth all around, the fierce horses that lined its capitol docile and sleeping in the semi dark. Beyond that, the road that smelled of salt and clay lay like a coiled red snake that ran between the green hills, along the encampment, and

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down to Pella, just coming awake, with puffs of smoke in her heart and along her walls. He could see the market square from this place along the road, and was just thinking that he should send out for some figs when someone called out to him from below.

“Oi! Phillip!” A curly head of hair and broad shoulders were all that were visible as a man lumbered up the steep hill, digging his fingers into the soil to keep from sliding down again. He looked up, and called out breathlessly, “My Lord, a quick word, if you please?”

Phillip stopped, hands on knees, puffing and smiling down at him. It was his old friend Deake, to whom he owed a happy debt of gratitude for service stretching clear back to before his regency. He held a hand out to his guard and one of them tossed him a flask of water before he waved them back, carelessly.

“Deakon! What brings you to this bend of the road so early?” Phillip squirted the water into his mouth and over his face before taking a seat on the crumbling, russet rim, his legs hanging down the steep, grassy grade.

Deake turned and flopped down on the edge of the hill, propped his elbows on the ridge of clay next to his king, and tipped his head back, gasping. After a moment he turned and panted, “Hoping your habits have not changed these last eight years, and that I might catch you on your morning exercise.”

Phillip passed him the flask with a smile, and watched him drink. “Well, now that you have my audience, what shall I hear?”

“A request. I hope you will forgive my impudence, but I find myself deeply motivated.” Deake expelled his breath dramatically and grinned at something only he could see. “Is it still your custom to bestow a gift upon officers who are being decorated or promoted?”

“It is.” Phillip was intrigued. He could not remember a single instance when this man had asked a favor of him, though he was more than deserving of it and had been made aware of it more than once.



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Deake's secret smile widened, and he gave Phillip a meaningful look. "A certain 'crown jewel' has caught my attention, and I was hoping I could have it for my promotion."

"What? A jewel?" Philip asked, surprised, and a little affronted.

Deake's grin was positively rakish. "A woman. Kera Berenyse, from the baths."

Phillip was stupefied. "You jest!"

"No, sir, I rarely do."

Still disbelieving, the king latched on to a newly formed suspicion. "You and Pausanias are playing a prank on me! Kera Berenyse, a 'jewel' for your gift! Oh, that's very funny. By all accounts she is a dirty whore, worthy of her father and that barbarian he had betrothed her to!"

"How many accounts? And from whom, might I ask?" Deake defended casually, curbing his urge to bite.

Phillip thought it over, and upon inspection found it had been multiple accounts from only one: Pausanias. He frowned at that, privately embarrassed that he had not seen this before. Deake saw the chagrin in his eyes and passed him the flask.

"No matter," said Phillip, quietly. "Evidently, I have been misinformed. So, this is all you want? Just a slave? That isn't much of a reward for a man of your talents and performance."

"I want to take her to wife. And, if it pleases you," Deake said with a serious face, "I would take as well a man, called Grey, also from the baths."

Again, Phillip was aghast. "The concierge? I can't even imagine what you want with—" He broke into laughter, his eyes going wide. "After all these years, do you take a lover as well from the ranks of slaves?" Phillip laughed some more at Deake's wrinkled nose and look of disgust. "All right, all right. If it is a wife you want, I will find you a virgin from a suitable family and—"

"No!" Deake said, a little too loudly, making the guards jump. Phillip waived them back, snickering to himself.

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“Please, no virgins,” Deake said, softly. “It is Kera I want. I love her, sir.”

Phillip just looked at him, sober and unlaughing. “How can you know she will not remain a whore? And, what about your reputation, man? You are an officer of rank; think of what you are asking!”

“She is not a whore, sir. And you know better than anyone I don’t give a damn what other people say about me. Honestly, is it any worse than helping a young prince play pikes at the gymnasium while the real warriors are away getting killed with the king?”

Phillip recalled well the jeers he himself had endured after returning from three years’ political captivity in Thebes, and proposing that the entire military structure should be remodeled on the principles that he, still considered by many to be a child, had learned while a captive. Those had been painful and frustrating times, and few had invested their time and belief in him the way this foreigner had. Phillip had never given much thought to what others might have said to this seasoned soldier for staying back with him to train in and develop the new methods while others went off to die of the old ones.

Deake had been, from the very beginning and in every campaign since, key to Phillip’s military success, and he had never regretted the day he broke with tradition, commissioned this Thessalian, and inducted him into the ranks of the sacred Companion Cavalry.

Humbled, Phillip said, “You know that her title and properties can never be returned to her, nor bestowed upon you.” He stopped, incredulous at himself for saying as much, doubting the sense of this move, torn between loyalty to his friend and the concerns of his office.

“Good gods!” he exclaimed suddenly, rubbing his face in amazement. “You are asking me to free a political prisoner whose father is still at-large stirring up trouble for me with the Athenians, and marry her to one of my top officers!”

Deake quirked his mouth and shrugged. “I always thought it the better of the two suggestions. Had she been safely married off, her

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father would now have little grievance to bemoan at the Athenians' door."

Phillip groaned: Deake was right. Had he been less drunk that night, and less enamored of the green eyed Pausanias, he wouldn't have had cause, on multiple occasions since, to regret taking that suggestion. *Ab, the insanities of love*, he thought to himself with a smile, and considered his friend again in the morning sun, shaking his head in wonder.

