

# **The Princess of Egypt Must Die**

Stephanie Dray

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## THE PRINCESS OF EGYPT MUST DIE

by

Stephanie Dray

"Remember always that you're a royal princess of Egypt," my mother says, wiping tears from my cheeks.

"But I'm not the only one." There is also Lysandra, my half-sister. The source of my tears.

My mother uses clean linen strips to bandage my bleeding knees, both of which were scraped raw when Lysandra nearly trampled me beneath the hooves of her horse. "You mustn't let Lysandra bully you."

"She's never punished for it," I complain. "She knows she can do as she pleases just because she is the daughter of the king's chief wife."

"Not for long," my mother vows. "Soon, *I* will be first wife here."

My father's harem is filled with women who wait upon his every whim. He has wives and concubines and even *hetaeras* like Thais, who sells her favor to the king. But my mother, Berenice, is fast becoming the king's favorite wife.

She is young and clever, making herself available to hear the grievances of the Macedonian lords who have been snubbed by Queen Eurydice. My mother has allies, beauty, and a keen mind for intrigue. "I swear, Arsinoë, one day I will be the king's first wife. When that happens, I will see that Lysandra is punished for her cruelty. Until then, you must stand up for yourself."

"How can I? Lysandra is taller than me. She's prettier than me. The king notices her; he gives her a horse just for learning to play the lyre, but I can't have one until I copy all of Plato's

writings onto papyrus scrolls."

"That may be true, but Lysandra isn't smarter than you are," my mother says. "You must outsmart her. You must make the price for hurting you so steep that she won't want to pay it. You must teach her to expect *revenge*."

I bite my lower lip, sniffing all the while. "I don't want revenge."

"Then what is it that you want, my soft-hearted little fool of a daughter?"

"I only want us to be sisters," I cry, the sting in my heart sharper than the sting of my bleeding knees. I remember a happier time when Lysandra and I were very little and shared the same nursemaid and we didn't know we had different mothers...

"You and Lysandra are *not* sisters," my mother hisses. "You're *rivals*. Never forget it."

#

My mother is a brilliant peacock in my father's court, but I grow up in shadow.

Lysandra teases me when I get my first woman's blood. She points at the spreading red stain that ruins my white linen gown. She whispers behind her jeweled hand and her friends laugh. Yet I do nothing but slink away from the feasting hall in shame.

I tell myself that when *my* mother is the king's chief wife, Lysandra will ask my forgiveness. And, struck with a sadness in my heart, I decide that I *will* forgive her. Then we can be true sisters.

Unfortunately, that is a far-off day. And in the meantime, she tortures me.

The king never defends me. Sometimes he even forgets my name. Though he is Pharaoh, worshipped as a god, it's as if he can't even see me. I wonder if I'm even truly *alive*. Perhaps I'm only a shade from the underworld who lurks the palace halls.

Of all the children in the harem, Ptolemy is my only full-blooded brother. He's named

after my father. Ptolemy is older and prefers the company of other boys his age, but sometimes he invites me to come to the stables with him.

Those are the best days of my girlhood.

After all, horses don't mind that I'm shy. They eat from my hands even if I *am* a soft-hearted fool. They *see* me, even if I don't shout. Even if I don't fawn and flatter at court. And so I spend much time in the stables, though I have no horse of my own. Ptolemy lets me ride *his* horse, though the steed never goes as fast as I want to. I want to gallop in the fields or ride a fast chariot. And one day, after a ride on the banks of the Nile, I dream that I will become Pharaoh.

I dream that, like the great pyramids, I endure forever.

Eventually, that dream fades and I tell myself it no longer matters. The day comes, when I am fifteen years old, that I have stopped waiting for anyone to notice me at all.

And that is the day I meet Cassander.

#

When I first see him with the reigns of a sleek black filly in his hands, I mistake him for a slave boy. Oh, why do I lie? It's the horse that has my whole attention, not the young man.

With long graceful legs, a powerfully muscled chest and a coat as black as night, the horse is a marvel. She is so beautiful that I overcome my shyness to ask the stranger, "What is she called?"

"Styx," the young man replies. *Styx*. That is the river between the world of the living and the midnight world of the dead. It's a good name for this horse; she looks so fierce I would believe she belongs to Hades himself. "She's a gift for Princess Arsinoë of Egypt from my lord, King Lysimachus of Thrace."

I am stunned. I cannot believe him. Surely there's some mistake. "A gift for me?"

At my words, he bows. "Yes, Princess. For you."

The filly turns gentle eyes to me. She may be a fierce and dangerous creature, but she longs for love. I know it. And I'm afraid to take her reigns unless she is truly mine. It is this fear that forces me to speak. "I've never met the King of Thrace. To what do I owe this kindness?"

"It's the first of many such gifts, Princess, in accordance with the terms of your betrothal."

*Betrothal.* I am betrothed? This is the first I hear of it. That I'm to be married without my consent or *knowledge* is so humiliating that I strive not to show the slightest bit of surprise.

"Please thank my bridegroom...whoever you are."

"I'm Cassander," the young man says with a smile. "I'm named after Alexander's companion."

The sting of his announcement—that I'm to be married to a stranger—lingers. And makes me silent. "Cassander," I finally murmur. "That is a big name for a stable boy."

He shrugs. "It was chosen for me by my father, the King of Thrace."

In an instant, my shame is compounded. Before me stands a prince! I should have known it. His leather boots are too well-made, the laces wound with golden thread. His tunic is simple homespun, but the cord tied around his waist is ornamented with beads of turquoise and jade. His shy smile isn't what I'd expect from a prince, but his green eyes and handsome face mark him as a Macedonian nobleman.

I dare to hope. Could this young man be my intended bridegroom? Mortified at having thought him low born, I want to sink into the ground and disappear. With my cheeks burning, I can do nothing but beg his forgiveness. "I apologize, Prince Cassander. I—I didn't know."

"Prince?" Now his smile bends with mischief and a sparkle lights his green eyes. "No, my

brother Agathocles is the prince. I'm merely an illegitimate son. One of many."

Why do I swallow back disappointment? Why should it matter whether or not he is a prince, a stable hand or a bastard? I've known him for only the space of a few breaths. Yet for a moment, I wished I were betrothed to him. "So then, I am to marry your brother?"

"You will marry my father," he says, turning my disappointment into despair. "It seems absurd, doesn't it? After all, I'm older than you are."

"I'm fifteen," I say, straightening my spine for my tattered pride is the only thing holding me up now.

"Then we're of an age. But you're too pretty to be my stepmother."

He speaks with insolent boldness. In my place, Lysandra would strike him for it. I only veil my face in helpless modesty as his words echo in my mind. He thinks I'm *pretty*? I've seen my reflection in polished mirrors and worried over the length of my nose. Does he not see the flaws?

The black filly gives an impatient snort then nudges against Cassander's shoulder. "Your gift, Princess Arsinoë," he says, holding out the reigns to me.

When I take the leather straps from Cassander, our fingers brush.

