

Kush
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Chapter One

The torches in the throne room cast ominous shadows on the wall as the Queen paces. In her right hand, she holds the heavy ceremonial staff that thumps against the stone floor with each step.

A servant appears crawling on all fours with his forehead touching the floor.

“Yes your Majesty?”

“Bring Nicoda to me. Now.”

The servant backs away never turning his back to the Queen.

“Yes your Majesty.” His voice is almost inaudible.

A noise, someone comes coughing and muttering.

A man enters, if indeed he is a man, standing no more than four feet tall. Except for his head, hands and feet, which are the size of a normal man, one might take him for a boy.

His short legs give him an awkward gait. He approaches and loses his balance tumbling forward, head over heels, landing just at the Queen’s feet.

With aplomb he rises to his knees, brushes off his clothes with his large bejeweled hand and asks.

“You called, your Majesty?”

“Yes, I did. Now get up off your knees.”

“Yes my Queen.”

He pulls himself up with his own short staff.

“Nicoda I have a task for you to undertake. It is extremely important and it could be dangerous.”

“I have no fear in my service to my Queen.”

“Yes, yes, very good. But you may think differently when you hear what the task is.”

“Tell me, what you would have me do?”

“Find my son Kashta and bring him to me.”

Nicoda plucks at his bushy eyebrows and strokes his sparse beard. His large eyes grow even bigger.

“Find Kashta?”

“Your ears seem big enough to have heard what I said.”

“Yes, of course your Majesty. But where is he?”

“If I knew that, why would I need you? The last I heard he was in Rome.”

“Rome the city or Rome the Empire?”

“Rome the Empire.”

“That’s a big place.”

“Tell me something I don’t know?”

“No, No, sorry my Queen. I just meant that it could be very difficult.”

“Are you saying you can’t do it?”

Nicoda inhales and puffs himself up to his full height and says.

“Have I ever failed you your Majesty?”

“No, but I have never entrusted you with such a challenge.”

“You may have faith in me my Queen.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“The wheels are turning, but one thing is certain.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s going to be very expensive. Rome is so far away and I must hire people.”

“Leave me now and come back to me when your plan is complete. If I agree with what you propose expense will be no object.”

“Yes your Majesty.”

“Remember Nicoda, no one must know of this, my enemies are everywhere.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Should I?” The old man responded.

“I am Lord Nicoda, Chamberlain to Her Majesty the Queen.”

“Tell me Lord Nicoda, why are you in my home, uninvited and unannounced. Like some thief in the night?”

The old man’s eyes made Nicoda feel distinctly uncomfortable.

“How dare you talk to me like that. I come on a mission for the Queen.”

“I feel no obligation to treat you as an honoured guest. If that offends you, please feel free to leave.”

“Will you listen to the Queen’s request?”

“I have only admiration for the Queen. Speak.”

Nicoda stood as straight as his small body would allow.

“Her Majesty requests that you help me in locating her son Kashta.

“I see, and you believe I can locate him.”

“All the world knows of the powers of the Great Tafari.”

“That is so, but, I am old and weary.”

“Perhaps this might nugget might help with your weariness.”

Tafari reached out, took the gold nugget, and held it close to his right eye.

“Ah yes, I am improving as we speak.”

“You will help me?”

“I will help the Queen.”

“How do we begin?”

“Just sit quietly on the floor in that corner. Say nothing regardless of what you see or hear.

The old man lifted a crude lamp from its place and put it on the floor in the center of the room.

He took down a strange looking mask. Nicoda couldn’t remember ever seeing one like it. The face was contorted as if in pain or was it angered? The color is like black slate with blood red rims around the eyeholes and the lips a startling white. Tafari placed the mask over his face and tied it with hide strips behind his head.

The dwarf watched in silence as the old man removed a small drum from the wall. He began to beat it as he walked around the lamp, his steps in time with the beat. A strange chant filled the room as the tempo of the drum increased.

Tafari began to twist and bend from the waist in time to the drum. The chant grew louder and each time he circled the lamp it glowed brighter.