He stood, helped Deake to his feet, and then dusted himself off, reluctant to begin. "What you are asking for is not a simple thing, Deake. The decorations are a very formal, very public affair, and for me to bestow upon you as a prize something as base and used as a slave, and a whore, no less...I must at least consider how such an act reflects upon my office, to say nothing of how your marriage to such a woman would reflect upon the Companion as a whole. Like it or not, it does matter what people think and what they say when it comes to such things as the marriage, decoration, and commissioning of my officers."

Phillip sighed, his regret apparent before he could speak it. "I commend your gumption and your humility in asking me this; and knowing you as I have, I do not doubt that your love for her is real. I am sorry, but I cannot promise you this, Deake. It is more than I can, in good conscience, give to you, much as I love you and want to please you."

Phillip lamented the stricken look on his friend's face, and held his arm out to him in salutation, signaling the end to their meeting. "I will put my mind to it, and if I can find a way to give you this..." Phillip pressed his lips together, wishing he could take back the words they both knew were a thin hope, at best.

Deflated, Deake nodded, blinking eyes that burned with grief, and took the proffered arm. Past the ball of twine in his throat, he said, "Thank you, my lord," and watched the young king turn and jog away

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toward the palace. He sat down heavily where he was, knees drawn to his chin, and fretted.

Despair, that great wellspring of loneliness, threatened to overtake him like quicksand where he sat. After some time, at a certain angle of the sun, he got up, unable to delay any longer the inevitable beginning of the day. He turned, gazing for a space of time at the high, thick walls of the golden citadel that encircled the baths, and then returned to his quarters to make ready for the purification rites.

\* \* \*

Kera began the day with a heavy sigh when the corridors came alive with the sound and candlelight of slaves and servants. It was first light: another day.

Weighing on her mind was the curse and the blessing of the baths: Always, there is a morning after. No matter how bad things were, and no matter how gay, the next morning would always come, and along with it, the usual.

Disappointments she had experienced before, some crushing, others minor, but few as pervasive as this. There had been favorites before this, and grief when they were forever gone; and there had been unpredicted departures and reassignments, and reunions gone other than expected. But this ache was over something that had not even occurred, and which, she was beginning to think, was never intended to occur. The yearning for it was constant and consummate: Not even work gave her peace from its clamor and endless sighing.

She was beginning to get sick of herself, and that couldn't bode well at all.

Something had to be done about it. It was time to move on and be done with this. Hadn't Muriel said that power lay in the notion of capacity? Well, she had experienced as much as she was going to experience of this man, this tiger, and it was time to be done with it

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and send it on its way before she found herself in a fool's position, pining away for something that could never be, a slave to her longing.

Methodically, she went through the morning's work in the hospital changing linens and rolling bandages; harvesting herbs from the medicine garden and administering tonics; cajoling the tired and weak into the tepidarium, and offering words of comfort to both men and women who were confined to their beds.

At last, shortly after the midday meal was taken and gone, the officers began pouring into the baths from the training grounds. She had just finished a massage and was delivering towels about the caldarium when she encountered Damon, alone in the shadows of the steam baths. Here was a friend she knew she could depend on to understand the need to be quit of these feelings and get on with her normal existence.

Damon smiled his greeting to her and pulled at his shoulder, trying to rotate it forward and wincing. "Kera, I was hoping I would see you today. Do you suppose you could pull on this for me? It's been drawing up again, as it always does this time of year—it tells me the rains are coming soon. Tonight, another day, at the most."

"Of course." Kera smiled at him, glad for the opportunity of the empty room. She took the seat above him, her legs filling the space between him and the short wall behind. She reached her arms down and around his torso and he slid forward to the edge of his seat, familiar with the stretch. Damon exhaled and relaxed as she pulled up and back on his shoulders, letting his head drop into her lap, his eyes closed.

She looked down at his face, so beautiful and familiar, so predictable and sure, and before she could reconsider, she put her lips to his neck, kissed him behind the ear, and ran her tongue along its rim. Damon sucked in his breath at the unexpected contact, making him wince at his shoulder.

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His eyes flew open and locked with hers, upside down, above him. Kera glided the flat of her hand over his nipple, in apology and invitation. His eyes grew dark, and his breath quickened.

He sat up, gently pulling out of her grasp, but remaining close. “What’s this?” he asked quietly.

“An invitation,” she said, tipping her head so that her hair fell alluringly over her shoulder. Involuntarily, his eyes flicked down to her throat and breasts, lingering for a moment before finding their way to her face again.

“Yes, I can see that; but, why?” He asked, gently, battling his urge to simply accept, and let honorable reasoning be damned. Something was wrong, he knew it: Not since that first entreaty had she made such an advance upon him.

Her sigh of frustration was answer enough.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Damon was embarrassed and a little hurt to find himself being a stand-in for another man, even though she was not his beloved. They were good friends, after all, and to be used felt...well, like being used.

Kera saw that she had hurt him, and it was the final frustration she could bear: tears of remorse sprang to her eyes, and she whispered through them, “Damon, I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have—”

“Oh, Kera, I will be fine.” Damon smiled, stood on his knees and embraced her, soothingly. “I have been paid worse insults than having my ear licked by a beautiful woman.” Kera laughed and dashed at the tears, squelching them after a few attempts. Relieved, Damon reissued his query, “What is this all about?”

