

# Six for Gold

*Mary Reed & Eric Mayer*

Poisoned Pen Press



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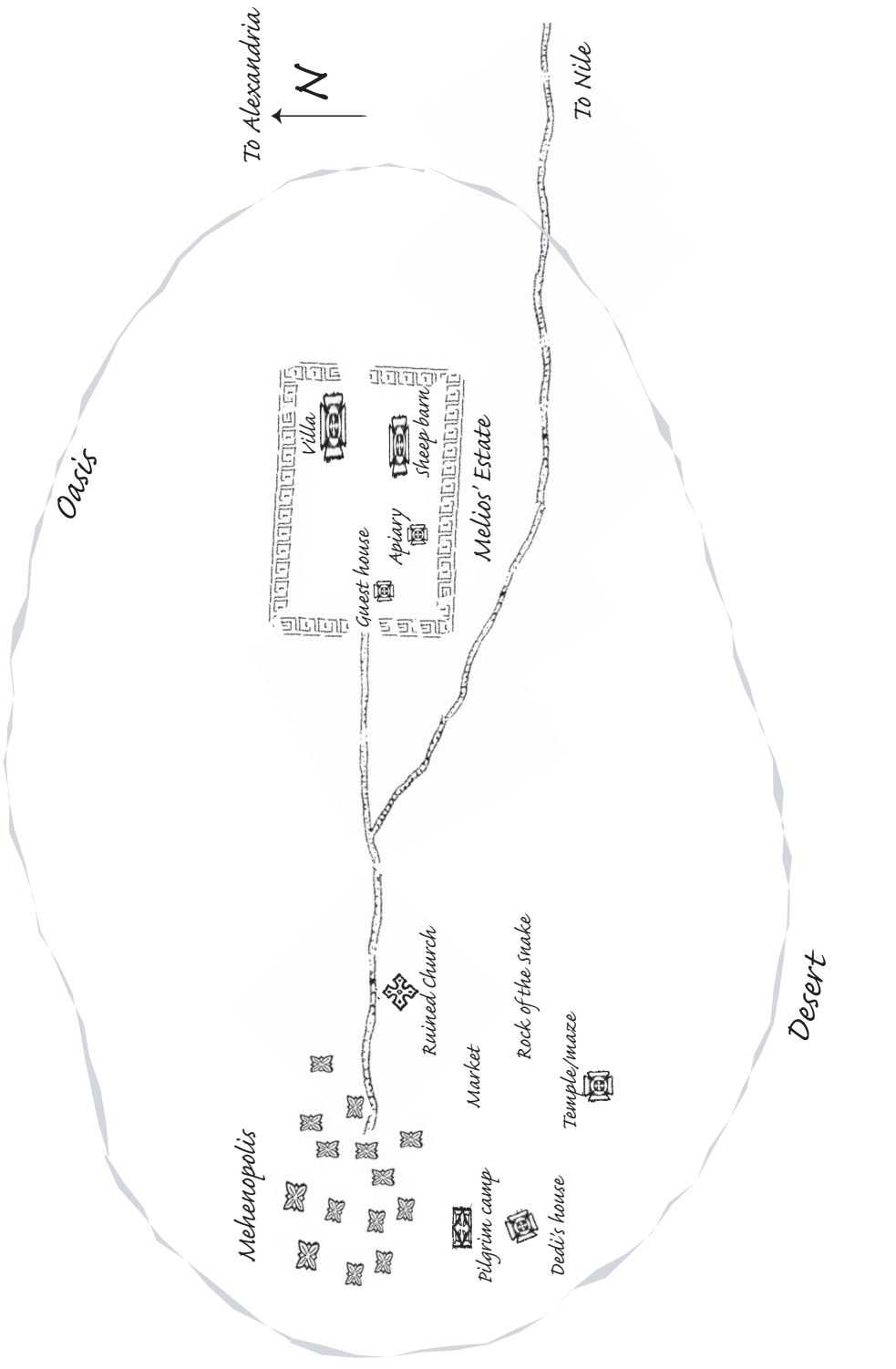
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*For our parents*