The sound of the drum and the chant made Nicoda’s ears ring. The lamp burned so brightly that he had to shield his eyes from it. It ended without warning. Tafari fell to the ground. The room was silent and the lamp flickered just as it had when he first entered.

After the brightness of the flame, it was difficult to see much beyond the old man’s body on the floor. Then Tafari rolled onto his back. He raised himself to a sitting position and carefully removed the mask.

Nicoda hoped that the magic had worked but was afraid to speak in case the trance had not ended. In a weary voice that was almost a whisper, Tafari spoke.

“Kashta lives. On a farm close to the Roman City of Perugia, north and east of the city of Rome.”

Still unsure, the dwarf remained silent. The old man continued.

“Kashta is under the protection of a strong spirit.”

Nicoda looked at the wizard.

“Tell me of this strong spirit.”

“A blind prophet who is called Caecus.”

“Tell me Tafari, are the powers of this Caecus greater than yours?”

“Who is to know?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Until there is a confrontation between he and I, we will not know.”

“What else can you tell me?”

“Kashta has a close relationship with several young Roman citizens. They regard him as a mentor almost another father.”

“Tell me more about these young Romans.”

“Three of them live in the city of Perusia and spend much time with him. Two others live in Rome, a fair distance away and see less of him.”

“Who are the three in Perusia?”

“The eldest is named Pando, the next is Tactus and the youngest is called Pico.”

“And the two in Rome.”

“The eldest of the five is Viaticus and his brother Ludus.”

“And you say that Kashta has a strong bond with them all?”

“Yes.”

“Then he would protect them and keep them from harm.”

“Without doubt.”

“Thank you Tafari, I will leave you now.”

“And you will tell the Queen of the great service I have done for her? And that I can do more?”

“Of course.”

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“So, I take it you have formulated a plan?”

“Yes your Majesty, I have.”

“Get up off your knees Nicoda so that I can see into your eyes. And tell me of what you propose.”

“I have traced the location of your son.”

“Where is he?”

Gritting his teeth Nicoda says.

“He is close to the City of Perusia not far from Rome.”

“What do you mean, ‘close to the City of Perusia?’ Where is he exactly?”

“On a farm.”

“On a farm, a Prince of the Royal Blood on a farm? Is this some kind of a joke?”

“I do not lie your Majesty. It’s not just any farm, but the home of a blind prophet named Caecus. Kashta is under Caecus’s guiding hand, has become skilled in the ways of the Greek prophets.”

“I don’t trust Greeks.”

“Kashta is very committed to this Caecus and is unlikely to come home willingly.”

“I assume that this is when you will finally divulge this master plan of yours? How do you propose to get him to come here?”

“He has become attached to some young boys that live in Perusia. They spend much time together and an almost paternal affection has developed.”

“Get to the point Nicoda.”

“If we kidnap the three boys and bring them here to Meroe, Kashta will surely follow. Once here, I’m sure that you could use your most persuasive powers to convince him to take his rightful place in the Kingdom.”

“But why all three boys? Why not just one?”

“Having all three would be a greater incentive for Kashta to come. It will cost little more to bring all three.”

“And after Kashta returns, what are your plans for the boys?”

“We could just send them back to their home.”

“Nicoda, great care must be taken for safety of the three boys. If they are as close to Kashta as you say, your plan might backfire if any harm came to them.”

“My Queen, I guarantee that they will be safe.”

“How long will it take for you be ready to carry out your plan?”

“Two weeks, your Majesty.”

“Then get on with it.”

“Ah, but I will need gold to be able to hire the men and cover the expenses.”

The Queen reaches inside her robe and retrieves a leather pouch. She throws it to the dwarf. Without looking inside, he grasps it.

“Now go and do not fail me. You know better than most, how I deal with people who don’t satisfy my needs.”

“Yes your Majesty.”

Chapter Two

Two men sat in a wagon by the side of a road leading into the City of Perusia. They watched as three boys approached.

“Pando, can you see who that is?”

“I don’t think they’re from around here Tactus.”

Pico ran to catch up then asked.

