

SELENE

of Alexandria

Faith L. Justice



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Selene of Alexandria

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In memory of Mary Ann Justice

Beloved mother and first reader

BY FAITH L. JUSTICE

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CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Selene, a young Christian woman of the ruling class
Nicaeus, Selene's older brother
Antonius, Nicaeus' friend
Rebecca, a Jewish servant
Calistus, city councilor and Selene's father
Phillip, Selene's oldest brother
Hypatia, Lady Philosopher, astronomer and mathematician
Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria
Orestes, Augustal Prefect (governor) of Egypt
Abundantius, Roman General and military *dux* of Alexandria
Demetrius, slave and secretary to Orestes
Timothy, Archdeacon (second in command) to Theophilus
Honorio, Selene's friend
Cyril, Theophilus' nephew
Aaron, Rebecca's brother
Auxentius, medical history and theory scholar
Haroun, anatomy teacher
Paulinus, bishop's chief steward
Hierex, Christian teacher and Cyril's right hand man
Lysis, Antonius' father
Jesep, leader of the Jews
Ammonius, Nitrian monk
Arete, Honorio's mother
Ision, Honorio's father
Urbib, Jewish physician
Mother Nut, Egyptian herbalist and healer
Thomas, Imperial agent
Melania, Christian midwife
Peter, Christian presbyter



CHAPTER 1

Alexandria, Egypt, AD 412

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

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

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

Antonius arrived first, staggering down the scree-covered slope to

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

"Who's fastest?" Selene teased.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both Antonius and Selene scowled.

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

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

The boys snorted in unison, laughing at the unlikely idea that the esteemed City Councilor Calistus would let his only daughter go unmarried. Antonius squinted at the rising sun and grinned at her. "Come, Nicaeus. We need to get your sister home, before your father comes looking for us. It wouldn't do to miss the new Prefect's welcoming procession."

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

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

At the funeral, Selene rejected the comforting words of the priest and vowed to thwart death any way she could. She would become a healer, a physician. As she grew from child to young woman, Selene realized death was inexorable, but the urge to become a physician strengthened. There were a few women healers, mostly holy women and pagan

medica, who ministered to the poor. Selene knew the main obstacle to her ambition was her father. No upper class man would willingly allow his daughter to engage in any profession. Calistus would have to be persuaded by someone he respected.

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

“Nicaeus, I need your help.”

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

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

“If Father gives permission.”

“You know he would never do that!” Selene wailed.

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

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

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

“But...”

“I said no.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nicaeus struggled with his traditional cloak, which was bordered with a narrow band of embroidery proclaiming his status as the son of a councilor. He swore fiercely until Selene took a hand.

"Let me." She settled the wrap in folds across his left shoulder and right hip, around his back, over his head, and down to his right arm, where she wrapped the end so it dangled nearly to his knees. She looked him up and down, then glanced at Antonius adding finishing touches to his own fine cloak. "You'll do. Maybe you should get Antonius to teach you how."

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

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

They entered the gate with an ever-increasing crowd, past city guards. The common people came from the countryside to join the public feasting and perhaps pick up a coin or two from the Prefect's coffers or the Patriarch's appointed almsman. The three proceeded onto Canopic

Street, the vast main thoroughfare bisecting the city from east to west. The magnificent Church of St. Theonas, sometimes called the church of a thousand pillars, anchored this end of the boulevard, while the Church of St. Metras greeted travelers from the east as they entered the Gate of the Sun. Selene's father had been a boy when St. Theonas had served as the Episcopal residence. The former Patriarch Athanasius needed ready refuge in the necropolis and desert monasteries during his ongoing battles with the Emperor's choice for the Patriarchy. Calistus occasionally spoke of those bloody times with a fierce desire never to see them repeated.

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

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

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



CHAPTER 2

SELENE!” ANTONIUS YELLED.
When she remained rooted to the spot, he grabbed her arm, sprinted toward the church and yanked her onto the steps. She stumbled against the wide marble slabs, banging her shins, and yelping in pain. “Are you trying to get your head bashed in? Those men are dangerous!”

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

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

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

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

The shouts of the armed men drowned out her final words. They

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Selene, at first irritated that she had been kept unaware of these developments, sobered. She was not yet born when the Patriarch had suppressed the last public vestige of the pagan cults. After murderous rioting on both sides, he closed the Great Temple of Serapis and reconsecrated it as the new Episcopal residence. Her father said smoke had

fouled the air for days as the Christians burned the tens of thousands of books housed in the public library there. When she questioned the tears in his eyes, he said they were irritated and would talk no more about it.

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

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

Selene, remembering him complains of a sore head two days ago, asked, “How are your ‘friends’ doing now?”

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

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

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

“But there won’t be enough time!”

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

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

“Enter!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Selene obediently put her fingertips in the bowl. The oil smelled

faintly of roses. "Where was the Prefect posted before Alexandria?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“With all this cloth, I feel like I’m wearing a merchant’s tent,” Selene complained.

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

Selene blushed at the thought, mumbling, “At least they’re comfortable.”

“The tent looks quite elegant with your height.”

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

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

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

“There’s one thing missing,” Rebecca added.

“What? I’m wrapped, draped, and pomaded. What more can you do to me?”

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

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

“It’s Nicaeus. Father waits. Are you ready?”

Selene’s heart quickened. She glanced at Rebecca, who nodded. “I’ll be right out.”

Selene strode across the room, then moderated her gait to the feminine glide her friend Honoria had worked so hard to teach her. The

astonished look on her brother's face was worth all the fussing. She kept a serene mask as she took his proffered arm and they descended the stairs.