Mehenopolis

Ruined Church

Market

Rock of the Snake

Temple/maze

Dedi's house

Pilgrim camp

Guest house

Apiary

Sheep barn

Villa

Melios' Estate

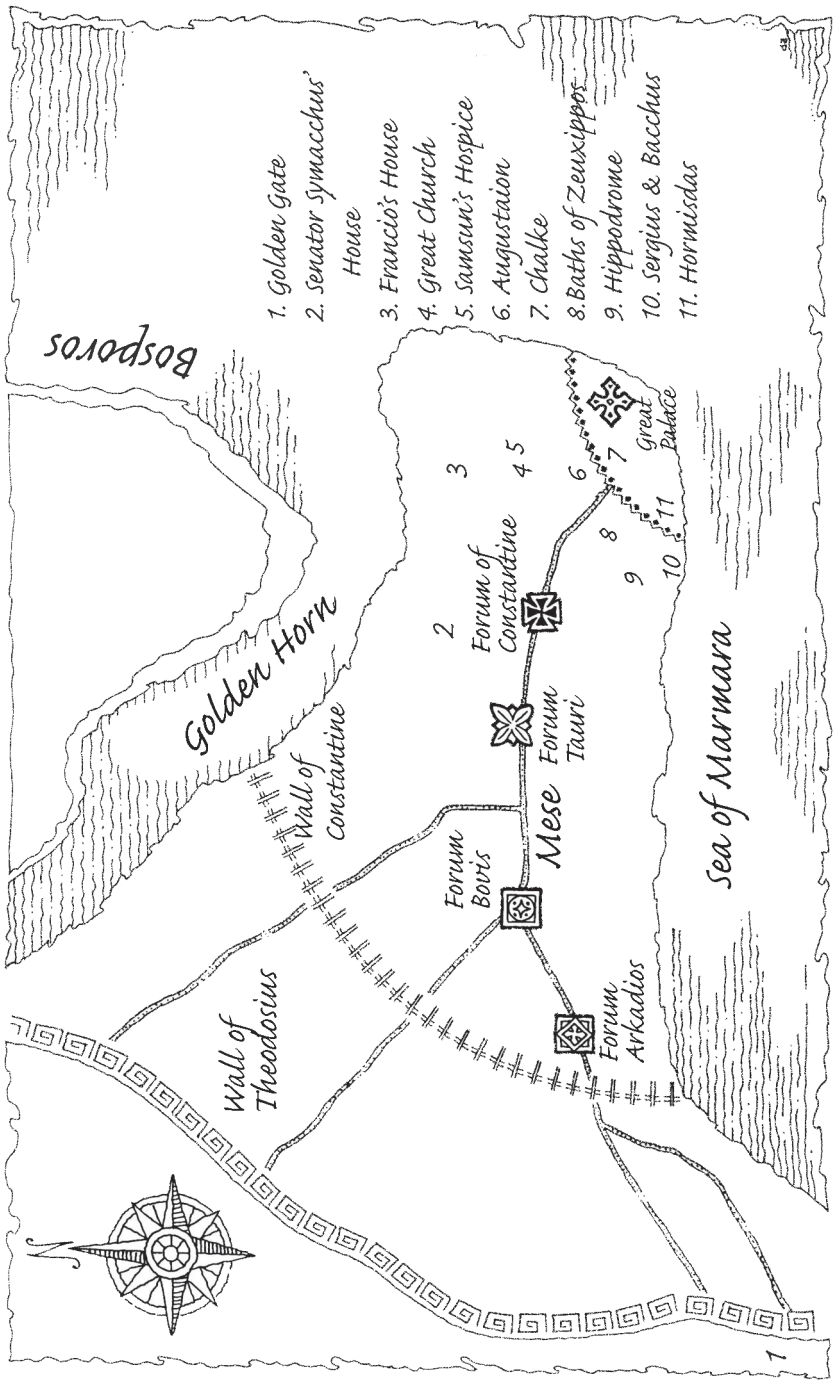
Oasis

Desert

To Alexandria

N

To Nile



1. Golden Gate
2. Senator Symmachus' House
3. Francio's House
4. Great Church
5. Samsun's Hospice
6. Augustaion
7. Chalke
8. Baths of Zeuxippos
9. Hippodrome
10. Sergius & Bacchus
11. Hormisdas

Bosporos

Golden Horn

Wall of Theodosius

Wall of Constantine

2

Forum of Constantine

3 4 5

Forum Tauri

Mese

Forum Bovis

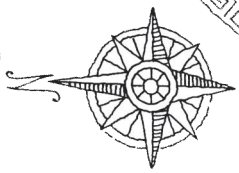
Forum Arcadius

6 7

Great Palace

8 9 10 11

Sea of Marmara





# Chapter One

John fled up steep tiers of marble benches. Dusk had fallen over Constantinople. It was not dark enough to hide the hunted man. The setting sun filled the Hippodrome with light the color of blood in water.

The long shadows of the pursuers grasped at his heels. The distorted shape of a helmet sprang up in front of him, then bobbed away.

The excubitors were closing ground.

John glanced back. One line of guards snaked directly behind. Others climbed along the seating on either side, intent on cutting off his escape.

Above his head loomed the ornately sculpted facade of the imperial box. As Lord Chamberlain, John knew those seats were inaccessible to the easily inflamed crowds. He was just as familiar with the area directly below, used by the emperor's servants, musicians, and guards. As he reached the chest-high wall of the enclosure and pulled himself over, a spear hissed by his ear and rattled down onto the marble floor.

He thanked Mithra the door leading from the enclosure was for once unlocked. He leapt through the doorway into darkness and plunged headlong down a sloping corridor.

## 2 *Mary Reed & Eric Mayer*

The sound of the pursuit echoed along the passageway as he emerged into the Hippodrome's concourse.

A beautiful, monstrous face below upraised wings smiled down at him. Dying sunlight flickered in the blank eyes.

John ran past the statue and outside. He was at the lower end of the Hippodrome. The shops lining its curved wall were closed, their gratings chained to rings in the pavement. He sprinted past them, keeping in the shadows as much as possible.

A hoarse shout told him he'd been spotted.

He dodged into a colonnaded street.

And fell.

The sprawled figure whose outstretched leg had tripped him winked.

No. Not a wink. Just a bloated fly skittering across the corpse's wide open eye.

John pushed himself upright. A ragged line of bodies in the middle of the street meandered to an overturned cart.

Plague victims.

Whatever the cause of the accident, the authorities had not picked up the remains.

John drew in a painful breath and ran.

Then, abruptly, the street dropped away. Below, John recognized the flickering lights of ships.

The docks.

There was nowhere else to run.