“It’s just that I cannot keep hanging on to this, this man whose name I don’t even know! I can’t keep letting myself want for something that just is not real, Damon. And this,” Kera motioned to the room around them, “*this* is real. *You* are real. You and I, we’re real. I know what to expect from you. I know what to expect from this place. But him...I do not know what to expect. And what he seems to

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offer me just *cannot* be real. I am a fool if I let my thoughts linger on him another minute.”

Damon was still, a mixture of anger, empathy and arousal. If he cared nothing for her, he would simply accept her offer and take her right here on this bench. If he cared nothing for the spark of friendship he had just tendered with Deake, he would tell her the man was a cad and entirely forgettable. But he did care; he cared so much about the both of them.

Kera was his friend, and he knew that to bed her now would not help her in the least, contrary to what relief she thought it would provide. And being in a position of command was a lonely place. Honest friends were in extremely short supply where such power and authority are owned. The truth was, Damon couldn't afford to lose Deake's friendship, new and tenuous as it was, any more than he could afford to lose Kera's love and respect.

“Kera, why don't you just talk to him? You always know the right thing to say to a man. He is a good fellow, despite his scowl. Why don't you just tell him what you want?”

“Really, Damon. I am in no position to make demands,” Kera despaired. “Besides, he would think me impertinent.”

“But you are impertinent. That's why we like you so much! You're impertinent, and beautiful, and you always say just the right things to a man.” Damon cajoled a faint smile out of her. “But you are right about one thing: you are in no position to make demands. The correct position is a bit more like this,” and he lifted her up, turned and sat down with her straddling his lap.

Kera's head fell back, laughing, and she held on to his shoulders as he wiggled suggestively underneath her, making exaggerated moans of relief. Damon continued, “You see, in this position, a woman can demand whatever she likes, and the answer will be ‘yes, yes—oh gods! Yes!’”

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Kera could scarcely stop laughing to put two breaths together, and their laughter, mixed, was a delightful sound filling the room and spilling into the hallway beyond, beckoning curious ears a little closer.

“What you should do is sit on him thus,” Damon pulled her closer by the hips and schooled his features into a look of intense seduction, “and say, ‘I demand you cease this intolerable teasing and bed me this instant!’”

The mist in the room stirred, and the two friends looked absently towards the door. Their laughter quit as if had been stoppered: There stood Deake, frozen mid-stride, his hand still on the door, the smile falling from his lips, the breath he had taken to call out his greetings numbly expelled into the silence. Without a word, he turned and left the room, pulling the door to behind him.

Kera and Damon sat still as statues, frozen in shock at the picture they must have presented to him. Hands shaking, Kera pushed against Damon’s chest and dismounted him to stand before him, awaiting instruction.

Damon cupped his hands over his mouth and nose, leaned back against the wall, and sagged with the force of his compunction. “Oh, Kera, I’ve got to go to him,” he said.

“Perhaps it is better this way,” she said, huskily, believing that the thought, spoken aloud, would make it more bearable somehow, but it did not. On the contrary, her voice, though barely more than a whisper, rang like a death knell in the silence of the room.

“No.” Damon shook his head. “I will not let it end like this. Regardless of what passes between the two of you, he is my brother in arms, and I cannot let it end like this.” He rose from his bench, cupped the back of her skull, and kissed her forehead. He sighed. “Go on. Keep yourself busy, and think not on it. I will see you later, perhaps.”

Kera nodded and left the room, despondent; and Damon pondered for a moment just what he would say to Deake before he, too, left the room with another dejected sigh.





## CHAPTER VIII

### W i n d

The midday sun was hot and bright, etching sharp shadows in the dust of the yard. It was quiet. Most men had taken advantage of the break to enjoy the baths, the surrounding grounds and temples, or the market in Pella, but a few were still about, reclining on stools in the shade of the colonnade, swatting at flies with towels and discarded tunics, reading or relaxing in one another's company.

Deake was far too restless for such pursuits. Instead, he inspected the long racks of *sarissa* along the walls enclosing the gymnasium, which would be used in this afternoon's training exercises with the infantry. Each double-ended pike had been cleaned, its joint sanded and oiled, and its ends blunted for training.

He paused, holding one in his hands, testing its balance. His chest heaved and shuddered; then his eyes closed and a look of calm came over him as he took another breath and slowly released it.

He resumed his inspection and checked the seal on the weapon, grasping its center with both hands and counter rotating the two halves until they stopped. He brought the joint down over his thigh, forcefully, where it broke apart with a 'pop'. Satisfied, he grunted and placed one point at the base of a column a ways off from where he stood, fitted the pieces together again, and then lunged the weapon into the column base with all his weight until the two halves snapped together again. He reversed the counter-rotation to lock them in place, set it on the ground beside him, and shucked his tunic.

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Clad only in his loincloth, he began a short series of stretches in preparation for the training session to come, and tried to forget how warm Kera's bosom had been against his flank when she stretched him, how soft and fragrant her hair when it cascaded down over his face. He leaned forward, touching his hands to the ground in front of him, and hugged his arms around his knees to deepen the stretch.

Upright once more, he carried the six-meter spear onto the field and brought it up across his shoulders, wrapping his arms over it and twisting gently from the waist, side to side, eying the wooden dummy in the center of the yard. His head dropped heavily, and he studied his shadow on the ground, brooding before closing his eyes.

*Perhaps it had only been a dream, he thought heavily, no more than the voice of frustration and fantasy.*

"Deakon."