I flush. To hide it, I press my cheek against the horse's long neck. Styx smells of the olive oil that has been brushed into her coat to make her gleam. She nickers gently in appreciation of my touch.

Then Cassander flourishes me a bow. "It seems as if you've made *two* new friends today."

#

I search for my mother in the women's quarters. Instead, I find Lysandra playing a game with one of the slaves. Lysandra's pretty head is bent in concentration as she races her agate

stones across the game board. I hope she doesn't look up and notice me. I almost make it round the lotus-capped pillar before I hear Lysandra crow, "There she is! The new Queen of Thrace."

I should run away before she can tease me. I should run to my mother and demand to know the meaning of my betrothal. But a boy noticed me today. He may only be a king's bastard. He may only be a stable-hand. Still, he *noticed* me and said that I was pretty. And so I find the courage to square my shoulders and face my half-sister. "What do you know of it?"

"I know you're to marry a very old man," Lysandra says.

"But my bridegroom is a king, isn't he?" I ask, pretending pride I don't feel.

She laughs cruelly, letting the dice fall from her hand before moving more agate pieces on the board. "Only the King of Thrace. *My* husband will one day be the King of Macedonia."

So then Lysandra is to be married too. She must be miserable inside and afraid to show it.

"Will we have to leave Egypt?" I ask. At fifteen, I'm too old to cry. Nonetheless, I'm blinded by sudden tears. My home is *here* in Alexandria, where the green Nile River flows into the vast blue sea. Here, where the hieroglyphics scroll down temple walls. Here, where the scent of lotus perfumes the air and the white marbled buildings gleam in the sun.

Here, where I once dreamed I would be a Pharaoh.

"I would rather be Queen of Egypt than any other place."

Lysandra snorts. "*You* would. And I don't care if you do. Go be the broodmare of some old man. Call yourself queen of barbarians here or in Thrace. I'm returning to Macedonia, where our ancestors ruled. The place from which Alexander the Great conquered the world."

I realize that I may never see Lysandra again. It should make me gleeful. Instead, it forces the tears to spill over my cheeks. Now there will *never* be any chance for us to be sisters. Only rivals, as my mother said. Or strangers.

My mother sweeps into the room wearing light Egyptian garments, the finest linen made anywhere. She sees the tears in my eyes and demands, "What are you doing to my daughter *now*, Lysandra?"

"Only telling her about our betrothals," Lysandra replies with an expression of innocence.

My mother glares at her. "Run along. Queen Eurydice is looking for you."

It is a lie and we all know it. Lysandra's mother and mine are locked in combat for the king's favor. Never would one rely upon the other to carry any message. Nevertheless, Lysandra casually tosses her game pieces on the floor for the slaves to clean up. Then she leaves us alone.

"You knew of my betrothal?" I ask my mother. "You knew that I was to marry some old man?"

"Of course I knew," my mother replies, beaming with pride. "You're to marry Lysimachus, the King of Thrace. He was one of Alexander's bodyguards. One of his successors."

Which means he's old enough to be my father, several times over. "He's a stranger."

My mother fans herself with an ostrich feather. "It was the best bargain I could make for you. Egypt needs Thrace for an ally. Your father needs you to assure his alliance. This is an opportunity and an honor, Arsinoë."

"Not as great an honor as my father shows to Lysandra!"

My mother reaches out to stroke my hair. "Is that what you think? Lysandra's bridegroom is only the second son of a king. Lysandra will still be a princess while *you* become a queen. Be *glad* that your bridegroom is an old man. I've arranged that you'll be his chief wife. You'll also be younger than any of the other women in your husband's harem—none of them will be able to steal his love away from you before he dies."

These things I don't want to think about. The scheming at court. The lies and



manipulations. The women all currying for favor. One rising in fortune, the other sinking into obscurity. How will I fare in such a nest of vipers? "But Mother, when the King of Thrace dies, I'll be a widow. I'll be alone in a strange place."

My mother sighs as if I were a very stupid girl. "You'll be wealthy and the mother of sons with a claim to the thrones of Thrace, Macedonia, and Egypt besides. When your husband is dead, you'll have no man to rule over you. And you can eliminate your rivals. That's the best gift I can give you, Arsinoë."

"But I don't want rivals!" I cry. "I don't even want a husband. I want to live in Egypt, forever."

"Then you shouldn't have been born a royal princess," my mother snaps. "This is the fate of royal women. To be traded by men in power. Or we become *hetaeras* like Thais and trade ourselves away. One way or another, life is a bargain."

#

"*You're* no broodmare, are you?" I ask Styx, petting her withers as we walk side by side. The filly is eager to get out and away from the stables. The moment the hot sun of Egypt glows upon her glossy flanks, she trots, shaking her long mane as if preening for the other horses. She knows that she's special; she's barely tamed and her wildness calls to me.

Not waiting for the guards or the grooms who oversee the stables, or even for the eunuchs who chaperone me, I leap up onto her back.

Having given her no warning, I'm not surprised when she rears up.

To stay on her, I squeeze her sides with my thighs. I am reckless. Let her throw me, trample me. I don't care. So long as I have this moment.

Styx whinnies, pawing at the air. Then, while the grooms and guards and palace eunuchs

shout warnings, she's off like an arrow shot from a bow. I cling to her back, every muscle straining to make her accept me. Behind us, I hear hooves clattering against the stone path as mounted men give chase.

But I don't want to be saved.

She gallops past the gardens. There is a low wall facing the ocean and she makes for it. It's her escape. *Our* escape. Knotting her black mane in my hands, I hold tight, leaning forward to encourage Styx to jump the wall. She's like the wind beneath me, a power that surges up and up and up.

We land hard, but I don't fall. We ride on. Loamy soil gives way to sand, but Styx never loses her footing. I half hope she'll gallop into the ocean even if we both drown. But at the last moment, she turns from the surf, pounding down the shoreline.

It's glorious.

We ride past the *agora*, where merchants do their trading. We ride past bricklayers straining and sweating in the sun to build our library. We ride out the Moon Gate.

The wind tears the ribbon from my hair, and together, we fly free.

#

Thirsty from our long ride, Styx dips her muzzle into the waters of Lake Mareotis. She drinks for a long time while I watch the fishermen in their flat boats using long poles to push their way through the marshy reeds.

The sun is low and red in the desert sky when I hear someone call my name.

Styx is munching on the grass, but her ears prick up in alarm. I think it's one of my father's guards sent to fetch me. Instead, I see the gilded sandals of Cassander.

"How did you find me?" I ask.

"I looked for Styx," he says, making his way through the shrubbery. "She has a taste for tall grasses, so I thought she might take you to the lake."

Picking at the wild grass, I say nothing, which Cassander takes as invitation to sit beside me. "I don't want to marry your father," I blurt out. "I don't want to go to Thrace."

Cassander nods, taking up a handful of pebbles and skipping one across the surface of the lake. "So what do you plan to do then? Jump into one of those reed boats and offer yourself as a wife to a local fisherman?"

His mockery gives me sharp offense. "I am a royal princess. Do you think I would lower myself?"

