

This book is intended as a stand-alone sequel to a previous book. Several characters were introduced in the first book, others are presented for the first time. Here is the first chapter. The question is, should I proceed? Suggestions for improvement? Wipe the slate clean and start over? In other words: IS MY BABY UGLY?

Send in your critiques – be honest, but nice...mothers are very protective of their “babies”. We’ll post the ones that are most helpful.

Here is *Aftermath*

## Chapter One

*...they have made a pact with the dark gods and that is why they are invincible...*

*...but if they are invincible, what would become of us?*

*...You know what would become of us...those of us who are virgins would be confined for the rest of our lives in a Persian harem, slaves to whoever claimed us as war prizes...although for an unlucky few...the blood of virgins is said to be particularly sweet to both the Persians and the dark gods...*

Echoes of a long-ago conversation held by spiteful girls who either did not know or did not care that the very-Persian Lady Yasaman was listening replayed in her mind. Twisting her hands, tightly bound by hemp rope that chaffed tender wrists, and blinking rapidly, her sight limited to the material of the burlap sack covering her head making it difficult to breathe and the heat created by a scorching sun even more so, thinking about that long-ago conversation, Yasaman smiled in grim amusement.

*I probably will wind up as a meal for the Dark Gods,* she thought to herself. Or the despised slave trader might sell her to a Persian brothel – he was not inclined to be benevolent - she had already caused so much trouble, created such mayhem, wreaked such havoc that the camel's rear

end would likely sell her to the first person who expressed interest and before she exhibited any of the behaviors that had made possessing her an unrelenting series of disruptions, unpleasant upheaval, barely prevented escapes and varying degrees of injury - up to and including death to anyone unfortunate enough to be placed within her reach. Her past behavior was the reason why she was currently trussed like she was, the iron clamps around her ankles limiting her mobility to short, tentative steps. At present she and five other women occupied a covered wagon pulled by slow moving oxen. She was the only one bound and hooded.

They had been travelling for several days since her capture. She flinched, shying away from the memory of what preceded it, unable to face what had happened to the caravan she and her family had been a part of when the unexpected, devastating attack occurred. The raiders had since paid dearly for laying claim to her. She had killed one of her guards, blinded another in one eye, sliced the tendons in a third's fighting hand, bitten a fourth's finger to the bone and kicked a fifth so squarely in his genitals it would be a wonder if he ever used them comfortably again. Unable to retaliate because they could not damage valuable merchandise, all anyone could do was hope they were not among those selected to watch the beautiful, deadly young woman with eyes that flashed dark fire and lethal promise. To a man they would be happy to turn her over to her new master and they all pitied whoever that might be.

Kansbar al Badenar, favorite of the King, former Commander of the Persian land forces, slowed his mount as he approached the outskirts of the small, bustling town, little more than large tents and a few clay dwellings along a makeshift dirt-packed street. Its biggest attraction was the

marketplace, dominated by the wooden platform surrounded by sand where human goods were offered for sale. More interested in acquiring food and water he made to move on when movement near a wagon pulled up next to one of the slave pens drew his eye. Four women were moving toward one of the open gates, submissive, heads down. The fifth figure, also a woman judging by size and attire, was surrounded by guards, head covered by what looked to be a burlap sack, hands tightly bound, and movement restricted to short steps. His attention thoroughly arrested he nudged his mount closer. A man strode up and began talking, gesturing with his hands, addressing the figure who had halted at the sound of his voice.

There was a tense silence when he finished speaking. Turning, the man pointed to one of his men and waved him toward the figure. The man selected gingerly approached the figure radiating anger and hostility, kneeling beside it and releasing the chains around its ankles. Standing quickly, he reached up, pulling off the burlap sack, quickly cutting through the ropes binding the wrists, stepping rapidly back. The first man said something to the man who appeared to be afraid, turning impatiently back to the woman coldly eyeing him. He too hesitated before visibly gathering himself and moving closer. He spoke again for some time before stepping up, reaching up and snatching away the turban hiding her hair and the scarf keeping most of her face hidden.