Deake opened his eyes and regarded Damon with cold indifference. "Artemas."

"We need to talk," said Damon.

"No, we do not."

*Poseidon's wrath, the man was obstinate!* Damon mused as he discarded his own tunic, determined to get the other man to discourse with him in one fashion or another.

"It was not as it seemed," he said, and held out his hand, palm up.

Deake considered him a moment longer before he resolved that he could make use of a sparring partner. He broke the joint across his thigh and felt something come alive in him with the loud snap. Carelessly, he tossed one half to Damon, who caught it easily.

Deake offered no verbal reply, but spun the staff across his wrist two turns until he held it from the center. Without preamble, he offered a fierce frontal assault, coming at Damon in a blur of motion. Their staffs cracked and scraped at a mad pace as the men beat at each other, lunged, and parried each other's blows.

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A deafening boom resounded, and Damon's shoulders bulged as he caught Deake's last strike with a lateral block in front of his face and held him at bay, arms steady.

The two men stood motionless, eyes locked, staves resting against one another, each man poised to respond to the other's next attack. Gone was the pretty man from the baths with the teasing and congenial manner, and here was a seasoned warrior, as capable and intense as his opponent. Damon had Deake's grim admiration, though one wouldn't see it through his snarl.

"That was a bit predictable, Korydon," Damon taunted. "Do you always go for the face when you're having a jealous fit?"

Deake bared his teeth. "Not always," he said, and with a snap pulled back on the staff, bringing the bottom end up between Damon's legs.

Equally fast, Damon whipped his down in an arc to deflect the blow and jumped back just as the pikes connected with a crack near his ankle.

"I was merely giving her a piece of advice," Damon said in a steely voice, circling his comrade.

"Is that what they are calling it nowadays?" Deake jibed, turning opposite him.

"Not that it is any business of yours, but she entreated me to put out a fire that you started."

Angered that he would throw salt into an obvious wound, Deake dealt in-kind. "And did she find your 'advice' sufficient, or was it as hollow as playing second for another man?"

The insult landed as intended. Damon flushed with anger, raised the staff above his head, and growled, "You are a stupid ass!"

Hair flying out behind him, he took a running start and swung the lance toward Deake's head. Deake ducked, then leaped as it came back across the ground for his ankles. He landed a strike across Damon's back as the man reeled with the momentum of his own assault.

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Under the eaves of the colonnade, interested murmurs began to stir as the few who were present began to coalesce into an assembly of spectators and speculators.

Damon spoke as he got up from his knees, using his staff as a cane to push off the ground. "Fool that I was, I declined her offer out of an apparently misplaced respect for our friendship." He indicated with his hand that he spoke of himself and Deake.

"Was that before or after I witnessed your impassioned plea?" Deake asked, disdainingly.

Incensed by the insult, Damon advanced, staff whirring fast in front of him like a moving shield. Deake watched his movements carefully, choosing a defensive stance that would best counter the attack. They engaged in close quarter, and the falls were rapid and intense. If possible, Damon sped his onslaught and pressed Deake backward. His voice, though coming in short measures, was undisturbed by his fluid motions.

"What you saw was my advice to her, enacted. I was trying to lighten her spirits, as she was extremely bothered when she came to me. I counseled her to take her grievances directly to you, since you are their cause."

Surprised, Deake faltered and was slow to defend. Damon's blows landed, three in rapid succession. There were whistles and catcalls from the sidelines as coin was exchanged and wagers settled.

Unconcerned with the onlookers, Deake got to his knees and casually spat a mouthful of blood into the dust beside him, wiping his mouth with a forearm. He stood up, holding the staff at his side. "You must have misunderstood her: I have done nothing to aggrieve her. I have given her every consideration and respect she deserves."

Damon snorted, derisively. "Deakon, that's just the problem. You are courting her like a bride maiden, defending her as if she belongs to you, and—"

"I will not treat her like a whore." There was warning in Deake's voice.

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“But she *is* a whore, man!” Damon felt as if he had slapped his friend by saying so, and tried to soften the blow. “She is an uncommonly gifted, truly virtuous, communal whore—”

He had to raise his voice, for Deake was already saying, “no,” and shaking his head.

“—and when you treat her as anything else you confuse the issue. She *wants* you. And when you offer her something she cannot have, whether you mean to or not, you are toying with her emotions.”

Bitter silence followed for a brief moment. The air around Deake was charged with electricity as he regarded Damon through eyes that had become slits.

“You have been laying with her, all this time, haven’t you? Two days ago you told me that you love her, and near tears proclaimed your almost religious devotion to her. Yet today you stand before me defending her heart while you use her body, and you accuse *me* of toying with her?”

Damon’s face was hot, and he answered quietly, mindful of the avidly listening men of the general ranks, more of whom were beginning to gather under the eaves at the end of the yard, “I said I do not love her in the same manner as you, but I never professed to hold her in a brotherly regard. Yes, I have lain with her! So have dozens of other men, Deake. That is why she is here.”

“But she does not belong here!” he roared, fuming.

“But this is where she *is*!” Damon rejoined forcefully, then ran a shaking hand over his head, moved by the other man’s love but baffled by his inability to be reasonable about this.

Shakily, he expelled his breath and, quieter, continued. “Like it or not, this is where she is, and it is bearable only so long as there is nothing better being held out in front of her. When you make it seem as if there is, you deceive her with false hope and crush her spirit.”