The guards at the imperial granary were intent on a game of knucklebones when the tall, lean man in a dark cloak burst into their midst. Before they could react, John was past them.

He reached the interior courtyard, veered through the nearest door, and raced along a dim hallway lined with narrow, rectangular alcoves—waist-high grain bins. The hallway intersected others with similar receptacles.

John zigzagged through the corridors. Skylights admitted only faint illumination. Rats scuttled out of his path.

Many of the bins were empty, others barely half full. The plague had disrupted everything, including the food supply.

His way was barred by a heaped grain bin that closed off the end of the corridor.

This then was the one Mithra had chosen.

John climbed in and burrowed under the grain. He pressed himself against the front wall and pulled his cloak up over his head to allow him to breathe.

The scrape and susurrantion of his effort gave way to a smothering silence. He fought off panic. The suffocating darkness was too much like being under water.

Loud footsteps approached.

“What do you mean where? Use your eyes!” someone said nearby.

John knew that voice.

“Here. Give me your spear,” the man said.

John took shallow breaths. He strained to hear through the cloak and the stifling weight of the grain.

There was a dull thud, followed by silence and another thud. The pattern of sounds was repeated.

“Do the same with the others,” came the order.

John understood.

His pursuers were thrusting spears into the grain piled in the bins.

There came the occasional scrape as a spear was deflected by a bin wall. Several curses. Footsteps. Someone emitted a coarse laugh.

Soon they would reach the bin in which John hid.

Each inhalation drew the fabric of the cloak toward his mouth, cutting off his breath.

“We’ll be here all night,” complained an excubitor.

“What’s your hurry? Is Theodora waiting for you in the barracks?”

Now they were in front of John’s bin.

He felt the grain move against his hip as the spear passed over and clashed against the back wall.

A grunt. Then flames seared John’s shoulder.

He’d been grazed.

#### 4 *Mary Reed & Eric Mayer*

He had uttered no sound. Would they notice blood on the spear? Not in the near darkness.

“No one’s in there either.”

The men began to move away.

“Wait! Three times. Those were the orders.”

The man addressed grumbled obscenely.

Again the spear sliced into the grain.

There was a piercing shriek. Rough hands grabbed John’s arms and yanked him upwards. The screams rose into a gurgling screech.

A rat writhed and bled on the end of the spear.

Then the voice John recognized ordered the captive be bound.

“In the name of the emperor, I arrest you for murder.”

It was Felix, captain of the excubitors and one of John’s oldest friends.

He stared at John in astonishment. “John....Lord Chamberlain. I’m certain there is an explanation?”

John said nothing, but his gaze flickered briefly towards the floor. No one at a distance would have noticed. When Felix looked down, John quickly traced four lines in the dust with the toe of his boot. His expression remained stony.

“Captain, you see the situation. I know you will do your duty. I expect to be escorted to an imperial dungeon immediately.”

## Chapter Two

“We shall be merciful and allow you to keep one eye. We would not wish you to be unable to see what is in store after the torturers begin their work.” Theodora’s mouth curved into a scarlet scimitar.

A smile of anticipation.

John gazed over her head at the opposite wall of the torch-lit cell. He was chained naked to damp stones.

Although he avoided looking at his visitor, he could not escape her musk, a mixture of stale perfume, exotic spices, and sweat. He imagined she had been roused from sleep and instructed her ladies-in-waiting to dress her in the first robes that came to hand.

Theodora selected a pair of bloodstained pincers from a wooden table upon which were ranged a variety of instruments, many resembling physicians’ tools. Her sharp, experimental click of the pincers drew John’s unwilling attention.

Theodora set the tool down and picked up a wooden-handled razor. “Think of the damage this keen edge will do.”

She looked John up and down. He could feel her gaze crawling over his body with a thousand insect-like legs.

## 6 *Mary Reed & Eric Mayer*

“You are in fine physical condition. You will endure longer than most, once the work begins. Unfortunately for you, Lord Chamberlain.”

She sighed. “That sounds like such an inappropriate title for one in your circumstances. Perhaps I should call you what the people in the streets do—John the Eunuch. Such a pity the Persians began our work for us. I am not without mercy. I like to give our special male guests a choice. Would you prefer to lose your eyes or...but that is an opportunity I cannot offer you. I give them a week to ponder the decision, just to be fair. What would you have chosen? Your eyes?”

John made no reply.

“Such a shame,” Theodora continued. “I should have enjoyed seeing...but there are other possibilities. The skin can be removed piece by piece for some time before oblivion. Did you know that? Then again, we might do better not to pollute the flagstones with your blood, but rather break your bones one by one instead.”

She tested the razor’s edge with a slender fingertip. “This is sharp enough to have been used by a tonsor. Do you suppose the razor that trims the beard longs for the flesh of the throat? So near...but I notice you are strangely silent. You will soon have ample opportunity to test your discretion. I shall order that your inquisition be completed before your tongue is removed.”

“I have nothing to say, highness.”

Rage flared in Theodora’s eyes. She lifted the blade. For an instant he thought she intended to slash him. Instead she struck him across the face with the flat of the blade. A thread of blood trickled down the concavity of John’s cheek.

“You murdered a senator! Why? There is a reason and I will have it! Not even you can thwart me. It will be an interesting interview tomorrow and I look forward to it. Don’t think you can escape our justice by biting off your tongue and choking yourself. You will be watched. You are a practical man and know your life is already forfeit. Why make whatever remains of it any more painful than it must be?”