Kansbar was transfixed, the image of tumbling black hair spilling like a waterfall almost to her knees, flashing dark eyes and full lips in a face of astonishing fiery beauty immediately and forever imprinted on his mind and heart. He drank in deep-set, almond-shaped eyes in a smoothly oval face, high cheekbones, strong nose and lushly full lips all encased in silky skin the

warm matte brown of carob beans. She was tall for a woman but slender as a reed. He wondered why everyone seemed to be afraid of her. She seemed harmless enough, and if he had not been watching so closely, he would have missed the swift glance she threw at the guard closest to her, stumbling against him, smoothly removing the knife from its sheath attached to his belt, quickly straightening in the same motion, reaching behind her with one hand, angrily pointing down to the ankle chains sprawled on the ground as the reason for her stumble with the other. He was beginning to understand what the slave trader had been experiencing and could only be thankful that he had come along so that he could prevent the as-yet unknown woman from doing whatever it was she planned to do with the stolen knife. It was time to be more than just an observer.

Twisting in the saddle he motioned to one of the men who had come with him to collect supplies, leaning over and whispering into his ear for some moments. The man saluted smartly and galloped the short distance to where the slave trader and his rebellious captive were walking to one of the slave pens. Dismounting swiftly, he hurried over to stand in front of the slave trader, halting his forward movement. Bowing he spoke a few words before leading him away from the group, speaking for some time. When he was finished the slave trader bowed deeply, repeatedly, calling for his men to bring the woman over.

Kansbar had joined them by this time and stood watching carefully as she was brought over to where he stood. The slave trader was the first to speak. “A thousand blessings, my lord! I am honored to serve one known throughout the kingdom – the King’s First. I am of course, delighted, anxious to bestow on you any, and all I have, but I must ask – are you certain this is

the one you want? I-I must tell you she, that is, the girl, she is, what I mean is..." his voice trailed off miserably. "She can be a handful," he finally said, reluctantly. "And I would not want it said that you were tricked or cheated in any way." Angering someone so close to the King would be disastrous. Why did *she* have to be the one who caught his eye?

"I'll take my chances," Kansbar said easily. "And hereby hold you blameless for anything that happens after she departs from your sphere of influence," he said. "I'll leave you to discuss the particulars with my steward while I have a word with my new addition," watching as they moved out of hearing distance to dicker over price.

He looked over at his soon-to-be acquisition. "I was not planning on an addition to my entourage so there have been no provisions made to accommodate you," he said. "We'll have to improvise."

The woman eyed him coldly. "I am no one's slave," she said.

"That may well be," Kansbar said, "but that appears to be the only way you will leave here today – unless you were planning to use that knife you have hidden on your person on yourself," noting her start of surprise, "and if you were planning to use it on someone else, well, I daresay that would be a death sentence as well."

“Death might be preferable to life as a possession,” the woman said defiantly.

“Death should never be an option, if it can be avoided,” Kansbar said. “As long as there is life, there is always hope that things will change.” And when the woman failed to respond he said, “Let us – you and I – reach an agreement. If you come with me willingly, I will allow you to keep the knife, provide you with a horse and your own accommodations, make certain that you are treated with respect and all you need do is promise one, not to hurt me or any of my men or two, attempt to escape. If not, more...drastic measures will need to be taken.”

“I give you my word,” the woman said after a brief pause just as the slave trader hurried up.

“All is in readiness, my lord,” he said with a low bow and a fawning smile. “The woman is yours for the taking, and I trust you will be pleased with your purchase.” Privately he thought he would be lucky if she did not slit his throat in his first attempt to bed her. Straightening, his face and voice hardened. “Bow to your new master and be glad that he saw fit to purchase you – show him you are grateful – and you can begin by telling him your name.” Something she had yet to do in the entire time she had been with him.

The silence following his statement was profound, the woman eyeing the slave trader with disdain, her mouth firmly closed. Flushed, embarrassed, the slave trader strode up, raising his arm, checking in surprise when it was caught in a powerful grip mid-swing. He gasped in pain

when the grip tightened. Looking up his eyes widened when looking into those of the second most powerful man in the entire Empire.

“If there is any chastising to be done, I shall be the one to do it,” Kansbar said quietly as he tightened his grip even more, “you relinquished that right when she left your dubious protection, and from this point on, I want you to forget that you have ever even so much as laid eyes on her. Is that clear?”

“Yes, yes, of course my lord, forgive me for my thoughtlessness – my temerity - I assure you there was no insult, no attempt to usurp your rights intended,” the slave trader said weakly, “as for everything else, it shall be just as you said – everything – all knowledge of her is hereby forgotten.”