Deake knew there was truth to what Damon said, but coupled with Phillip’s rejection this morning, he felt as if his own spirit was breaking

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in two. He brought his staff to rest before him and, with closed eyes, lightly knocked his forehead against it, trying to regain his composure.

Seeing his anguish, Damon sought to console him. He squeezed his shoulder and looked at him beseechingly. “Deake, we are men of war. What we have, we share with one another; we love one another because it is safer that way. When we enjoy our spoils, we do not sorrow for whence they came. You make too much of this. Just enjoy her for what she is. It is not as if you put her here.”

This was more than Deake could tolerate. Hot, blinding rage against something he could not name and could not grasp to smother into nonexistence filled him to his very core. He rounded and took flight, and, in a craze, charged at the dummy a few yards behind him. With the force of a hurricane, swinging the *sarissa* over his head in a two handed grip, he rained down blow upon blow until naught was left of the shaft but splinters.

Spent, The Hammer collapsed to his knees and sat among the debris with his chest heaving, his hands shaking at his sides, and his head bowed. The small crowd, having witnessed his fury with terrified awe, now quietly dispersed to grant him privacy in his grief.

Confused by Deake’s reaction and unable to leave him in such turmoil, Damon approached him after a few minutes when his breathing was no longer so ragged. He knelt down and put his palm on Deake’s neck.

“Friend, I am sorry my words have aggrieved you. That was not my intent. I simply do not wish to see Kera get hurt.”

Deake’s body sagged under the tentative embrace, and he blew out his breath in a hot rush. He lifted his eyes, seeing something other than Damon’s face, and said, simply, “Neither do I.”

Damon was puzzled by the anguish he read in Deake’s eyes, for it seemed out of step with his remark; and judging from the distant manner in which he replied, he was not referring to quite the same thing to which he seemed to be responding.

## WIND

*Gods above!* Damon wondered with dawning horror, suddenly sympathetic to previously unconsidered repercussions of being a man of ‘great endowment.’ *Could those dreadful rumors actually be true?*

As if sensing the nature of his thoughts, Deake’s gaze became focused and hard, his manner once again brittle and defensive.

Damon’s mouth opened in disbelief, his compassion roused as he began to understand. Very quietly he said, “Deake, I am sorry for your...situation, truly, I am; but Kera is a good girl, she’ll not be coarse with you. Why don’t you just tell her?”

“I will not discuss this,” Deake said belligerently, and shrugged the hand off his body.

Spurned, Damon stepped back from him, tasting bitterness. “All right. Fine. Just don’t expect her or the rest of us to defer to you while you work up the courage to bed her,” he said coldly, and then left the yard, angrily pulling his tunic from the sand.

\* \* \*

Deake exhaled slowly as he lowered himself into the small pool, gritting his teeth as he knelt down and let the hot water cover shoulders that already burned with fatigue. He sank down further, hiding his face beneath the water’s ebony surface as he sat back on his heels, enjoying the silence for as long as he could hold his breath.

He was in hell. He knew it.

In the flickering light of the torches the room was cave-like; full of distant, distorted voices whispering, laughing, dripping their torment around him; taunting him with fragmented memories and fractured hopes. But, under the waves, there was quiet. Under the waves, he could still feel his own strength, his own integrity, unassaulted by the doubts and ‘concerns’ of other people, of other times. In the private dark of his mind, he could still see the vision of Kera, bent in a graceful arc, her mouth soft, her body glowing in the golden light, her eyes intensely regarding him as he entered the tepidarium.

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Slowly, he raised his head above the rippling pool and combed his hair back with his fingers as he exhaled. He took another slow, measured breath, and opened his eyes, studying the stones in the wall before him, considering his options: He could smother his feelings, disregard the dream as idle fantasy, and forsake the hope of a life with Kera, ending any further contact with her; or he could do as Damon suggested and enjoy her solely and only as a whore, sharing her with untold others; or, he could commit treason and attempt to steal her from his friend and liege lord, the king of Macedonia.

He frowned darkly and rubbed his face, then set about trying to alleviate some of the tension in his neck and shoulders. He abandoned the attempt after a moment, finding that it hurt his shoulders to lift his arms, and hurt his arms to reach for his neck. Again, he sank down to let the water cover him up to his nose, and brooded as he fanned his arms to the front, and then as far behind as they would go.

He realized, as he heard footfalls approaching, he would have to make up his mind soon, as he would eventually be faced with Kera, or with another woman. What would be his choice?

Treason was, of course, out of the question; and he was no more able to smother his love for her than he could stop the wind from blowing. But to abandon her or treat her as a whore would really be a kind of treason to himself, and to her. He just couldn't do it. His frustration mounted.

The footfalls neared and stopped. She was there before him, beautiful, flowing and graceful, just as the first day he saw her. She was carrying a stack of towels and turned to place them on a small table.

*By Zeus's thunder, I will have her. I must,* he thought. Kera froze. She had not yet spotted him, but it was as if she had felt the force of his prayer.

Deake's heart pounded and his mind began to whirl. *What if she is already in love with Damon? What if she—?* He tried to quell the doubts, but wasn't succeeding.



## WIND

Kera looked around the room, sensing she was not alone but unable to locate anyone else in the dark. She shivered, feeling suddenly superstitious as the thunder echoed through the baths, and the wind from the gathering storm made its presence felt inside. She looked toward the sentry guarding the door to the slaves' quarters and gathered strength from his presence. Slowly, he tipped his head meaningfully toward one of the pools. She followed his gaze, curious, and then gave a little start of surprise.