John was silent.

Theodora's dark eyes glittered. "Very well. If you remain stubborn, I shall order the women in your household brought here. That one you call your wife...my servants will be able to offer her more, shall we say, intimate hospitality than you can, and you will witness it all."

She emitted a coarse laugh and opened the cell door. "Good night, dear Lord Chamberlain. While you're waiting for sunrise, you can consider what I've told you and count the passing hours until our next conversation."

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As the door closed behind the empress, John allowed himself a thin smile. Then he leaned back against the rough stones. The scent of the empress remained, vanishingly faint yet discernable, an incongruous contrast to the malodor of the stuffy room.

His thoughts were not for himself but his family. His daughter Europa and her mother Cornelia, who had ill-advisedly set foot in this city where the scent of the empress who hated John was always in the air. There was also his daughter's new husband. That reckless fool Thomas.

What would they make of it all? What would they do now?

The door squealed open.

Two unfamiliar excubitors entered, removed his chains, threw a rough tunic over his nakedness, and shoved him out into the gloomy corridor. Other guards waited. He looked around, thinking he glimpsed Felix in the shadows at the back of the group. Strong hands forced his face forward.

"Watch where you're going!" A sword pommel jabbed hard in the back emphasized the curt instruction.

John was led along twisting passages, past nail-studded, iron-banded doors pierced with rusty, barred grates, up steep staircases, down, and along more corridors lined by other cell doors, then up once again. The measured tramp of his escorts' boots did not stir the black veil of darkness lying beyond the reach of their torches.

The party emerged into a soaring, echoing space he recognized as one of the emperor's reception halls.

It was not yet dawn. Tall windows held only a gray glow. Terra cotta lamps strewn across the dark marble floor illuminated the hall with hundreds of trembling flames. John had the impression of gazing down at the lights of a city. Smoke coiled up into a haze through which twinkled an enormous constellation in the shape of a massive cross, drawn in gold and precious stones on the vaulted ceiling.

At a hoarse command—he recognized Felix's voice—the excubitors came to a halt. Firm hands pushed him onward, into a curving lane of darkness between the lamps, leading toward a mountainous ivory throne from which Jupiter might preside. Or Jupiter and Juno, for there were two seats.

An indistinct group of figures moved in the smoke swirling behind the throne. John's keen eye caught a brief flash of gems on the hem of a cloak.

The emperor?

The wearer's pale, phantom visage coalesced for a heartbeat. John could not say whether it was smoke, his imagination, or the flickering light, but the face did not quite attain human form before it dissipated into darkness.

The misshapen, inhuman image floated in John's memory after the vision itself had vanished. He recalled wild tales told in the city. They claimed Justinian was a faceless demon who never slept but instead stalked the halls of the Great Palace all night.

As if summoned by the thought, Justinian approached from the shadows, his face not demonic, but as bland and round as a country farmer.

"Lord Chamberlain! Take care you don't trip! I do not usually receive visitors at this time of the night, but the lamps are kept lit for our nocturnal strolls. The emperor should never be kept in the dark." He spoke softly, his words intended only for John.

John said nothing.

"You are not in a humorous mood? But why should you be? Murder is always a vexatious matter, and the killing of a

senator. . . . It has been a busy night. You realize you have given me no choice? Innocent men do not flee. That's what everyone at the palace will be whispering. One can think of a thousand reasons why a Lord Chamberlain might kill, but not a single one why he should then run away as if he were some common criminal."

Justinian waved his hand in exasperation. The movement of his heavy sleeve made the flames of nearby lamps tremble and sent shadows rolling along the walls.

"Powerful men may do what they wish, provided they are discreet," he went on. "For the emperor to pardon a man who has so plainly admitted his guilt. . . . there would be grumbling, which so often leads to unrest. And what would the Patriarch say? There is nothing I can do but exile you." Although Justinian was already speaking quietly he lowered his reedy voice further before adding, "I see you grasped your opportunity, John. Well done."

"I did not kill Symacchus, Caesar."

"Oh, I'm not concerned about that. The important thing is you have arranged matters most conveniently."

"You will send me to Egypt?"

"Of course. Perhaps there you will find the answer that has thus far eluded you here in the city."

"It is difficult to investigate here without disturbing the empress," John admitted.

"You are aware the empress has a strong Christian interest in justice being done. She would prefer your tongue be exiled from your mouth, for a start."

"Have you elicited any new information regarding the situation in Egypt, excellency? I appreciate your informant has been vague, nevertheless, with so little known so far I have been chasing phantoms."

"Better that than faceless demons, wouldn't you agree?"

John gave a slight nod.

"My spies have given me the name of a certain landowner. A fellow called. . . .ah. . . .the name escapes me. Strange to relate, I granted him an audience in this very hall. There couldn't have been more than a hundred other petitioners that day. Last year?

Or was it before the riots? I believe the man's father also once visited the capital. Something involving taxation or possibly a property dispute. In any event, the family is not entirely unknown to me."

"Do they reside in Alexandria?"

"No. The settlement is some distance up the river. Most of Egypt is up the river, is it not? As you already know, those who oppose me—whoever they are—appear to believe there is something important to their cause in Egypt, and this location appears to be the place to begin your investigation."