“See that everyone that accompanies you is equally forgetful,” Kansbar said coldly, flinging the man’s arm away from him. “Now, I think it would behoove you to get out of my sight.” Turning away from the man scurrying hurriedly away, he addressed his steward. “Ride back to camp and secure a mount for our guest,” he said. “The bay mare, I think. And have a tent pitched and equipped for her as well.”

“Yes, my lord,” he said. “I shall return forthwith.” Mounting his ride, he galloped rapidly away.



“Our initial reason for our presence here still needs to be addressed,” Kansbar said to the woman. “You may accompany me which means we would have to ride tandem. Or you may wait here with my steward until the horse secured for you arrives. You may keep your knife while remembering your promise.”

“I am a woman of my word – you do not have to remind me of it. I will ride with you,” she said after a short pause.

Nodding, Kansbar put two fingers to his lips and whistled. Immediately there was an answering whinny, and the sound of hoof beats. A smoke-gray stallion with bridle and saddle galloped up, coming to a halt beside him. Mounting, he leaned down, offering his arm, pulling up and twisting slightly as she deftly straddled the horse’s flanks, her arms lifting to twist her river of hair into a knot, wrapping the scarf she had retrieved around it, using it to cover her face, wrapping those arms around his torso when he cantered off away from the pens of human bondage, the cries of auctioneers rising in the air.

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“My nose is itching. It’s been itching all day.”

The man examining the wagon's wheels paused, turning. "We will leave immediately following the last performance. I will alert the others." Rising he walked over to the carefully patched tent flap, lifting it and disappearing inside.

"It seems we'll be pulling up stakes and saying our goodbyes to the others," Sefra said with a regretful sigh. "All alone again until we find another traveling caravan of performers. Did you hear that, everyone?" Sefra asked, addressing the rustling, shifting noises in a variety of cage types and sizes taking up most available space in the tightly packed wagon. "Myrnah, what do you think?" she asked addressing the large white bird perched on a crossed wooden post, smiling when the bird responded with a cackling laugh, lifting her feathered headdress.

"I hear your nose is itching and we're moving out," a young man walking on his hands climbed the stairs, entering the cramped, crowded wagon.

"It's been itching really badly all day," Sefra said, rubbing the offending appendage vigorously.

"There have been a lot of military types around today," the youth observed, twisting into a backbend before standing upright. "Persian soldiers trying to hide the fact that they're looking for something. Or someone."

Poised to answer, Sefra checked, listening. “Are you ready for the performance?” she asked.  
“Since it is our last, we want to be sure to leave a good impression.”

“On my way,” he said returning his weight and balance to his hands. “I will see you after the final act.” He made his way down the stairs and over to the tent, opening the flap with his feet and disappearing inside.

“You can come out now,” Sefra said, “There is no one here except for me and my animals.”

The silence following her statement was broken when a lean tanned hand reached out of one of the python cages, lifting the latch, untying the leather cord holding the door closed, opening the cage door and climbing out. “It takes a brave soul to risk hiding in a python cage to avoid detection,” Sefra observed, looking the man who emerged over carefully.

“Drastic circumstances call for drastic measures,” the unknown man said in a deep, rich voice with lush velvety undercurrents, dark and exciting.

“Yet you knew to hide in Zephyr’s cage,” Sefra noted, “and not Laocoon’s – which would not have been a good idea”. Dark brown eyes with a lighter brown surrounding the pupil stared into a brown that was almost green, hers probing, assessing, his looking back steadily. They both froze at a pounding on the closed wagon door. Sefra gestured for the stranger to return to his

previous hiding place. “Yes? Who is it?” she called, hurrying over to another large cage and lifting out a huge snake, wrapping pale coils around her before moving over and opening the door. “Yes? What is it?” she asked testily. “Can you not see that I am attempting to prepare for my performance tonight? If you’re curious about what I do, pay the entrance fee and see for yourself.”

The soldiers standing at the door jumped hastily back as they took in the sight of the enormous snake entwined around the small woman’s body, its scales moving, shifting, pale yellow eyes unblinking, huge head resting on a slender shoulder. She continued her advance, watching with hidden amusement when the soldiers backed up a step for every step she took forward. “Was there something in particular I can help you with?” Sefra asked, reaching up to stroke the huge head still resting on her shoulder, big coils moving, twining gently around her slender body, encased in living snake.

“We are searching for a spy and have reason to believe he is hiding among those connected with this performing troupe,” the soldier apparently in charge of the search spoke up.