It was *him!*

Though only the upper portion of his face was visible, she recognized him by his brooding. He made her think of a crocodile waiting to strike. She smiled tentatively, unsure of his mood or whether Damon had been able to remedy their misunderstanding earlier today.

"Would you like some company?"

He lifted his face slightly, exposing his mouth. "Depends on the company." His deep voice rumbled around the room, echoic of the storm.

Her smile faltered. "What sort of company would you like?" she asked softly.

"The quiet sort," he said laconically, his eyes never leaving hers.

Feeling a flash of irritation, Kera pressed her lips together and gave a curt nod. "Of course. I can leave you if you wish," she said and made towards the door.

He was standing in an instant, his hand hot and wet across her foot. "Please don't," he said softly.

The warm current that emanated from his hand and up and through her body rendered her speechless. She had been touched by many a nude fellow before, and had seen plenty of well-built men; but never had she felt penetrated by their very presence.

He looked legendary, with steam rising off his skin, and the light of the fires making his eyes burn like embers. It was easy to imagine him as a centaur, just partially revealed in the night. The water, which was

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navel deep on most men, barely covered that place where the trailing line of hair began to thicken. He was most enticing.

Her imagination fully inspired, Kera slowly sank down on a couch that had been pulled close by the pool, laid aside the towels she was carrying, and set her flask of oil on the floor, away from the uneven stones at the pool's edge.

Deake's eyes followed her movements. She looked as if she had just emerged from her own bath; her hair was damp and loosely braided, her skin glowed, and she was covered in a full-length wrapper.

"Thank you."

"Of course, sir," she murmured, warmed by his grace.

"I wonder if we could speak privately?" Deake looked pointedly at the armed sentry standing statue-like before the heavy door.

Kera indicated with a nod to him that she wished the same, and with the sigh of hinges he silently vanished into the dark recess, then closed the door behind him with quiet finality.

They were completely alone. The officer seemed to have a good deal on his mind tonight, and Kera was content to give him the quiet he asked for.

Deake was unsure of where to begin. When he was apart from her, his mind overflowed with what he would say to her if given the chance; but now, in the quiet and the dark...it was so close to his dearest dreams, and yet he felt so fraught with tension that he found his mind almost entirely blank when facing her in the flesh.

"Damon tells me I have vexed you." Deake regretted his tone immediately, and damned himself for letting his jealousy put an edge to his every remark. "I am sorry; I did not mean for that to sound so...accusatory."

Kera relaxed somewhat, but her manner was guarded again. Deake contemplated her thoughtfully, his face revealing very little, and then spoke very softly as he fanned his arms before her, caressing the water's surface.

## WIND

“I continue to find myself bewildered at how my mind is completely addled by your presence.” He smiled bemusedly and continued, “My whole world has been turned upside down since meeting you: Things I was sure of before, I now doubt; and things whose existence I denied, I now see. I hope you will speak frankly with me, and not fear any consequence.”

Kera sighed reflectively and reclined to her side, drawing up her knees and propping her head on one hand. “I do not fear you; I just do not understand how to please you. One moment you reach for me, and yet when I reach for you, you seem angry with me, or put off. I do not understand what you want of me.”

Deake was silent, feeling the moment of reckoning at hand.

Kera saw his withdrawal, and asked, “Do you favor men?”

“No.” he said, meeting her gaze, wishing he could be done with withholding.

“Are you scarred, or injured?”

“No. No, it’s none of that, Kera, it’s...” but his voice dried up in his throat, and he could only look up at her, reading the frustration on her face. He closed his mouth and looked away from her.

“Then why do you avoid willing women and skulk about the bathhouse at midnight?” She asked, sitting up, her irritation kindled. “Why do you tease and taunt, and then hide yourself away like some prim virgin?”

“Why don’t you come in here and find out what I am hiding?”

Deake said this so quietly, she heard it almost entirely on echo. His voice was like the quiet thunder of a distant storm, belying his calm demeanor. He extended his arm to her in invitation.

Kera recognized this was not simply a challenge or an order he had thrown at her, but something a great deal more intimate to him. It was more of a test of her character: would she stoop to ridicule, would she balk in fear, would she brag one way or the other? In short, would she respect him or not? He was afraid of something, and he was trusting her to be kind about it.

## THE COMPANION

Deake watched her closely, noting every subtlety of her face and eyes as she considered him. She looked surprised by his offer, then wary. His nerves were pulled taut; he braced himself for insult whether in the form of fear or jest. His heart thudded with apprehension, and he felt suddenly foolish with his arm sticking out.

“All right,” she said. In a smooth motion Kera untied the rope about her robe and let it flutter to the floor where it pooled around her feet.

Deake’s breath caught in his throat at the sight of her skin, kissed by firelight, and momentarily forgot his own fears. She stepped down into the water, took his extended hand and laced her fingers into his. In another moment she was touching his chest, caressing the skin above his hammering heart. He tightened his hold on her hand, halting her before their bodies could touch, hesitant to break this spell by letting go. She seemed to understand this, and looked up into his eyes with a silent promise. He let out his breath, released her hand, and let his arms hang at his sides.