He handed John an official document burdened by the heavy imperial seal. "This is your letter of introduction. One more thing. I have just learnt there have been a number of mysterious deaths on this man's estate. They should serve you as a starting gate."

John peered into the emperor's face. There seemed no life in the small eyes, except that lent to them by the lamplight's exaggerated shadows. He might have been examining a mask. "These deaths are mysterious, Caesar?"

"Oh yes, like nothing I have ever heard before. The man's sheep, although guarded and locked in a barn, are beheading themselves."

## Chapter Three

**S**uicidal sheep?  
No sooner had Justinian imparted this information than he ordered John escorted from the reception hall.

The party marched briskly away. Their route took them through one of the buildings housing the palace administrative offices, a warren of whitewashed walls punctuated by the dark doorways of empty rooms. From the entrance to one cubbyhole, where a lamp burned at a desk piled high with parchment, a pallid clerk peered out at them with the huge eyes of a startled nocturnal creature.

As the company turned a corner and exited into a small, tree-girded garden, John heard giggles. The sound turned to shrieks as three gaudily costumed court pages, who clearly had no business there, threw twigs and abuse at the excubitors and then raced away into the shrubbery.

The first red light of dawn illuminated the colonnade under which they walked. The harsh complaints of seagulls and a swelling chorus of birds greeted another day. Mist steamed off the dark vegetation.

John thought of his family. They would be informed he had murdered a man and would have to live with unanswered

questions until he returned. There was no helping it. No one could be told the truth. Justinian was not the only person with spies everywhere, or torturers to elicit information from the unwilling.

As the party descended a series of stone stairways leading to the palace's private harbor, Felix ran up.

"John, I want to speak with you! I was detained. I fear there is bad news. Theodora sent for me. She's relieved me of the funds Justinian meant to be given to you for your journey."

"I see."

"It was a delicate situation, John. The empress said Justinian was being too kind, sending you into exile with a bag of coins. He would surely think better of it, were he asked to reconsider."

"She was right. He would have changed his mind," John replied as they arrived at the dock. A squat merchant ship bobbed on the swells of the harbor.

"The *Minotaur*," Felix remarked as they boarded. "There's more to this than it appears, isn't there? I realized that when you traced that seven on the granary floor. There are seven degrees in our religion and you were trying to reassure me. And how often does a man sent into exile be given funds as he departs?"

"I didn't murder the senator, Felix. I swear it as your brother in Mithra."

"You cannot tell me anything more?"

"I fear not."

"Mithra guard you always, John." Then Felix clattered off the ship.

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John shivered in the brisk breeze and looked up past the sea wall into the city. An hour or two had passed since Felix and his excubitors had departed. The sun had risen, and now the dome of the Great Church stood out against an azure sky.

He turned at the sound of light footsteps.

A slim, deeply tanned woman whose dark hair held more than a hint of gray approached. She had the delicate, perfectly

sculpted features of a patrician except for her lips, which were too thin for classical notions of beauty. They were now drawn into a determined line.

“Cornelia! Why are you here?”

“Felix came to the house not long ago and told us what little he knew,” she replied. “Don’t think I’m letting you go away on your own!”

“You must return home immediately.” Though the words formed automatically he struggled to speak them.

Cornelia smiled, her expression halfway between laughter and tears. “I fear you will have to get used to not giving orders, Lord Chamberlain.”

The deck planks creaked and for the first time John noticed Peter. The old servant appeared to be limping. “Don’t worry, master. I haven’t been hurt. It’s just that...well...”

He placed the satchel he carried on the deck, bent unsteadily, and pulled off his footwear.

He held them out to John. “There was only time to pack one little bag and your favorite boots wouldn’t fit in it. Though my sandals did so I have them. Captain Felix said you were being sent away in nothing but a tunic.” His tone was outraged. He bent again to rub his feet. “Your boots aren’t the right size for me, master, but I shall soon lose my limp.”

Cornelia laid her hand on John’s arm. “Before we left, I sent Europa to tell Anatolius. I’m certain between them, Thomas and Anatolius can take care of everything.”

The ship moved under their feet. Timbers groaned.

Peter gave his satchel a few pats and then sat down stiffly on his make-shift cushion. “I’ve never been to Egypt, master. I hear it is a fascinating land.”

A thought occurred to John. “How did you persuade the ship’s captain to allow you aboard?”

The servant’s wrinkled face assumed an innocent expression, but before he could reply Cornelia provided the answer.

“Peter insisted on paying for our passage with his savings.”

“It seemed a good use for them,” the old man smiled.

“I am very grateful, Peter,” John said, and turned toward the bow. Wheeling gulls squalled. The noise reminded John of the shrieking court pages he had seen earlier. Thinking of them, he recalled a page now grown. Hektor.

Why should he think of Hektor? Perhaps because he was Theodora’s creature. Like the empress, he would have delighted in seeing John suffer, particularly since not so long before he had been badly disfigured in an accident.

Hektor’s once pretty face was now a demon’s visage, akin to the one John had glimpsed in Justinian’s reception hall.

“Mithra! Hektor was there!” John stopped himself from blurting out the rest of his thought—that his household had been left unguarded.

## Chapter Four

Anatolius never heard the footsteps on the stairs.

He was concentrating on his task. One after another, he removed parchments from a reed basket on the kitchen table and dropped them into the brazier flames. He prodded the fire with an iron poker. A few half-burnt scraps spiraled upwards along with the sparks.