Cassander shrugs. "I'm just a bastard boy; what do I know of royal honor?"

He skips another stone over the water. To his surprise, this one comes up under a rush of white froth. And a hippo lifts its snout from the water to roar at him.

"Zeus Almighty!" Cassander shouts, scrambling to his feet.

The hippo must have slipped past the patch of reeds without our notice. Now it has our full attention. Styx whinnies in sharp fear. I'm the only one who doesn't move, even though I know how truly dangerous a hippopotamus is. This one fixes black eyes on me, rivulets of water streaming down its pinkish grey flesh. It opens its mouth in another roar and shows enormous teeth.

Then it rushes me.

"Run!" Cassander cries.

As the great creature closes in on me, I only close my eyes. I'm too terrified to move, or too resigned to my fate. Perhaps this is no ordinary hippo, but the Egyptian goddess Taweret come to claim me for Egypt forever. I wait for the painful crush of a hippo's jaws.

Instead, Cassander's steely grip closes around my wrists and I'm yanked to my feet. "I said, run!"

So we run.

Cassander is strong and swift. With my horse, we clamber up the bank onto the road, away from the hippo—which, in spite of its blubber, could probably catch us if it really tried. We don't speak until we are well away, leaning against the city wall, doubling over from our efforts.

Styx is still on alert from our narrow escape. She trots in a circle, head high, making her outrage plain.

I rub the sore spot on my wrists where Cassander's grip left marks. "You saved me."

"Only by a hair!" His eyes are clouded with anger, his face red with exertion, and he pants like the breath has been stolen from his lungs. "Why didn't you run?"

I too am fighting for breath, and I gasp, "I don't know."

He stares at me. "Did you *want* to be eaten alive?"

I lower my eyes to the ground. "I don't know."

"What's wrong with you? Thrace isn't so bad. It's a barbarous land, but there is a palace and all the luxuries you find here."

"You don't know me well if you think all I care about is luxury."

Cassander snorts. "I don't know you at all. And I can't get to know you better if you're inside the belly of a hippo."

Dusty and glowing with perspiration, I'm surprised he wishes to know me better. Moreover, given his rank, I'm acutely aware that he should not be so familiar with me. His easy manner tempts me to ask him what his father is like—to tell me about this stranger that I'm to marry. But even if my bridegroom is a cruel man, how could Cassander speak against his own

father and king? Nonetheless, this boy has become my own personal hero, so I confess, "I'm afraid."

"You can't know what will come, Princess. None of us can. The world turns in strange ways. We can't change how we're born, but we have some say over everything after."

#

I marry before Lysandra does. In this one thing, I finally come first.

Before the wedding, I sacrifice all my girlhood toys to Artemis. It's a goodbye, for the virgin goddess can't protect me anymore. I will belong to Hera now. After, I wash in a sweet-smelling bath of milk, honey, and water drawn from a ritual spring and carried by a special vase. The servants anoint me with oils, style my hair, and swath me in veils.

My brother is garbed in a crown of thorn and nuts. He is to be my companion at the wedding and pass out bread at the wedding feast. "I'll miss you, Arsinoë," Ptolemy says, his voice thick with emotion. I wish he could come with me to Thrace, but he's part of my mother's plans. When she becomes the Pharaoh's chief wife, my brother will become the heir to the throne. He must stay here and be King of Egypt after my father. It now seems like a childish thought that I should have ever remained here, or become Pharaoh, so I embrace my brother in fond farewell.

The wedding feast is a raucous affair with men and women celebrating together, though they eat separately on either side of the hall. All the while, Lysandra sneers at me, as if hoping to provoke me to tears. She nearly does. Or perhaps I am upset only because when I look for Cassander, I don't see him.

At last, my father calls to me. I go swiftly because it may be the last time I ever hear the Pharaoh speak my name.

I'm presented to my groom, Lysimachus, the King of Thrace. "Before this assembly," my father intones, "I give this girl to you that you may beget legitimate children upon her."

Daring to peek at my groom from beneath my veils, I see a hard face with a furrowed brow and hollows in his cheeks. This stranger will be my husband. My king.

He's at least sixty years old; his hair thins over his brow. He is old. I make the mistake of thinking he is also frail. I'm surprised when he grabs me hard by both wrists, his fingers digging in where Cassander's had been the day before. My new husband shakes me like a captive, for that's what I am, and a cheer goes up from the crowd.

Then I am carried off into the night to be unveiled.

#

Thrace is not Egypt. My husband is not Pharaoh. The land he rules holds no wonders. No pyramids rise up from the sand to amaze and inspire. Thracians are fierce fur-clad tribesmen who dwell in the mountains, climbing up to their fortress villages each night like sure-footed goats.

"They are barbarians who must be *forced* to live like civilized men," my husband says to me in the early days of our marriage.

It's one of the few things Lysimachus says to me at all. Like my father, he takes little notice of me. If there is anyone or anything my husband loves, it is his hunting dog. The hound is always close at his master's knee, peering up with open adoration, keen to amuse by fetching sticks or performing tricks.

But the dog hates all others. Come too close to the king, and the dog snarls and growls. Try to pet the dog, and you may lose a hand to his snapping jaws. The king never scolds him for this. To the contrary, I think it makes him love the dog more.

I'm given a banquet to welcome me as the new queen of Thrace. The host is Prince

Agathocles, a youth of no more than eighteen years. He looks like Cassander, but with a narrower mouth and a haughty bearing. I worry that he might resent me as a replacement for his dead mother. But he welcomes me to Thrace with a toast. Lifting a goblet he cries, "To Queen Arsinoë. May she give comfort to my father in these golden years of his life."

The guests all cheer to honor us, but I see that my husband the king isn't pleased. He doesn't like to think of himself as elderly, and he narrows his eyes at his son as if Prince Agathocles were a danger to him and not the bearer of his blood and his legacy.

Nonetheless, the prince offers me a place of honor, and I'm obliged to take it. "My father is a hard man to please," Prince Agathocles says to me. "As I'm sure you've noticed."

I lower my eyes. I don't want to speak ill of his father. And with my eyes lowered, I spy a young girl under the table feeding the dogs from her fingers. When I gasp, Prince Agathocles reaches down and hauls her up into his arms. "There you are, Bunny! Meet our new stepmother."

Surely princesses do not crawl under tables to feed dogs even in barbarous Thrace! But I soon learn that like the king's favorite hound, this girl is allowed a very long leash. "She is my father's darling," Agathocles announces. "My father calls her his little bunny, so we all do."

Bunny is a girl of twelve with fair hair who curtsies to me. "I am the Princess Eurydice."

An unfortunate name. It's the name of my mother's rival. It's a name that makes me think of Lysandra. But *this* little girl, with her pink cheeks and upturned nose, could never be so cruel. I smile at her. She cleaves to my side, so giggly that I realize she's had wine. Girls aren't supposed to have wine. Someone should send her to bed. But it's my celebration and I don't want to make trouble.

"Later, I'll show you the palace," Bunny says. "I'll teach you our dances and our songs. We'll stay up late."