His expression was guarded, and that said so much about the man and his experience that she wanted to make it all right for him. She had been with shy men before, but this was something very different. It was more like he was wounded. Kera watched his face as she slid her hands along his skin and beneath the water’s surface.

He closed his eyes, barring further inspection of his fear. “You smell good,” he said, and filled his lungs again. “What is that?”

“Freesia,” she whispered, her voice mingling with the echo of hundreds of tiny waves lapping at marble edges.

Deake opened his eyes and his lips parted as her hands took hold of him. She perused his length, and gently twisted up and around. He filled his lungs with air and found no sound, no breath would come out. *Her hands were so soft!*

Admiration flowed through her, not because of what she found, but because he didn’t foist it about like a trophy or a cudgel; because he cared, obviously, for the experience of his partner. She stroked him

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again, and he stopped her, gripping her wrists lightly, his eyes glinting in the dark. His chest was heaving with desire, but still he restrained himself.

Kera gazed into his eyes, her mind fast at work piecing together his evident reservations, his extreme modesty, his moods, and the brittle, contradictory way he handled himself when he was near her.

Very softly she asked him, “Are you the one they call ‘The Hammer?’”

His eyes became as ice, and it seemed his very spirit bristled with anger and disappointment. He released her hands and stepped back from her. Kera understood perfectly that she trod on broken shards, and her heart resonated with his degradation. She stepped closer to him, closing the gap he had created, and touched his face tenderly.

“I thought you would be uglier,” she said, smiling faintly at the scowl this incited. “A bit hairier, certainly, with warts and bad teeth, and goaty little legs and...and a tail, perhaps?”

Deake smiled in spite of himself, picturing the satyr she described. He relaxed visibly and looked at her with a sort of reserved gratitude in his eyes.

“I am glad it is you,” she said simply.

“What? Why?” He knitted his brow, surprised.

“I know you would never hurt me.”

He lifted his hand, hesitantly, as if to stroke her arm, and yet disbelieving his good fortune, withdrew it. His face showed his skepticism when he spoke.

“This doesn’t trouble you?”

“Of course not.” Kera laughed easily and covered his chest with both hands, relishing the feel of the soft, dark hair there, and coaxed it into stripes with her fingernails. She watched his eyes darken in response. He stepped closer to her and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand.

“Tiger that you are, I think you are beautiful,” she said, and softly kissed his chest when he was silent. “Every inch.”

## THE COMPANION

Relief followed by a profound appreciation filled him so that he felt forever rooted to this spot. He turned his hand against her face and extended long fingers into her hair, lifting and kneading it gently as he drew his fingers down, unwinding the loose braid so that her tresses tumbled freely around her face and shoulders.

“My name is Deakon Korydon. You may call me Deake, if it pleases you.”

“It pleases me very much,” she said, breathlessly, shivers coursing down her back .

At her radiant smile, he bent and kissed her languidly at the base of her neck, the same place he had once teased her, and murmured into her ear, “I have wanted you since I first set eyes upon you. I just don’t want to hurt you.”

Delighted, Kera raked her nails over his scalp, taking handfuls of his curling, silky hair and rubbing her cheek into it. “I don’t think you could, Deake. I think that if a woman can grant passage to a baby, surely, with the right preparation, she can grant passage to any size man.”

His face lifted abruptly, his brow knitted, and he gave a soft snort of affront. “How very... practical of you to say so. Not exactly flattering, but practical,” he said.

Kera let go of him, bristling at the criticism. “I should think you have had your fill of ‘flattery,’ sir. I was under the impression that you wanted my services, and I do not know how to be anything other than practical about it.” Frustrated, thinking it another attempt to sidestep any natural progression of intimacy, Kera dared, “If you are willing to dispense with a few conventions, I think I can accommodate you.”

Deake’s face went blank with shock, his head reeling as his most fervent desire to have a meaningful, intimate encounter with Kera, a moment ago within his grasp, was now being negotiated like a trade deal. The anger and the same sense of panicked loss that had taken hold of him when she had retreated from his first advance took root

## WIND

again when he saw her withdrawing from him, even as he held her in his arms.

Kera regretted her words immediately. She had been preoccupied with thoughts of him, with hopes of him, and a half dozen admittedly naïve fantasies about him for days, and now, in this incredibly vulnerable moment, she was treating him as impersonally as she had any other man. Disgusted with herself and the whole situation, she turned to leave the pool as her eyes began to sting.

Deake watched her turn to leave, confused and suddenly doubting the validity of his own experiences with her. At war in his mind was the truth of what he felt for her versus the harsh reality of what she was, as Damon had so painfully reminded him today. She was to the edge of the pool now, and in another moment she would be closing the distance to the heavy door where she would vanish into the utter security that lay beyond.

“Kera, wait.”

She stopped at his command but did not turn to face him.

Deake waded to her, a shallow wake fanning out behind him. He spoke softly in her ear, nuzzling her, and placed his hands on her back, lightly sliding them down to her hips.

“I am sorry. Please don’t leave. Please?” He glided his lips and the tip of his nose along her neck, featherlike.

Kera thought she might swoon at the delicate sensations he wrought. His fingers were soon wrapped around her waist and slowly inching upward. She relaxed and leaned her head against him, finding it difficult to think.

He smiled against her skin, asked, “What conventions?” and continued to nibble.

“Normally,” she began, and then suddenly gripped the tops of his thighs as she sucked in her breath.

“You taste good,” he rumbled, and gently squeezed her ribcage before easing back.