Their father waited in the vestibule. Calistus was of unremarkable height, with the stooped shoulders and small rounded belly of a man who spent more time at his books than in the gymnasium. Today the full regalia of a city councilor disguised his physical imperfections: full length white tunic, topped with a voluminous toga bordered with the thin purple stripe denoting his class. He wore rings and medals, denoting his various civic offices and honors, and carried a mahogany staff capped with gold.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Phillip! It's been three years! You've grown a beard. Why did no one

tell me you were coming? When did you get home? What was the court like? You must tell me all about Constantinople! Does Father know you're home?"

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

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

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

Selene's breath came quick as Phillip described a narrow escape on the trip. "We chased the bandits into a blind canyon where they fought for their lives. Just as I thought they were finished, the leader..." Phillip's words were drowned by the blare of a hundred trumpets playing a fanfare. They all looked up in surprise. "I'll finish the story later."

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

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

Selene gasped when a lovely painted plaster statue of what seemed to be the Virgin Mary was revealed to be the goddess Athena. Several

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

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

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

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

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

Theophilus spread his arms to address the crowd.



CHAPTER 3

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

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

His good friend Abundantius, posted here for several years as the Egyptian military commander, made it clear what the people of the city expected. "One of my predecessors had to accompany a new Patriarch into the city to protect him after he had been tossed out," he had told

Orestes. “The good father was humble and most holy, but he was the Emperor’s man, not theirs. The new Patriarch came into the city with little fanfare and compounded his error by shortening the investiture ceremony. The good citizens of Alexandria drove him out of the city until he did it right. ‘Right’ meant a full procession with troops, clergy, and—most important of all—a feast day for the city.”

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

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

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

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

“Do you know what is going on?”

“No, Sir, there’s been no word.”

“Then carry on, but prepare your unit for trouble.”

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

Battle senses alert, Orestes rode into the vast square. He saw several people cleaning a pile of rubble from in front of the viewing stand. A

diminutive woman in scholar's white, and a frail man in full Bishop's regalia, harangued the crowd. He immediately recognized the famous Lady Philosopher Hypatia and Patriarch Theophilus. Whatever the problem, they had it under control.

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

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

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

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

workings of the city.

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

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

“My fellow citizens,” he began in slightly accented Greek, “I greet you on behalf of the Most Pious and Beloved Emperor Theodosius II. In this, the fourth year of his reign, the Roman Emperor of the East extends to you his blessings and assures you of his love and justice.” Orestes continued in the same vein, as customary, acknowledging the warm welcome and elaborately praising the city and its people. “The Emperor knows of the great work you do here in Egypt, laboring to feed the Empire...” There were a few mutters and dark looks, so he hastened onto another topic. “In appreciation, the Emperor has increased the bread dole by one-half portion for three months.”

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

Orestes noted the lowering sun, the restive condition of the crowd, and concluded, “In light of the advice given me by the wise Lady Hypatia to listen more than speak, I’ll conclude by saying it is an honor to serve

my Emperor in this fairest of all cities. Enjoy this feast day, good citizens, and may God bless us all.”

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

“WHICH GROUP IS THIS?” Orestes asked Abundantius as they ascended the stairs to their third reception. The *dux* had volunteered to escort his old friend around the city and make sure Orestes got to the Prefect’s mansion in time to bathe before starting his duties early the next morning.

“The city councilors.”

“How many?”

“Only about thirty...with their families.”

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

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

The City Council building housed the banquet. They ascended the marble steps, past a row of columns, into a massive hall. Internal columns held up a vaulted ceiling, painted deep blue, with the twelve constellations depicted in gold leaf. Painted plaster walls gave the illusion of looking out into a formal garden. About seventy temporary couches lined the walls, many accommodating two or three occupants. A leather couch strewn with red and purple silk cushions was reserved for him to the right of the entrance.

Orestes took his place and waved off the servants bringing food, although he did accept a goblet of cold white wine. The councilors

approached him one by one, according to rank and seniority. Abundantius introduced each and provided amusing stories about some as they left earshot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ouch!” Phillip mimed pulling a knife from his heart.

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

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

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

Calistus’ countenance softened at the praise for his son. “I’m pleased Phillip was of service to you.”

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

“At your convenience, Sir.” Calistus bowed.

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

Abundantius raised a goblet. “What? When?”

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

AFTER RETURNING THE JEWELRY and fine clothes to their chests, Rebecca cleaned the cosmetics from Selene’s face and combed her hair. “What is the new Prefect like, Mistress?”

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

“Perhaps cold water would relieve the discomfort.” Rebecca combed the curls out of Selene’s hair.

Selene laughed. “To soothe my hand or douse my dreams?”

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

“Younger than Father and older than Phillip. He’s not decrepit, if that is what you’re hinting.”

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

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

“As you wish, Mistress.”

Selene turned Rebecca’s words over in her mind as the servant girl exited. It was indeed strange for a man of Orestes’ position to be unmarried. Perhaps he had made a vow to the church or had lost a true love. Or maybe he preferred boys.

What was this unwanted feeling Orestes stirred in her? How could she find out the truth about him? What difference would it make, if he were unavailable? Why was she thinking such things when that morning she vowed she would remain unmarried? The thought shook Selene out of her romantic reverie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her brother laughed. “I’m not blind. I saw how you looked at our Prefect all during his appearance.”

“I did not!”

“Yes, you did.”

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

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

“He what?”

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

Phillip laughed, hugged her briefly, and then stepped back, holding

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

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

"Promise."

"Phillip?"

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

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

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