"I should retire early," I say, remembering my mother's example. "In the morning, I'll weave with the women in the harem. Would that please your father?"

"Let the *old* women do the weaving," Bunny says, removing her sandals so she can join the dancing girls. "You're young, like we are. You should have fun."

As we watch his sister spin away, Prince Agathocles agrees. "You need not worry about pleasing my father *too* much. His last woman was a Persian witch. Most of his concubines are leftovers from the harem in Susa. You won't have many rivals here."

I glance over to where the king's women gather. I wonder if one of these women is Cassander's mother, but I'm afraid to ask and give insult. Most of the harem women are as old as my mother—some of them much older. They don't stare at me with resentment, but my mother would tell me to view them as deadly enemies. For once, I'm glad she isn't here.

I don't *want* to see enemies behind every pillar.

"And what about you?" I ask Prince Agathocles. "Do you have rivals?"

"None," he boasts then leans in close. "And no wife, either."

Why does he mention this to me? Does he want me to speak to his father on his behalf?

Then he stuns me by saying, "Perhaps when my father passes into the underworld, *you* can be my wife, Arsinoë."

My mouth falls open and I fight the urge to whip 'round and see who is listening. Surely this is a jest. A cruel trick meant to humiliate me. The kind of trick Lysandra used to play on me in Egypt. I choose my words carefully. I have my duty to my father to think of. To my family. To Egypt. "I'm quite happy to be your father's wife."

It is a bald-faced lie. I think Prince Agathocles knows it because he smirks. "Then my father chose the most virtuous bride in the world. You see, other girls might resent being forced



to touch wrinkled old flesh. They would prefer young arms, like these." He holds up his arms so that I can look at them. "Other girls would cringe to kiss a mouth filled with yellowed teeth—"

"You've had too much to drink," I break in, the heat of offense burning from my toes to the tips of my ears. "In the morning, you'll wish you didn't say these things. As a kindness, I'll pretend you didn't."

He reels back as if I slapped him. He's a handsome prince; perhaps no girl has ever turned away his flirtations. I worry that *I* wouldn't have turned him away if he weren't so reckless...or if my heart didn't already belong to someone else.

#

"My queen," Cassander says with a flourishing bow, as if we stood in the marbled palace instead of the straw-laden stables. A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth as I stroke Styx. It's the first moment since I arrived in Thrace that I have been able to visit my horse...or Cassander. And now I feel shy.

"I haven't seen you since the wedding, Your Majesty," Cassander says courteously.

I gasp. "I didn't think you were there!"

"Of course I was."

"But I didn't see you..."

Holding a piece of fruit for Styx to munch on, Cassander looks absurdly pleased. "So you were looking for me? My place was in the shadows; my father likes for me to make myself scarce with the other servants at court."

"But you aren't a servant," I say, as it seems to be an injustice. Certainly the children of my father's concubines never made themselves scarce. "You're the king's son."

"But not a royal one," Cassander says with a rueful smile. "That is my brother."

"I've met him."

"Did you like him?" he asks.

No. I did not like Prince Agathocles. But I'm afraid to say so.

At my silence, Cassander tilts his head. "Did he mistreat you?"

"Why would he?"

"Because you can destroy all his dreams. If you bear my father a son, Prince Agathocles will no longer be the uncontested heir to the throne."

I stare so long that Cassander raises a brow. "Don't tell me you haven't dreamed of bearing sons for my father."

"I've never dreamed of such a thing," I say. Those were my mother's hopes, not mine. I've always pushed away such thoughts because I fear ambition goes hand in hand with cruelty.

"No?" Cassander asks. "What else does a queen dream of?"

On my wedding night, I dreamed of Cassander.

In the journey across the sea, I dreamed of Cassander.

I have dreamed of Cassander every night since he rescued me from the hippo.

I can't tell him this. I'm married. I'm his father's wife. I'm his queen. Even if none of that were true, I wouldn't be brave enough to speak my feelings aloud. Nonetheless, the words lodge themselves painfully in my throat.

And I can say nothing at all.

#

"Did you have sisters in Egypt?" Bunny asks. She is always at my side now. She's a clever girl for her age, quick at games and funny, too. I think this must be why she is her father's favorite.

"Yes, I had a sister," I say, remembering Lysandra.

"Do you miss her?"

I don't know how to answer. My life is easier now without Lysandra to taunt me. And yet, there is an emptiness in my life where my hopes for Lysandra used to be. I want so badly to make new hopes that will fill that space. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you seem so lonely," Bunny replies. "If I were Queen of Thrace, I'd have a wonderful time. I'd order everyone to do my bidding. I'd wear sparkling jewels. I'd visit all my lands—you do have lands, don't you?"

I nod. Part of the betrothal arrangement provided that I should own lands surrounding the city of Ephesus. I'm eager to ride out to see them, and not only because I will see Cassander in the stables before mounting my horse.

"Anyway," Bunny continues. "I thought maybe I can be your sister here." Her upturned nose twitches in delight. "Yes, sisters. We'll watch out for one another and keep each other's secrets. That's what sisters do, isn't it?"

"I'd like that," I say, daring to hope...

"I have a secret. Of course, it isn't really mine."

"Whose, then?"

"My brother's. Prince Agathocles. He fears he offended you at the banquet and that you'll never forgive him."

Did the Prince send his little sister to tell me this? Since the banquet, I've pretended that Prince Agathocles never said those reckless things. I'm always polite when we pass one another in the corridors. I never speak against him; I didn't tell the king. I didn't even confide in Cassander. "I'm sure anything the prince said that night was said in jest."

"Everyone loves my brother, you know. He cannot bear to think anyone dislikes him. It pains him like a thorn in the paw of a lion. He won't be able to sleep until it is plucked out. Will you forgive him?"

Never in my life has anyone asked forgiveness for offending me. Back in Egypt, I imagined that one day Lysandra would beg my forgiveness. And that I'd give it to her. Since that may never happen now, I want to forgive Agathocles, in her place. "Of course."

"He'll be so pleased. I'll tell him you'll meet him in the garden beneath the mulberry tree!"

Bunny throws her arms around me then runs off.

When we meet beneath the mulberry tree, Prince Agathocles is humble, his head lowered in deference. I don't know why Bunny chose the garden. There's little privacy here. A hundred servants and soldiers pass by, but at least they can't hear our words unless they strain to hear.

"I fear that I've made your first days here in Thrace uncomfortable," Prince Agathocles is saying. "It was never my intention. I was drunk and can't even remember most of what I said. But I *am* sorry."

"I forgive you," I say, and feel quite wonderful as the words come out.

He gives a grateful smile. "Would you tell me, Queen Arsinoë, what exactly it is that I said?"

"I'd rather we forgot it entirely."

"It's only that I worry—" he cuts off, as if embarrassed but no blush stains his cheeks. "I fear you'll break my heart."

Something twists in my belly.

"You see, I love you," he says.

I don't believe him. He's teasing me. And I hate that the first time I ever hear a man say

this to me, it's in jest. In Egypt, many boys professed their love for Lysandra. She knew how to turn them away, to laugh at their flattery as if it were nothing. But I don't know what to do. I feel like a fish on a hook. I'm gasping like one too.