When a hand reached over his shoulder to catch one of the smoldering remnants, he turned in surprise.

“Francio!”

“I’ve been all over the palace looking for you. I was about to try the dungeons. I thought the emperor must’ve had you locked up. Then I heard you were at the Lord Chamberlain’s house.”

The visitor was short and muscular, with lumpy features, a narrow forehead, and cropped black hair. As usual he was perfectly turned out. This morning, he appeared in robes of variegated greens embroidered in pearls, and over all a short, yellow cloak decorated with a portrait of Dionysius.

He looked like a slave who’d stolen his master’s clothes.

Anatolius, by contrast, was slim, his classical features framed by dark ringlets. He scowled at his aristocratic friend. “Where did you hear I was here?”

“You know me, my ear’s always to the ground or the floor tiles. Nothing goes on at the palace that I don’t know about.”

Francio tapped the side of his nose with a stubby finger. The habitual gesture drew attention to the organ’s flattened state. Anatolius had been given to understand it had been broken by a horse, but had noticed the explanations offered depended on the credulity of each listener. “What do you think you’re up to, Anatolius?”

“I’m cleaning out my palace office.”

Francio peered at the singed document in his hand. “Beauty More Stealthy,” he read. “How could you possibly destroy your poems?”

“It’s only ink and parchment, Francio.”

“But it’s about a woman!”

“She’s gone.”

“So you burn your memories of her?”

“My memory of her is part of me. I don’t need poetry to remember.” He snatched what was left of the poem from Francio’s hand, crumpled it, and thrust it back into the brazier.

Finding the bundle of old poems had upset his humors more than he realized.

“Is the rumor true? Are you bent on becoming one of those lawyers?”

Anatolius grabbed more poems from the basket and consigned them to the fire.

“In times like these, writing poetry is frivolous.”

“Homer might disagree, but what of your duties as Justinian’s secretary? There’s nothing frivolous about writing proclamations for the emperor. What will he say to the Armenian ambassador without you?”

“Obviously I’ll still be at Justinian’s disposal, not that he needs me. Remember, I was given the position because I’m a senator’s son.”

“Most of us at court are senators’ sons, but we’re not all as talented as you.”

Anatolius took the basket and upended it over the brazier.

Francio flicked ashes from his garment. "A lawyer! I give your new occupation a month, and that's being generous!"

"What did you want to see me about, Francio?"

"I intended to ask you to dinner. I've planned a fine menu."

"With the plague still raging? I wouldn't have thought there was enough food left in the city to make a decent meal!"

"The shelves of the city may be empty, Anatolius, but nature's larder is still full. Yesterday it was venison. Tonight, we shall feast on pheasant."

"You've hired someone to poach in the emperor's preserves?"

"What do I know about hunting? For all I know the deer might have come out of the Marmara, and the delectable crane I had the night before could have been snared wandering the docks or crossing the Forum Bovis. I don't ask those who supply my needs."

"You're still trying to eat every creature mentioned in the Natural History?"

Francio wrinkled his forehead and tapped his ruined nose. "An excellent notion. I'll have to consider that after my current project. At present, I'm recreating Trimalchio's feast. You know the one. A wild boar stuffed with live thrushes, and wearing a liberty cap. A nice touch! I must not forget the liberty cap. First, however, I must obtain a wild boar."

"Isn't that somewhat ambitious?"

"Do you think so? If Justinian can reconquer Italy, I can manage to recreate a mere banquet. In connection with which, I am having some difficulty finding tooth powder." He coughed and waved floating ashes away. "I believe I'll return home and try my hand at composing verse. With all the smoke and ashes in here, I must have inhaled quite a bit of your genius by now!"

"You're welcome to try. Poetry never did me any good. Nor anyone else."

Anatolius glanced into the cooking pot set beside the brazier. The pot was filled with a mixture of honey and poppy seeds, now ruined by the flecks of ash that covered its glistening surface, not

to mention rapidly gathering flies. Evidently it was one of Peter's confections, removed hurriedly from the heat and abandoned.

"Come to dine anyway," Francio replied. "I imagine you've worked up quite an appetite burning your past. But why skulk in here using the Lord Chamberlain's brazier? Isn't yours up to the task?"

"I thought it would be prudent to stay here in case someone has designs on John's house. I wouldn't be surprised, given the circumstances."

"What circumstances are these? Has something happened to the Lord Chamberlain? Not the plague?"

Anatolius offered his visitor a glum smile. "No. No, John is well. Or as well as possible, considering he's on his way to Egypt."

## Chapter Five

John leaned carefully against the rail in the stern of the *Minotaur*. He did not look down into the swirling water. The sight of such depths made him uneasy.

Instead, he stared over the undulating and treacherous surface back toward Constantinople. Already the shapes of individual buildings heaped on its peninsula were becoming obscured by distance. Only the dome of the Great Church and the customs house rising from its tiny island at the mouth of the Bosphoros were still recognizable.

He had come to consult Peter, who looked worriedly away from the birds swooping in the ship's wake. "I hope the morning meal was acceptable, master. Bread was all I could obtain. Plain fare to be sure, but nourishing enough. There's many in Constantinople would be glad of it right now."

John thought his servant looked tired. Peter's hands, gripping the rail, appeared more gnarled than they had while stirring the pots on the kitchen brazier. How old was Peter? John realized with some surprise that he did not know either Peter's age or where he had been born.