“What’s going on? What did he say?”

“He called and asked us for help, maybe something’s wrong with their wagon. Let’s go see.”

Once they were close enough to talk without shouting, the man with the beard spoke.

“Thank you for coming young men. As you can tell, we are strangers to your country and I’m afraid that we’ve run into a problem.

“My name is Iniko and as I said, we are strangers to your country and we need your help.”

“Where are you from,” asked Pando.

“From very far away, in a land called Kush. Now that you know our names, may we know yours?”

Pando’s eyes widened at the reference to Kush. Was it a mere coincidence? “My name is Pando, and over there is my brother Tactus and my youngest brother Pico is next to him.”

“And fine young men you are.”

“What brings you here from so far away?”

“So you know where Kush is,” asked Manu.

“No, not really, it’s just that your friend said it was very far away.”

“Excuse Manu Pando, this is his first trip away from home and he’s very nervous.

“The reason that we are in your country is that we took work aboard a ship that carried grain from Egypt to Rome. Unfortunately, we came upon a storm at sea. The ship foundered and sank just before we were to arrive. Lucky for us both we learned to swim in the River Nile as young boys and we were able to swim to shore. Others were not so fortunate.”

“How exciting,” said Pico.

Tactus edged closer and asked.

“But this is a long way from Rome. What brought you here?”

Iniko spread his hands and looked to the sky.

“Today I ask that of myself, what indeed brought us here. Not knowing your fine country, we have lost our way. We landed a distance from your great city of Rome and after buying this wagon and donkey from a very nice farmer we met, we set out to get to Rome. We have traveled many days and still could not find Rome. I can only assume that we made a wrong turn.”

Pico chuckled and said.

“It seems so.”

“Pico, it’s not funny. How many times have you been lost? You know how it feels.”

“That’s quite alright Pando, we do feel like fools.”

“Why do you want to go to Rome?”

“Our only hope to get back home is to get to Rome and find another ship going to Egypt for grain.”

“Iniko, I’m curious. How is it that you speak our language so well? Considering you’ve never been in our country before?”

Without hesitation, he responded.

“I’m sure you know of the many outposts maintained by your glorious Legions. Both Manu and I were fortunate enough to live in the City of Elephantine where there was a large Roman garrison. We worked at the garrison and learned the language from your mighty Legionnaires.”

“Elephantine. Are there elephants there? I’ve seen an elephant on parade when father took me to Rome,” said Pico.

Iniko smiled at the boy.

“Not that I ever noticed.”

“Pando may we count on your help?”

“I think we might be able to provide you with directions. Maybe even a rough map.”

“Thank you, both Manu and I will be eternally grateful to you, as will our families. Now, I insist that we all have a refreshing drink to celebrate. It is a hot day after all. Bring the jar Manu.”

Manu ran to the wagon and returned with a ceramic jug.

“I’m afraid we have no cups so we will have to share the jar, but then we are all friends. Aren’t we?”

He handed the vessel to Pando.

“As the eldest, you have the honour of the first drink.”

Pando lifted the jar to his lips and tasted the refreshing liquid.

Made from some kind of fruit, but none that I’ve ever had before. It is delicious.

“Iniko this is the best drink I’ve ever tasted. What is it?”

“In my country it’s known as The Elixir of Isis. Here Tactus you try some.”

“Oh, that is very good. May I have some more?” Tactus asked.

“Surely my young friend and then pass it to Pico.”

Pico, usually suspicious of anything resembling food or drink was not to be outdone. Even he praised the flavour and took a second drink too. He handed the jar back to Iniko.

“Thank you Pico. Why don’t we all just sit down here for a moment and be thankful for our new friendship.

They sat in a semi circle. Each of the boys felt refreshed and very much at ease. But none of them noticed that neither of the strangers took a drink from the flask. It wasn’t long before their eyes grew heavy and they fell into a deep sleep.

“It works as well as Nicoda said it would. They’re sound asleep.”

“Yes Manu and they should stay that way for three days.

“Come we must load them on the wagon. Hurry our ship awaits.”