Seeing my panic, Prince Agathocles hastens to add, "But it's a chaste love."

Too late. I lift my skirts and turn to run. Prince Agathocles chases after me, calling, "I want only your friendship, Arsinoë! Nothing more."

He has me confused. Rattled. As he chases me, we draw stares from the gardeners who snip at sprigs of rosemary. The guards at the palace doors turn their eyes our way, too. I'm embarrassed to even look at him when he catches up. "Just let me go, Prince Agathocles."

"I've offended you again," he says with a dramatic sigh. "I've made things terrible for you here, and all when I know you were fearful to come to Thrace."

"Who told you I was fearful?" I ask, biting my lower lip.

"My bastard brother," Prince Agathocles says. "Cassander speaks very highly of you."

Just the mention of Cassander's name stops me in my tracks. "W-what does he say about me?"

Prince Agathocles raises one eyebrow. "Why do you care?"

I hear myself swallow. I blush. The heat of it sweeps over me.

Watching my face, Prince Agathocles gives a little start. Then something turns behind his eyes. "Are you fond of Cassander?" When I don't answer, he says, "He knows how to behave himself better than I do, surely."

It hurts me to lie, but I must. "I'm no fonder of him than any boy. It's only that he saved me once, in Egypt. I owe him a debt of gratitude."

After a long pause, the prince says, "Arsinoë, I've made a mess of things. Let me make it

up to you. If you find Cassander good company, I'll arrange to have him chaperone you on a tour of your lands."

I've never heard of a stable boy like Cassander serving as a chaperone to a queen, not even if he is of royal blood. But perhaps things are done differently in Thrace. Or perhaps I do not question it because I'm simply too eager to see Cassander again.

#

Agathocles is good to his word. He arranges for Cassander to accompany me on my rides. All I must do is wait until the king is busy with envoys and dismisses me. Then I'm free to slip away from the harem and visit the stables.

When I go, Styx is always pleased to see me, her tail high. Adorned with my royal livery, a bridle ornamented with golden lions fit over her face, she preens. I think Cassander is pleased to see me too, though it's more difficult to tell. A horse can show disrespect to a king or queen; a servant must always behave as if he's honored by one's royal presence.

Cassander makes a good choice for a guide, though. He knows the roads, the streams and the mountain passes of Thrace. He points out the plants I don't know and tells me about the different Thracian tribes. And though we always ride out with an accompaniment of the king's soldiers, we sometimes forget they are there.

I'm now glad that my father insisted I copy the writing's of Plato because Cassander knows them too. We debate the nature of the soul. Plato thinks a soul is made up of appetite, reason and spirit. I agree, saying it explains why people are torn between what they want and what they *should* want. Cassander scoffs. He says that everyone assumes *their* soul is ruled by an enlightened spirit and that everyone *else's soul* is ruled by animal desires.

We talk about Egypt, and I even confess my dream that one day I would become

Pharaoh. Cassander doesn't laugh at me and that makes me like him even more.

When we reach one of my estates, Styx breaks into a gallop over the field. I let her run. Cassander gives chase on his own brown stallion. The hooves of our horses crash against the ground even as my heartbeat pounds inside my own breast. I feel giddy as we ride and delighted when we stop in an orchard. Cassander and I pluck apples from the trees, and we're both breathless and laughing.

"That's my favorite sound," Cassander says, biting a juicy chunk from the fruit.

I listen, but hear only the wind, the chirp of a bird. "What sound?"

"Your laughter," he replies.

I blush hotly. With Cassander I'm always blushing.

#

"He's very handsome isn't he?" Bunny asks one night when she finishes teaching me a Thracian dance.

"Hmm?"

"Cassander. He's a stable boy now, but one day soon he will join my father's cavalry. He'll make a fine warrior, don't you think? And if he fights well, the king may grant him lands and a wife."

A *wife*. The thought of some girl in Cassander's arms is so horrible that I close my eyes.

"It's better if he marries," Bunny chatters on, oblivious to my distress. "I think it will ease his pains."

"His pains?" I ask, instantly alert.

"Surely you've noticed that Cassander is sick with love," she says. "He sighs dreamily. He doesn't eat with the rest of the lads. And whenever anyone asks him if there's a girl he

fancies, he stammers and stares at his feet."

My breath seems to catch in my throat. "I didn't know."

"He's not likely to show it before his queen," Bunny says. "But I hope the girl he loves is suitable. As the king's bastard, he must choose wisely. If he fell in love with the wrong girl..."

"What?" I ask, breathless. "What would happen?"

She motions over her throat with one finger. "If the girl is unsuitable, she'll lose her head and Cassander will be strangled."

"Oh!" I clap my hand over my mouth. It's too terrible to contemplate.

Bunny continues. "If he's in love with a shepherd's daughter, that poses no threat. But if he fell in love with a noblewoman...people would think he intended to make a play for the throne."

These are the kinds of things my mother always tried to teach me. My mother wanted me to see rivals. To unravel court intrigue. I never wanted to think that way. I never wanted to listen to it before and I don't want to hear it now, either. But I can't close my ears to it. Not if it has to do with Cassander.

"Do you know the name of the girl he loves?" I ask, reassuring myself that she cannot know my feelings for him. Surely, I have kept them hidden.

"I think you should ask him," Bunny replies. "Then you could warn him if the girl is unsuitable. You might save his life!"

#

I don't have the courage to ask Cassander about the girl he loves. I don't go to the stables that day or the day after. I avoid the feasting hall too. When I see Cassander in the palace, I turn the other way and disappear. I wish my mother was here. I wish there was a woman of *any*



experience I could turn to. Even Lysandra. If she were here now, I would humble myself before her and ask her advice.

It takes more than a week before I am brave enough to face him.

"Your Majesty!" Cassander says, smiling to see me. "Styx has missed you."

"I've only been away a few days," I say, my eyes turned away so he cannot see how I love him.

"It seemed much longer than that," he replies.

I clear my throat. "I'm told you're unwell."

"Just an aching heart," he says, his words filled with unspoken meaning. "Nothing fatal."

I wince and my courage abandons me. If he loves another girl, it will destroy me. If he loves *me*, it will destroy us both. I must know, but the knowing will ruin our happiness. Better we never ask anything, never admit anything. I could be happy with Cassander's friendship. But what if Bunny is right and he loves an unsuitable girl?

"Cassander, is there—is there anyone you would marry? If you could?"

His gaze drops to his feet. He is silent for some time. Then he says, "Yes...if I could."

"Who is she?"

He glances up, only once. "I think you know, Arsinoë."

*Arsinoë*. He should never use my name like that, without a title. He does it because he loves me, I think. I never believed Prince Agathocles when *he* said he loved me. Cassander has not said it, and yet, I believe.

*He loves me!*

I had given up hope that I would ever be loved by anyone. To be loved by Cassander... The joy brings tears to my eyes. But the tears are for other reasons, too. He *cannot* love me. He

should not love me. This is a dishonor. It's also dangerous. Cassander was wrong when he said his aching heart was nothing fatal.