## THE COMPANION

Kera tried again, licking her lips before she spoke. “Normally, we do not engage in mouth kissing because...it can be...that is to say it sometimes can lead to... well...but circumstances being what they are, I think...” but factually, she could not think. She had been aware of all the practical reasons for such a request when she first contemplated it, but she no longer felt very practical with his hair caressing her cheek and his lips worshipping her skin.

She wanted to feel his mouth against hers again, it was as simple as that. “Oh, please don’t make me explain it!” she cried.

Deake’s head slowed as he digested her words, finding he had to play them back to himself a few times before he deciphered the unspoken request. He stopped, entirely surprised, and his mouth left her skin at last.

Kera turned her head to look up at him, which put their mouths so close he could feel her breath on his lips. *Gods, she was beautiful!* His heart was pounding, and he found his gaze unable to leave her mouth. He asked, just to make sure he hadn’t mistook her meaning, “You want me to kiss you?”

“If it pleases you,” she whispered.

The words acted as an intoxicant upon him, fogging his senses. Alarm sounded in some deep recess of his mind as if, on some primitive, instinctive level, he knew he was suddenly in over his head. He could very dimly remember a time, long ago it seemed, when he learned why these customs had been put in place. There were reasons, he remembered, which had impressed him with their insight; but, now, confronted with such a beautiful pair of lips, he was impressed by little else.

She turned within his arms to look at him directly, awaiting his answer, and the sensation of her breasts, warm and wet, sliding across his chest was his undoing. His breath caught in his throat, and his eyes closed of their own accord as he covered her mouth with his own.

Deake’s heart broke free from something and soared in the darkness and flame. He felt as though he had yearned for this woman



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for years, and he cared not whether it was passing fancy or doomed love; he only cared that she saw *him*, and she wanted him for who he was, having no interest in what he was or whence he came, or what people said of him. He could consume her for days and still hunger for more.

Kera melted, and then ignited under his tender onslaught, moaning softly as he washed over her like a hot typhoon. All sense of down and up, left and right became inverted in the inky depths of his sensuality. His kiss was potent, his hands strong and searing against her skin. Like a vine, she curled her hands around his neck, cupping the back of his head, and twined one leg around his, resting the sole of her foot on his calf. Beneath the surface of the water, he throbbed against her vitally, and she felt her body opening in response.

He gripped the back of her leg and pulled it tighter, lifted it higher, letting her feel his urgency, and little eddies turned at his side as she lifted both her legs and hugged him with her knees.

The sound of his own voice, wrenched from him in broken moans as they kissed, echoing and mixed with the sound of hers acted as a mirror, multiplying his passion a hundredfold; and the heat of her body pressed against him, the warmth of her hands sliding over his back and buttocks, molding him, squeezing him, was spurring him into a fervor.

He took two strides to the edge of the pool and knelt upon the submerged ledge, putting her back against the wall. He tore away from the kiss and lifted her up to envelop her breasts with mouth and hands, making love to each in turn as, below the water, he probed and teased her in gentle mimicry of what was to come.

Kera raked her nails across his scalp and breathed his name, and it took all his self-control not to plunge deep into her. His mouth came down over hers once more, hungry and consuming. Deake marveled at the raw power of what he was feeling: this was so much more *alive* than anything he could recall experiencing, comparable only to rage in its exact inverse.

## THE COMPANION

He pulled away from her lips with effort and forced his hands to still on her body, taking delight in watching her come out of the fog of her passion and find him again.

“All right,” he said, breathless. “Kissing allowed. What else?”

She looked at him blankly, her gaze falling to his mouth as if she could comprehend nothing else. Her thoughts had turned to honey, becoming sweet, slow, and sticky. She watched his mouth spread into a smile, and he bent and nibbled her earlobe while she thought it over.

He was so hot between her thighs, hotter even than the water around him. Kera slid her hands down his powerfully muscled arms and up again, relishing the perfect roundness of his shoulders, delighting in the surprising softness of his skin. She lightly nipped his neck, tasting him with her tongue, and was rewarded with his startled moan of delight.

It took her some time to give him her answer, for her mouth was quite preoccupied by its exploration of his neck, and she found herself captivated by every twist and gasp she wrought from him.

At last, with her mouth over his ear, she said, “You stop when I say ‘stop,’ no matter what.”

His eyes hovered before hers and became hooded as he slipped his tongue into her mouth and slowly perused the shape of her lips. “Of course,” he breathed, and continued his exploration. She held his gaze for a long moment, savoring the sultriness of his look before her eyes slid closed and she shivered, overcome.

“Anything else?”

“Oil.” The word barely made it out of her throat as an audible sound. When he had finished another sensual assault on her mouth, he stepped back lightly, putting both of his feet down.

Kera, in a dazed sort of way, stood up on the immersed ledge, suddenly very aware of the water cascading down her body like an erotic veil. Deake’s face was now level with the middle of her thighs, and he gave a crooked sort of smile as he let his gaze trail down from her face until he was fully appreciating that region before him.

Set in the court of Phillip II of Macedonia, The Companion breathes new life into the classical era. Deake yearns for love, but Kera, of necessity, must shun it. Though their union is impossible, the gods have fated them to be together. Theirs is a journey that tests their faith in gods and their personal integrity, and finds them in an epic battle of loving versus living that keeps the suspense high and the pages turning.

## **The Companion**

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