“I thought the fighting was ended,” Sefra said. Everyone had heard about the Persian King’s thundering defeat at the hands of Palmyrene and Roman forces led by Odenathus of Palmyra, followed shortly thereafter by his murder by unknown hands, though his young wife and son by a previous marriage were suspected to have played a role in his demise.

“That may be so, but the King is most anxious to get his hands on this particular spy who he credits with instigating surprise enemy attacks and disrupting a number of carefully crafted battle plans, leading to this...setback – something for which Shapur entirely blames this spy for supplying vital information to the opposing forces.”

“Well, I have been in the wagon with my animals most of the day,” Sefra responded. “So, my opportunity to see this spy, much less recognize him as one has been extremely limited. As for strangers, *all* of you are strangers to me. But you are welcome to look for yourselves though I should warn you there is another python and two cobras in here, so exercise caution.”

“I do not think that will be necessary,” the soldier said following a brief hesitation, his men nodding in relief and agreement. He could not imagine anyone voluntarily crawling into a cage containing a giant snake. “Just keep an eye out for him, let us know of any strangers hanging about, and I should mention that there is a sizable reward being offered for any information leading to his capture.”

“I will certainly be on the lookout,” Sefra said serenely. “Now, I pray you will excuse me, but I must prepare for my nightly performance.” She firmly closed the door on the retreating soldiers.

Inside the python cage, Kaveh had watched the proceedings carefully, prepared to make a run for it should the situation warrant. His eyes had warmed with admiration at her deft handling of the

soldiers, impressed by her invitation to allow them to inspect the cages after casually mentioning the presence of three additional deadly snakes, coolly daring them to call her bluff. He took in the slight figure wrapped in snake, the chirps, whistles and rustling coming from the other cages indicating the presence of other animal inhabitants. Short, dark hair covered a small head housing the big, uncanny eyes surrounded by spiky, lush lashes he had fallen headlong into earlier, rounded nose, and wide, full mouth with naturally flushed lips. Much of the rest of her body was presently covered by snake, though she was slowly divesting herself of the huge coils, leaving the python to slowly make its way back to its cage. Turning towards him, he absorbed small, tender breasts, tiny waist, slender hips, shapely calves, long slender feet., a grace in every move that drew and captivated. And like him, she had the Gift of a special affinity with animals.

He had been pulled, drawn to the small wagon in his search for a place to hide and had slipped inside, crawling into the cage with the big snake, radiating feelings of comfort and friendship when the human occupant stepped outside briefly. He knew when she became aware of his presence, bracing himself. But to his surprise she had given no indication of her awareness until they were alone together, his surprise increasing when she had protected him from the soldiers. Reopening the cage, he stepped out, leaning against a nearby counter, watching as the young women released all animals from confinement.

“We have a guest,” Sefra said, opening cage doors, “so be nice.”

Kaveh watched as the creatures were released from confinement. First out was a solemn monkey dressed in a turban, vest and wide-legged pants who had opened his own cage and released himself. Looking at the stranger in their midst, examining him carefully, he bowed. “His name is Socrates,” Sefra supplied. She nodded in satisfaction. “He does not take to many, but he seems to like you.”

“I’m honored,” Kaveh murmured resisting the ridiculous urge to return the monkey’s bow, but unable to prevent himself from nodding in acknowledgement.

An enormous tabby cat was the next animal to be released. Twining its body sinuously around the slender legs belonging to its favorite person, purring mightily it turned huge amber eyes on the stranger in their midst, turning back to rub a large head against stroking, caressing fingers. “This is Antigone,” the woman with the magical voice and equally magical touch said, gently cupping tulip-shaped ears, reaching behind them to scratch at their base, her touch tender, sure. He found himself wishing she were touching him like that.

“This is Damon and Pythias,” the woman said, holding up two identical, very lively ferrets, their eyes trained on the newcomer in their midst, immediately headed his way when released. “Watch them carefully or they will rob you blind,” she warned.

“May I present to you Jason. Jason, do greet our guest.” A small, stately dog emerged gravely from the cage confining him, walking over to Kaveh, sitting down in front of him and extending a furry paw in greeting, he stooping to shake the proffered paw.

“And last but not least, this is Myrnah,” the woman said indicating the large white bird perched on the wooden post.

“Myrnah, I am honored,” Kaveh murmured.