"If the king knew, he would kill us both!" I cry.

This time, Cassander's gaze is steady. "We all must die someday."

#

It's a torment, but I must stay away. Every moment of every day, I think of Cassander. From the time I wake up until the time I go to sleep, he haunts my every thought. But I won't go to him, even though being without him makes me miserable. All I wish to do is sleep, because I see Cassander in my dreams. It is only when I awaken that I remember, with a horrified start, that it would be better for us both if I never saw him again.

I repeat the facts to myself, over and over, as if it will help me to accept them. I'm the Queen of Thrace. I'm married. Cassander is my stepson. Even if he weren't, he is a bastard. He is a stable boy. To love him is to bring dishonor upon the house of Lysimachus, and to shame my father and Egypt besides.

One evening, Bunny climbs into bed next to me, whispering, "I've a note from Cassander."

"How puzzling," I say, in a desperate attempt to disguise my aching heart. "Why should a stable boy send a note to the queen?"

It's no good. I can't fool her. Bunny is too close to me. She sees through me. She must sense the way I go hot all over. Then cold. Then hot again. Bunny says, "I'm your sister here in Thrace. I'll keep your secrets."

All my life I have longed for a sister. Lysandra and I never found a way to go back to the way it was between us when we were little, but Bunny is different. She has never been cruel to

me. She tells me stories and teaches me dances and makes me laugh. My heart fills as I look into Bunny's big eyes and when she clasps my hand warmly in hers, I nod in surrender.

"Take the note, and I'll tell no one," Bunny says.

So I do.

Unfolding the little piece of papyrus, I see the words etched in a spidery lettering.

*Why won't you see me? I've been thinking of Plato. I care nothing for reason. I care nothing for lofty honor. My soul is made up of appetite and if I do not feed it, I'll die. I love you. Meet me somewhere. Anywhere. — C*

This note is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever written to me.

It's also treason.

I want to press this paper to my lips. I want to sniff it and catch the scent of him. Instead, I throw it on the fire. Bunny gasps, trying to catch it before it lands in the flames. But she's too late and we both watch it burn.

"Will you meet him?" she finally asks.

"No." But I can't leave him with silence. I call for a pot of ink and a sheet of papyrus to write upon. Bunny swears she'll deliver my message as soon as it's written and I know she will keep her word, but I take my time, laboring over each word.

*I am the Queen of Thrace. I am married. You are my stepson. Even if you weren't, you are a bastard. You are a stable hand. To love you would be to bring dishonor upon the house of Lysimachus and to shame my father besides. I will not do it. I will not meet you. The only favor I*

*can bestow upon you is my silence. For your own sake, I implore you to burn this letter and never write to me again. — Queen Arsinoë*

Writing those words, those horrible words, opens a gaping wound in me. It hurts. It pounds behind my eyes, giving me headaches that keep me in bed for days. It churns in my stomach so that I eat very little, and what I do eat, I can't keep down.

#

Cassander sends another note. Then another. I burn them all.

I'm so sick, so often, that the king believes I'm with child. In a fit of exuberance, he sends midwives to prod at my belly. They swear that I have good hips for birthing and that I'll one day have sons who will be kings. Like my mother, they think this is the greatest protection a woman can have.

Even Prince Agathocles brings me a congratulatory basket of pomegranates. "In case I'm not here to give you a gift when you *are* with child..."

"Why wouldn't you be?" I ask. "Where are you going?"

"To war," Prince Agathocles says stoutly. "I'm going to lead the cavalry into the mountains against the tribesmen."

"May you win a great victory and return home safe," I say.

I mean it, too. Since the day Prince Agathocles apologized for his behavior, he's treated me with respect as his father's chief wife. Since that day, he and his sister have been my friends. I would be sorry if he died at war.

He tries to encourage me by saying, "I'll have Cassander with me. That boy knows the mountain passes as if he were a native tribesman himself."

My throat tightens and my voice comes out as a distressed squeak. "*Cassander* is going to war?"

"He must grow up sometime," Prince Agathocles replies. "He knows how to use a spear. Now he must wield it for our father."

By the gods, Cassander could die in battle and I might never see him again! I've been so foolish to stay away from him. Now I regret every moment we've been apart. When Prince Agathocles is gone, I nearly dash the basket of pomegranates to the floor in my haste.

"Where are you going?" Bunny asks.

"To the stables."

"No!" she cries, grabbing at my arm. "Someone might see you."

"So what? I've visited the stables a hundred times before."

"This time you aren't going to see your *horse*," Bunny argues. "You're going to see *Cassander*."

She knows my secret heart. She's carried messages for Cassander. She carried one from me, as well. But before now, I've behaved honorably. I've *done* nothing shameful. That is about to change. Even though I know it is wrong that Cassander loves me and I love him, I must see him. I am ashamed of myself, but it will not stop me. "But I must see him, Bunny. Before he goes to war. I must!"

She pauses only for a moment, biting her lower lip in that exaggerated way she has. "Then it's better you meet him beneath the mulberry tree when everyone is asleep. Stable lads tend the horses at all hours and might overhear you talking there, but nobody goes to the garden after dark."

It is as if she's given me permission to do the thing I most want to do. "Yes," I say, a

tingle of thrill in my blood. "Surely, you're right. Tell Cassander to meet me under the moon and the mulberry tree."

#

A servant undresses me for bed. The moment I hear her footsteps in the distance, I slip out of my room. In bare feet, I race down the back stairs. All I can think of is Cassander. To see him again! To hear his voice. To be warmed by his shy smile. I don't even feel the ground beneath my toes. It is as if I float through the moonlit garden to the mulberry tree, where I see him silhouetted in the darkness.

"Arsinoë?" he whispers.

The sound of his voice makes my heart leap with joy. "Yes! Cassander. It's me."

"You came," he says, reaching for my hands. I let him take them. His hands are warm, his fingertips rough on my own. "Have you come to say goodbye?"

"To wish you luck," I say hurriedly, not wishing to give him cause for worry.

"I intend to become a great warrior," he says.

"And then?"

His eyes glisten. "Who knows...the world turns in strange ways."

We're silent a moment, holding hands.

"I'm not afraid to die in battle," Cassander says. "I am only afraid to die without ever having heard you say it."

I blush. I *burn*. I know what he wants to hear. I can't deny it anymore. "I love you, Cassander."

He smiles. It's a beautiful, dazzling smile. "Will you say it again? I think it has become my new favorite sound."

"I love you, Cassander. I *love* you."

Nothing in my life has ever been so easy to say.

And once I've said it, we are so happy. We stand there, staring at one another with foolish grins upon our faces.

We are still standing like that, moments later, when the king's soldiers burst into the garden and arrest us.

#

I'm brought before King Lysimachus. His deranged dog takes my place on the throne, barking madly. In only my dressing gown, I'm utterly shamed before the court. I'm accused of unspeakable crimes. And I cannot stop trembling for my fear—and my anger.