"It was perfectly acceptable, Peter, thank you. Now I wish to ask you a few questions. Did Thomas return to the house before you and Cornelia departed?"

“No, but we didn’t expect him back yet, since he’s working at night for Madam Isis.” Peter’s lips puckered around the name “Isis” as if it were an unripe olive. As a devout Christian, he did not approve of prostitutes, or even of those, such as Thomas, who served as doorkeepers for such establishments.

John’s opinion of Thomas was darker still.

Peter made the sign of his religion and continued. “Forgive me, master, for speaking ill of your daughter’s husband, but consider the job he holds. It’s not a proper profession for a member of the Lord Chamberlain’s family.”

John didn’t point out that Isis was a good friend of his, as Peter well knew. However rigid Peter’s morality, he always found a loophole for the behavior of his employer. If John had been a Christian expecting to face the judgement of a demon tribunal on the ladder to heaven, he would have wanted Peter there to serve as his defender.

“You haven’t noticed anything odd lately, Peter? Thomas didn’t bring anything unusual into the house or perhaps mention unfamiliar names?”

“I try not to take notice of the personal affairs of those I serve, master.”

“A commendable trait, Peter, but if you should remember anything out of the ordinary, let me know immediately.”

“I will pray to remember anything useful I may have overlooked. It would be helpful if I knew what it was you suspected Thomas—”

John’s sharp look cut him off. “Now, tell me what happened when Captain Felix arrived.”

Peter frowned, adding another layer of wrinkles to the abundant creases in his brown face. “It was not long after dawn, and I’d risen to prepare the morning meal. There was a knocking at the house door that would have awakened the dead. At the time I didn’t realize you weren’t at home.” He cast a reproachful glance at John.

“Well, as you now know, I had been unavoidably detained on imperial business.”

“That’s not how Captain Felix put it, master.”

“What did he say?”

“Most of his comments I would prefer not to repeat. Captain Felix has an inventive turn of phrase when he’s angry, and I say that as an old army cook. Anyhow, just as I was going downstairs to attend to the door, the mistress appeared. She looked very worried and said you had been gone all night.”

There was no need to elaborate on what unexpected absences could mean at the palace. The gilded corridors at the center of the empire were more dangerous than the most squalid of the city’s alleyways.

Peter continued his account. “Captain Felix almost knocked me down when he burst into the house. He was furious. He told us you’d been exiled for murdering a senator, and that you’d been caught red-handed with the body.”

John was silent. He could feel the deck shifting with the swell, but kept his gaze fixed on the receding city. No doubt the murderer of Senator Symacchus was still there, as well as those who might be able to reveal the murderer’s identity.

“Not that any of us believed the accusation, master,” Peter went on. “I don’t think the captain did either. He told us if we were fast enough we could catch this ship. The mistress instructed Europa to seek Anatolius’ help, and then we left.”

John was silent.

Peter frowned. “It is my opinion that if certain people knew Captain Felix had alerted us to your departure and the name of the ship taking you away, he would be in, well, a very difficult position.”

“That would certainly be so.”

Peter’s eyelids narrowed in their nest of wrinkles. “Master, I suddenly remembered something! But now I’m sorry I did.”

“What is it?”

“The pot I was using to cook honey and poppy seeds. I forgot to cover it before I left.”

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Cornelia was in a difficult humor. John had tried to question her about Thomas, but she could not enlighten him.

“If I were you, John, I’d have already read that letter of introduction.”

John looked down at the document tucked in his belt. Addressed to one Melios, headman of Mehenopolis, the scroll was tightly tied by a linen ribbon with the gold seal of the emperor clamped over the knot. He had been waiting to explain his mission, uncertain what, or how much, to reveal. “Perhaps so, but you know quite well it is my duty to deliver it intact.”

Cornelia perched on the rail of the *Minotaur*, her bare feet dangling above the deck. Just seeing her precarious position made John uneasy. A short length of rope was tied around her wrist and he wished she’d used it to tether herself to the ship.

“I would give a great deal to know what it says,” Cornelia replied. “Particularly since if Theodora had had her wish, you’d be carrion by now.”

“Even so, bearers of imperial letters with broken seals are seldom received in a friendly manner.”

Cornelia scowled. “It might be best if we don’t arrive at our destination at all. For all you know, that letter instructs the man Melios to have you killed on the spot. You have to admit it would be perfectly in keeping with Justinian’s notion of a jest, sending you half way across the world to meet your end in some Egyptian backwater!”

There were creases around Cornelia’s eyes now, but the fire that flared up in them was as hot as it had been years before, when John first knew her. “Yet if Egypt holds the end, remember it also saw the beginning!” he said.

They had met in Egypt under unlikely circumstances. John was Greek, Cornelia a native of Crete. As a young man, John had run off from Plato’s Academy to see the world and subsequently become a mercenary, while Cornelia had abandoned her home to take ship with a traveling troupe.

Both had eagerly thrown away the settled lives awaiting them. They had had that in common when their paths crossed.

Thieves and cutthroats, pirates and kidnappers for the slave trade stalked roads and seaways. The band of performers and musicians to which Cornelia belonged had use for a man whose talents lay with the sword, so John joined the troupe and stayed at Cornelia's side.

Cornelia's displeasure seemed to vanish as swiftly as morning mist on the Bosphoros. "It was a long time ago, wasn't it?" Her tone was wistful.