“Myrnah I am honored,” he heard repeated in a voice close to his own. Looking up he laughed in disbelief, gasping with additional laughter when his laugh was echoed by the cackling bird.

“She is showing off,” the young woman said serenely. “Trying to impress you.”

“She is definitely succeeding, all of them are,” he said looking around, “and here comes Zephyr,” watching as a deeply black snake, darker patterns visible on its shifting scales, this one not quite as large as the pale one, slid out of the open cage door, coiling in a corner of the cramped space. “Where are the cobras?” he asked looking around for an unopened cage or closed basket.



“Boo and Hiss spend most of their time with Qanti, he’s their real handler – I just added them to unnerve the soldiers. Not very many people like snakes, poor things.” She was silent a moment. “Now that you have met most everyone of the animal variety, you must decide how you would like to proceed,” the young woman said, “You are welcome to join our performance tonight – hiding in plain sight is surprisingly effective. Or you may remain here and slip away while we’re performing and steal the camel or horse you have staked out for your escape tonight and continue to attempt to evade the soldiers on your own - the choice is yours.”

Kaveh looked down in contemplative silence on the small figure matter-of-factly detailing his carefully crafted plans for escape. “Won’t your human companions question the sudden appearance of someone no one knows?” he questioned. “Especially knowing the Persians are actively seeking someone?”

“I’m known for collecting strays and helping those who need it,” Sefra said. “So, except for Moses, I don’t think anyone else will object or even question it – it is how most of them joined our company anyway.”

“And what would I be contributing to the performance?” he asked.

“You could do one of two things,” Sefra said. “You have a wonderful speaking voice so I imagine a song from you would be most welcome and would captivate the giddy young women

free of normal restraints for the evening, but it would draw a great deal of attention to yourself which is probably not such a good thing, considering. The other thing would be for you to wrap yourself in Zephyr's coils and stand in front of the tent while someone extols the excitement and wonders to be found within. Do you play the flute, perchance? Good," she said when he nodded. "You can play the flute while Zephyr twines around you – you would be well concealed - the flute would partially shield you and not many would get close enough to discern your features."

"Why are you willing to do this? To take these chances for a total stranger?" Kaveh asked, drawn again into the swirling depths of her eyes.

"My animals tell me you can be trusted," Sefra said. "And I have a propensity for helping the underdog."

"I never thought I would be grateful to find myself in that category," Kaveh said softly.

"Yes, well, what do you want to do?" Sefra asked. "You need to decide because of you're to join us, we must make certain it looks like something we're done on a regular basis, else others might get a little suspicious if everyone seems surprised or uncertain."

"I believe I will take you up on your kind offer," Kaveh said. "Travelling with you for a time may be just what I need to regroup and evade those...anxious to further their acquaintance."

“Good, follow me so that I can introduce you to the others and to make certain we all know what we are to do tonight. Collect Zephyr, get used to handling her, and meet us in the performance tent.” She walked over to the door and opened it climbing down the three stairs, disappearing into the nearby tent closely followed by her menagerie. Kaveh reached down and picked up the surprisingly heavy Zephyr, trying to arrange sliding, twining coils comfortably around his body without tripping over them. Making his way carefully down the steps, walking over and lifting the tent flap, he entered the dim confines of the performance tent.

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“You there – Girl – Girl, do you hear me? Someone get that girl’s attention.” The thick, burly slave attendant waved his thick, hefty staff at a figure huddled against a far wall in a corner of the crowded pen.

“Get up, Girl, you’re being summoned.” The woman nudged the bundle of rags crouched by the wall. “It doesn’t pay for you to keep a potential buyer waiting.”

“I – I am being summoned? There must be some mistake,” the figure protested.

“That may very well be so, and looking at you I would not be surprised, but you are the one they are calling for, so you best get over there, or it’ll be the worse for you.”

“As if things could get any worse,” the woman was heard to mutter as she got reluctantly to her feet, making her way over to where the dark, burly man stood outside the fence. It would soon be clear that she was the wrong woman, she would be told so in humiliating detail, and she would be forced to find another space where she could curl up in the fetid, crowded pen stuffed with humanity and pray for death.

“Are you the one who they say hails from Palmyra? The city known as the Bride of the Desert before it was destroyed by the Emperor Aurelius? The one who claims bonds of blood and friendship with the disgraced Zenobia of Palmyra?” the man asked brusquely, doubtfully, eyeing the ragged figure standing before him. “There is a man asking for information about Palmyrene women, and promising a reward should that information lead him to the particular woman he is actively seeking. Someone remembered your supposed ties to the city during the time you were being prepared for sale.”