All my life I've been someone's victim. Bullied by Lysandra in Egypt. And now, betrayed, most cruelly, by the girl who called herself my sister in Thrace.

I should never have called her Bunny.

I should have remembered that her real name was Eurydice.

I should have seen her as a rival.

"I carried notes for Cassander," she confesses to her father, big crocodile tears in her eyes. "But only because he swore to me they were innocent. I didn't know any better, Father. The moment I realized the queen meant to betray you, I told the guards everything I knew."

The king turns his cold eyes to me. "How will you defend yourself, Arsinoë?"

Lifting my chin, I say, "I've done nothing."

"Nothing!" The king roars. "You stand before me having been caught in the night with another man."

Not another man, I think. His son. Cassander is his son, I remember. Surely that must

count for something. "We only clasped hands in farewell," I say, choosing my words carefully. If I want Cassander to live until morning, I must use my wits. "We clasped hands. Nothing more. Not tonight. Not ever."

"You cannot trust her," Prince Agathocles says. "She's an immoral girl."

King Lysimachus snaps a finger, warning the prince. "She's still your queen."

"She was my queen when she professed love for me at your welcome banquet," Prince Agathocles says.

My mouth falls open in horror and my stomach cramps sharply, as if I've taken a blow.

"And why is this the first I'm hearing of it?" King Lysimachus snarls.

"You seemed so happy to bring home your new bride," Agathocles says. "I thought she was young and naive. I didn't want to believe she was wicked."

In Egypt I never learned to defend myself. I hope it's not too late to learn now. "He's lying."

"Oh, but there's more," Prince Agathocles says. "A few days later, your queen asked me to meet her beneath the mulberry tree—yes, the very same tree under which she betrayed you tonight."

"That's not true!" I cry.

"Ask Bunny," Agathocles says. "Ask your guards and gardeners if you don't believe me. Some of them were witness to it. Your queen professed her love for me, and when I rebuffed her, she ran from me in anger. I called after her that I wanted only to be her friend."

The blood drains from my face as I realize how expertly I've been maneuvered and manipulated by Prince Agathocles. The king's children planned it all from the start. Bunny called herself my sister, but she's *his* sister.



And they both want me dead.

#

I fall to my knees before King Lysimachus, reaching for his feet to plead for his mercy. When I do, the horrible dog snarls, lunges, then sinks its teeth into my arm. I wrench away, too late. Fangs have pierced the tender skin of my wrist and I'm bleeding. The courtiers all gasp; even though I am a queen near disgrace, they're horrified by the sight of the bright red blood that trickles down my hand.

My blood fascinates me, however. The vibrant color. The sharp scent of it. It focuses my mind to perfect clarity. And I know what I must do.

I must attack.

"Your ambitions to take your father's throne don't deceive anyone," I say, pointing at Prince Agathocles with a bloody finger. "You wear expensive jewelry to remind all his lords that you outrank them. You lead the king's cavalry. You take it upon yourself to host in his banquet hall, welcoming his bride by saying she is only fit to give him comfort in his *golden years*. You said this to remind the lords of your father's age and to make them think you should take the throne from him."

Another gasp comes from the crowd. My accusation seems to startle the prince, whose eyes widen. He is *so* startled that he cannot stop himself from self-consciously hiding his bejeweled fingers behind his back.

"Now you drag your poor sister into it," I continue, glancing at Bunny—no, Princess Eurydice; I will never again forget her name. "You made her lie. You made her scheme. All in an effort to do away with me before I stopped you from stealing your father's throne."

Before anyone can reply, I whip my head to face the king. My hair must be wild. My face

must be pale. I cannot keep my lower lip from trembling. But I force myself to look into his hard eyes. "Prince Agathocles hatched a plan the moment we arrived in Thrace. He saw me and he was jealous of what you have. Ask yourself, would a loyal son wait all this time to tell you of an unfaithful wife? He waited until you sent midwives to me. He waited until the moment he was most afraid I would give you another, *better* son."

Prince Agathocles shouts an objection, but the king raises a hand to silence him. Then the king looks at me and his eyes narrow shrewdly. "Yet you were caught tonight in the garden with Cassander."

I'm not guilty of what they accuse me. Still, I'm not innocent. It doesn't matter. To save Cassander's life, I'll say anything. I'll pretend anything. "I was lured there by the prince," I say.

"Do you deny that you sent messages to Cassander?"

"I wrote only once." This is actually the truth. "And I wrote nothing shameful. This I swear on the River Styx."

#

I spend that night locked away. Under guard. My wrist hurts badly. The dog bite still seeps blood and throbs with pain. Yet, that's drowned out by the sound of my racing heart beat.

I'm afraid for my life. I'm more afraid for Cassander.

Why wasn't he dragged before the king as I was? What have they done with him and where is he now? Unable to sleep, I shuffle on the tile floor, back and forth, until I'm so tired and thirsty that I sink to my knees.

In the morning, a servant dresses me in my finest garments. The expensive linen from Egypt. The pearls that were a gift at my wedding. The jeweled diadem for my hair. Whatever fate I meet today, I'll meet it in royal fashion.

Led into the throne room, I see the court assembled. The king doesn't look at me. He is dressed formally, standing the way he does when he makes judgments. I'm the one to be judged. He'll pronounce me guilty or innocent.

I'm so afraid that I must push hard on the floor to keep myself standing.

King Lysimachus holds forth a scrap of paper and begins to read.

*I am the Queen of Thrace. I am married. You are my stepson. Even if you weren't, you are a bastard. You are a stable hand. To love you would be to bring dishonor upon the house of Lysimachus and to shame my father and Egypt besides. I will not do it. I will not meet you. The only favor I can bestow upon you is my silence. For your own sake, I implore you to burn this letter and never write to me again. — Queen Arsinoë*

It is the letter I wrote to Cassander. How horrible to hear my harsh words, spoken with the king's contempt. This letter absolves me but condemns Cassander. He should have burned this letter. He should have burned it! I glance at Princess Eurydice, wondering what trick this is. But the girl they call Bunny is dressed in a simple gown today, and she looks as surprised as I am. From his spot beside his sister, Prince Agathocles gapes, then snaps his mouth shut.

My husband the king takes a long, shuddering breath then says, "This letter was found amongst Cassander's belongings. It's proof of Arsinoë's innocence. Proof of her virtue." I begin to wilt with relief until the king says, "Let the stain and the sin fall upon Cassander. He's confessed to an intention to betray me by seducing my queen. Tomorrow he'll be put to death."

Now I fear I will faint dead away. *No!* How could Cassander confess to such a thing? And why should he pay for it with his life? "But—but he is your son. Cassander is your *son!*"

"My bastard," the king says, letting his eyes fall upon Prince Agathocles. "And let Cassander's death be a warning to *all* my sons."

#

The sentence having been pronounced, the court files out. King Lysimachus and I are left alone in the throne room, burning oil lamps throwing ghostly shadows on the walls.

"Come, take your throne," the king says.