John smiled at her. "Indeed it was, Britomartis."

Her hand went to her eyes, as if to wipe away sea spray. "The Lady of the Nets. Who but you would've chosen such a name? Not my little thrush or sweet cake."

"I could never quite think of you as a little thrush."

"And you always remembered me?"

"Of course I did."

He did not add that he had tried to forget, during hundreds of nights, over all the years after he had strayed into enemy territory and his Persian captors had robbed him of his future. Reduced to slavery, he managed to catch the emperor's eye, win his freedom, and rise to a position of power.

Years after his forced abandonment of her, he and Cornelia met again, unexpectedly and briefly. Then he had sent her and his daughter away. The capital was a dangerous place, particularly for the family of a Lord Chamberlain.

He had never expected to see them again, but seven years later, they returned. He had not had time to send them away again before exactly what he feared had happened. Thomas, that supposed knight from Bretania, had become entangled in some sort of trouble and dragged John's whole family into it with him.

Annoyed, Cornelia tapped her fingers on the rail. "What is this you tell me about sheep killing themselves? What explanation can there be for something that must be nothing but a traveler's tale? What do dead animals have to do with a murdered senator?"

“I don’t know if there’s a connection.”

John was being truthful. His investigations into amorphous rumors of a plot connected with Egypt had uncovered nothing. The only suspicious behavior he’d noticed belonged to Thomas, who seemed unusually thoughtful, and more guarded in his speech than usual. Then too Thomas had made more than one foray at an odd hour on what struck John as flimsy pretexts.

Finally John had followed him. He did not know what he expected, but it was certainly not to find Thomas standing over the body of a prominent senator.

“Besides, why should you be serving Justinian when he’s just exiled you?” Cornelia went on.

“There’s more to the situation than it appears,” he told her. “The emperor could have sent someone from Alexandria to inquire about the livestock, but the fact is that he has discovered there is something of great value in the settlement, something connected with the matter I’ve been investigating. The problem is that to gain an advantage, he must keep his knowledge of the existence of the plot secret. Unfortunately Justinian, or rather his informant, doesn’t know exactly what this valuable item might be. In a word, while I know nothing about what it is I am seeking, I have not been exiled. Which is not to say it may not be my lot if I fail to accomplish what I have been ordered to do.”

She peered at him as if she might be able to see his thoughts if she stared hard enough. “So your exile is nothing but a story intended to throw smoke in the eyes of...who?”

John hesitated. “Everyone at court. The emperor can’t be certain of the identities of those he needs to deceive because he doesn’t yet know who might be plotting against him.”

“But in that case why were you asking me about Thomas? Is he involved in this plot?”

“I cannot say,” John replied, “although he and Europa are involved indirectly. Why do you suppose those really exiled do not need to be accompanied by guards or confined by bars? Because usually they have families who will serve as hostages.”

“I see. Well, I hope you’ll at least put Peter’s fears to rest, not that I feel any better about the situation. I don’t trust Justinian, and as for Theodora....”

Cornelia turned to look in the direction of Constantinople. When she spoke again, it was to change the subject. “Nikodemos has been showing me how to make different knots.”

She undid the short length of rope looped around her wrist. Frowning in concentration she tied the rope into an intricate knot and displayed her complicated handiwork to John. “It’s a sailor’s skill I thought might have some entertainment value for those who never venture near the sea.”

“And how did you happen to get into conversation with the ship’s captain?”

“He’s from Crete too, and naturally we got to talking. You’d get along well with him, John, since he’s a former military man like yourself. He’s given to wagering, I discovered. Not surprising, though, is it? As he observed, every sailor wagers his life on winds and tides.”

“True enough,” John replied uneasily. So far as he was concerned the knucklebones were rolled the hour he stepped aboard a ship, and kept rolling with the waves until his boots trod dry land again.

“I placed a wager with him myself. It hinged on whether or not he could extricate himself if I were to tie him up.”

“Using that knot he showed you? Perhaps it’s easily undone despite its elaborate appearance?”

“No. I was to tie him any way I wanted.”

John looked thoughtful. “So you’ve been busy tying up the captain?”

Cornelia laughed. “Indeed! When he mentioned this trick had won him more than a few coins, I thought it would be useful to learn. An incantation or two and the captive is free. It would be most impressive. Magick is always popular.”

John smiled to himself. They had only been at sea a few hours and already Cornelia was making plans. “You’re thinking you

can resume your old career, and Peter and I might join you? If only it could be so! And what happened with Nikodemos?”

“Oh, he escaped without any difficulty!” Cornelia clapped her hands and rocked backwards on her precarious perch. “I lost the wager, but it was a small price to pay for learning the trick.”

“He explained how it was done?” John’s mouth went dry as a large swell caused the ship to lurch and Cornelia with it.

“After I told him I wanted to use it for an act to be called the Nikodemos Mystery Escape. He was flattered, you see, when I explained the idea would be he was captured by pirates....”

The deck creaked as the *Minotaur* lurched abruptly. Cornelia gave a cry and began to topple backwards.

John leapt forward and grabbed her. Suddenly her weight was pressed against him. He staggered backwards, arms around her.

His heart was in his throat. “You almost fell into the sea,” he managed to say.

She smiled up at him. “When you ride bulls you learn how to fall in whatever direction you wish, just as when you travel with a troupe, you learn to make a home wherever you find yourself.”