“I was born and raised there,” the woman said softly.

“And did you know the nobility in the city?” the man asked.

“I knew some of those belonging to the upper reaches of Palmyrene society,” she said, eyes down.

“Well, we’ll let the gentleman who is inquiring take a look at you,” leaving unsaid his thought that she would likely be tossed back after he got a good look at her. “Open the gate and release her to follow me,” he instructed, watching as the huge bar holding the gate closed was lifted and the woman jerked through the opening before releasing the bar to clang back into place. Turning he made his way through the teeming crowds, the woman trailing behind him.

“This is the third slave market I’ve visited in the past month, and this one seems the worst of the bunch,” Abasi, Prince Royal of the Kingdom of Kush said disgustedly, looking around. “Still, she has to be somewhere, and I will continue to look until I find out something.” Like that she had been sold to some wealthy Persian trader or purchased to augment a noble’s harem. Which would make things more difficult, but he was nothing if not determined. “At least I am comforted in the knowledge that Kiah is alive and safe – back in Kush where she belongs.” His dearly loved sister had been a direct participant in the events surrounding the sacking of Palmyra, grievously injured, she had barely escaped with her life. All of which could be placed squarely at the feet of their cousin, Zenobia. Her ultimately unsuccessful attempt to establish an empire by taking what belonged to Rome ending in tragedy, pain and heartbreaking loss, Palmyra left in ruins from which it would likely never recover and she a prisoner of Rome.

“Here she is, my lord. She says she was born in Palmyra and knew those of the higher classes.”

Abasi turned at the man's words, his eyes seeking and finding the figure trailing behind the portly overseer. "Pull off your cloak and scarf that his lordship can see you," the man addressed the woman still standing some distance away. "And come closer," he said roughly.

The woman approached slowly, reluctantly. Lifting a trembling hand to the scarf covering her face and hair, pushing back the hood further shielding her features, she stepped forward, her eyes meeting those of the man she had watched, admired from a distance whenever he came to visit his sister, a sister who disliked her heartily and treated her with a cold courtesy whenever the two came into contact. Not that she blamed her, in her desperate attempt to fit in, to be a part of an elite inner circle she had done things, allowed herself to be talked into unforgiveable actions and behavior aimed at the newcomer in their midst. Actions she had regretted ever since. And she had still ended up on the outside looking in. She would not look down, she told herself, would take the pain head on.

Abasi looked at the woman standing before him, feeling the dissolution of the fledgling hope he only now realized had been building. On the verge of turning away, he met the woman's eyes, something about them causing him to look more closely. He frowned, stepping closer. "I know you," he said, still frowning, "You look familiar. I know I have seen you somewhere before." There was a short silence, then, recognition dawning. "You are cousin to Zenobia on her father's side, are you not?" And one of those who had made life difficult for his sister on her arrival to the fabled city.

“Yes,” the woman said softly, hoping the despair she felt could not be heard in her voice, bracing herself waiting for the words that would send her back to hell.

Poised to lift his hand and wave her away, he checked, He had seen the fleeting look of hopelessness, of despair in the brown eyes looking back at him, had seen her bracing as if anticipating a blow. “Are you alone?” Abasi asked, “Is there no one with you?”

“I am alone,” the woman said. “There is no one else.”

Abasi regarded the woman in silence for a time. Trying to convince himself that the troublesome woman was not his responsibility he could not erase his memory of hopeless eyes looking bravely into his. “How much for the woman?” he asked abruptly, “and do not think you can take advantage of me.”

On the verge of grabbing her to return her to the teeming slave pen, the stout man checked in surprise. “Why, why she will make a good servant for your household, my lord, she is full-figured, sturdy and well able to handle any task you might give her. That being said, I think,” and he named a sum that made Abasi snort in derision. Several minutes of hard bargaining later and both men nodded in agreement, Abasi gesturing to one of the men accompanying him, that man reaching into a leather purse and extracting the agreed upon gold coins, the overseer bowing repeatedly, walking away fingering the gold in his pocket.

Abasi looked at his purchase. “Come with me,” he said abruptly, turning and striding away without waiting to see if the woman was following.

Momentarily paralyzed with shock, the woman gathered her scattered senses together and hurried after the rapidly moving figure desperate not to be left behind.