I'm shaking all over. I don't think I can walk. But I must convince him, somehow, to change his mind about Cassander. Tentatively I sit beside him, cradling my wounded wrist in my lap.

"Do you know why I spared you, Arsinoë?" King Lysimachus asks.

"The letter," I say.

"That was only a convenient excuse."

Such hatred is burning in my belly that I dare to ask, "Then why did you spare me? Because my father is the Pharaoh of Egypt?"

"That is the main reason," the king admits. He does not want to cause a war with my father, so he will not kill me. It's an advantage I will not forget again. "But there's one more reason."

"What is it?"

"I spared you because you worry Prince Agathocles," the king says merrily. "So long as you're my wife, he'll plot against you. And better you than me."

It's clear to me now. My husband is *happy* that I lashed out at those who might harm him. He *wants* me to become like his horrible dog. I plead with him. "But Cassander isn't a threat to anyone. Please, have mercy—"

"Cassander embarrassed me," he says bluntly. "He's also confessed. And he must die."

I stifle my sounds of anguish. Inside my head, I am screaming, *No, no, no!*

The king tilts his head. "Cassander did not ask for his life. He only asked to see you once before he dies. That was the price of his confession, and we made our bargain. So go to him tonight, because he dies at dawn."

#

Cassander is a prisoner in a small room with bars that keep us from rushing together. I don't wait to see if the guards watch me. I don't care if this might be a trap to test my loyalty. I don't care about anything but seeing him again. Rising from a pallet in the corner, Cassander comes to the bars, his eyes murky with emotion.

A guard puts a burning oil lamp on the floor near my feet then withdraws to the hallway.

And we are alone.

"Why, Cassander?" I ask, my voice high and shrill. "*Why* did you confess?"

"To save you," he says simply. "I told the king that I loved you but that you had nothing for me but scorn."

"A lie," I whisper, tears flowing freely down my cheeks. "That's a lie. I love you. I *love* you."

He lays a finger over his lips to hush me. "I knew they would find your letter, Arsinoë."

"Why didn't you burn it?" I cry, wringing my hands.

Cassander's lips tilt into a smile. "It smelled like you. I didn't know if I would ever see you again, so I kept your letter. I traced the words, imagining you writing it. I couldn't burn it; it was the only thing you ever gave me."

Oh, how that pains me. I would have given him so much more...

"I'm not afraid," he says, reaching through the bars to twine his fingers with mine. "I said that we have no choice about how we're born, but we have some say over everything else. I have a say over how I'll die."

"Then I want to die with you!" I cry.

He shakes his head. "No, Arsinoë. You have to live. You have to live for both of us."

I won't believe anything he says now. I'm sobbing. I'm going mad.

"Remember your dream that you'd be Pharaoh of Egypt? Live for that..."

He must know that I can't ever return to Egypt. "It was a silly dream of a silly girl."

He brushes the tears from my cheeks. "When I die, I'll blow my last breath to you. Take it in, and I'll be with you all the days of your life. We'll be one person, one soul. Everywhere you go, I'll go. Everything you see, I'll see. Every time you laugh, I'll laugh. Every time you ride Styx, I'll feel the wind on my face. You must survive, above all."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "He can't kill you. He can't kill his own son. This isn't happening."

"He can," Cassander says calmly. "And he will."

He's so brave, but I feel his fingers trembling. I clutch at him. He pulls me as close as he can, though the metal keeps us apart. His breath warms my face and I look into his beautiful eyes. These eyes, filled with fear. Filled with love. Love for me. And I'm breaking.

We kiss. It is soft. It is sweet. I breathe him in.

And when we break apart, he says, "Thank you for that. Now, nothing can hurt me. You're already breathing for me, Arsinoë. I'm already half gone."

#

When the rooster crows, we go out into the warm spring morning, where a platform is

being erected for the execution. It takes longer than it should for my husband's harem, all his children and all of the most important nobles to assemble. Then we wait beneath blooming almond trees that weep pink and white flower petals down upon us.

King Lysimachus is solemn. This is his fault, I think. Men like him. Men like my father. Men who marry so many wives and make so many children that we must compete for attention, for power and for survival. But it isn't *only* his fault. Prince Agathocles played his part. So did his sister. Now these monsters sit here to watch the murder of their own brother.

The soldiers lead Cassander onto the wooden platform. His hands are tied behind his back and I feel the cords cutting into my own wrists. When the executioner places a knotted rope around his neck, my throat aches. Cassander doesn't move. He stares straight at me—and my heart batters against my ribcage. I want to run to him, even if it means my own death. The pain cannot be worse than losing him; let them plunge knives into both of us.

But Cassander's eyes beseech me to live for him; it is a horrible choice.

The king nods to the executioner and Cassander blows out his last breath.

The springtime breeze carries it my way and I gasp, filling my lungs. I hold it inside me as the executioner twists the rope, cutting off Cassander's air.

My beloved begins to strangle. As I watch, I squeeze my hands into fists, wanting nothing more than to pummel the executioner and make him stop. I want to save Cassander. I'm desperate for him to live. Then, as Cassander's lips begin to turn blue and his eyes bulge in agony, I want nothing more than for him to die.

*Die. Die swiftly. Be free of these pains! Be free of this world and its betrayals.*

Then I know that I'm wrong. If Cassander lives inside me now, he'll never die. For as I watch them murder him, I make this solemn vow.

I will have revenge.

I will have revenge on King Lysimachus. I will have revenge upon Prince Agathocles and his sister. I will destroy each and every one of them. I will see them suffer. From this day forward, no one—not even Lysandra, wherever she is now—will ever hurt me, or anyone I love, without paying a price. And I will make that price steep. My enemies will pay in blood.

Rivers of blood.

For I have Cassander's breath inside me. To hurt me now is to hurt *him* too, and I'll defend him with the ferocity of a hippopotamus.

Until now, I've been only that soft-hearted Princess of Egypt who did not want to listen to her mother's warnings. I've been that fool of a girl who did not want to see rivals or learn to play political games. That girl, that princess, dies with Cassander. She *must* die.

For today I'm born anew.

Today I'm born a *true* queen...and an avenger. My rivals will learn to fear me. They will tremble at the sound of my name. And when I've destroyed them, I'll take those dreams I had on the banks of the Nile and make them true. *Somehow*, I'll make them true.

For Cassander, I will return to Egypt.

I *will* become Pharaoh.

And we will *both* live forever.

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#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

Based on the life of Queen Arsinoë II who was born into the Greek-Macedonian



Ptolemaic Dynasty that ruled Egypt, this story imagines an explanation for the ruthless woman who would become one of history's greatest survivors.

Except for Cassander, I based all the characters upon known historical figures. King Lysimachus would go on to lose the support of his people—in part—for murdering a son. That's what gave me the germ of my story idea.

It took Arsinoë years, but she eventually *destroyed* the royal family of Thrace. Later, she returned to Egypt, became queen and was anointed Pharaoh in her own right. She planned victorious wars. She won an Olympic medal for horse harnessing. And she was deified as an incarnation of the goddess Isis, whom the Greeks believed was the eternal goddess of spring.

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