

Death comes to Alexandria

The Royal Palace of Alexandria, Egypt Four Years Earlier

I stood in a dark, stuffy room full of people I hated, trying my hardest not to cry one single tear. Princesses aren't supposed to, you know; at least, not in public.

My precious mother was lying on a painted bed, dying, and my heart knew there was nothing I could do now to save her.

It should have been so easy.

The most powerful goddess in Egypt was meant to be on my side, but apparently she wasn't listening to me right now. I'd had my palms raised up to the heavens,

begging her constantly since my mother's accident. How hard would it have been for her to answer one tiny prayer? Just one – that was all I asked.

It's me, Isis. Cleo. You chose me at birth, remember? I'm your special favourite. Please save her, Isis. Please!

But no. Just when I really needed her, my patron deity disappeared and went silent. I was so very angry with her about that, but I couldn't show it.

It might sound as if I was a spoilt royal brat with no feelings because I refused to cry when my mother was dying. But I wasn't.

Not crying took everything I had. There was a lump in my throat the size of a camel's foot, and my eyes felt as if the whole Nile welled up inside, just waiting to pour out of them. I'd got my nails dug so far into my palms that I could feel the skin breaking, and then the slow, stinging seep of blood.

'Never show anger, fear or grief, my little pusscat. Never let them see you're weak.'

That's the last thing my father the Pharaoh – the great and wondrous Ptolemy Auletes – had said to me three days ago, when he got on his grand ship – the one with a thousand or so oars – and sailed away to Rome with my little half-sister, my two baby half-brothers and the precious flute he seemed to love more than any of us.

If only he'd taken my mother and me too.

If only he'd made her his Pharaoh queen, then none of this would even be happening.

Egypt is supposed to have two Pharaohs.

One for Isis, one for Horus – protectors of the Double Throne.

Maybe that's why my goddess wasn't listening to me.

Maybe it was all my fault.

Maybe I should have tried harder to stop him going away.

I wouldn't have left my kingdom to rot just because a few thousand angry Alexandrians were rioting and threatening to throw me off my throne. And I most certainly wouldn't have sailed all the way to the other end of the Great Green Sea just because I owed a pile of money to some old Roman.

I was pretty sure my father was a big fat coward, showing fear, like he'd told me not to. Ptolemy rulers aren't supposed to run away and leave their people behind, or their daughters, or their gods.

But, hey, even if he wasn't here now, he was still the Pharaoh, which meant he was lord-of-everything and could do what he liked, mostly, including leaving me and my mother to sink or swim in this hellhole of a palace.

At least, it had been me and my mother till yesterday.

Till her so-called accident on that deserted flight of stairs.

Soon it was going to be just me, and that scared me half to death.

I thought if I concentrated on my father's last command, maybe the little hissing voices in my head wouldn't be able to come in, wouldn't be able to spit horrible words like 'alone' and 'abandoned' at me.

It wasn't working very well.

All I wanted to do was to throw myself on the bed and hug my mother tight. I longed to hold her hands – those soft little hands that had stroked my hair only yesterday morning; those slim fingers which had held mine steady as I traced kohl round my eyelids with her own jewel-ended stick for the first time last year. But I wouldn't give anybody in that room the satisfaction of seeing me break down. If I cried, Tryphena and Berenice, my Evil Sow half-sisters, would say it was because I wasn't a proper princess. They had said that a lot since my father left. But I was. I really was. It was just that, as I said, my mother wasn't exactly the official queen. My father used to call her his queen of hearts in front of everyone, though, and me his pusscat princess. When Pharaoh says you're a princess, you are, believe me. Anyway, I was recognised as Princess Cleopatra in

the priests' scrolls, and that's about as official as it gets.

Nobody could imagine how much I didn't want my mother to die. But the physicians had told me at dawn that she was starting on her journey to the gods and there was nothing more they could do for her. I commanded them. I screamed that Isis would curse them to eternal death. I even threatened to have them beaten and fed to the jackals if they didn't make her well again. But they just bowed and backed out of the room, shaking their wrinkly, bald heads just like a lot of vultures anticipating a nice fat piece of carrion. The next thing I heard was the sound of the deathwatch drums.

Boom boom boom, they went. Boom boom boom.

That was when I started praying to Isis even harder.

Oh, Isis! Where are you? Where were you when Mama fell down those stairs? Did you see what happened? Did she really slip? Or was she pushed? Please save her! Please! I'll do anything for you. Anything at all.

But Isis still wasn't listening.

The person on the bed didn't even look like my own dear mother any more. She was barely breathing, lying there so still and small under her favourite blue linen sheet, the one embroidered with lilies. I had put that over her poor, broken body myself, just in case it made a difference. I hoped it might help her get better if she had

something pretty around her. But it didn't. (Or, at least, it hadn't so far.) And having the official crowd of palace gawpers there to witness her passing wasn't helping either of us. I'd tried to stop them coming in, but what could I do? I was still an undergrown child in their eyes, and the deathwatch was in the stupid religious rules my tutor had been drilling into me since I was old enough to talk. I could hear his prissy voice in my head now.

'Everyone must witness the passing of a member of the inner court, whether they want to or not – the god Horus himself has decreed it.'

It was only two months since they'd called the deathwatch for my half-siblings' mother – my father's 'official' Pharaoh queen – just as all the whispers about him draining the royal treasury started. I remember feeling sorry for Tryphena and Berenice and the little ones then. I didn't now.

Oh, please, Isis, Queen of Heaven! Oh, please, Horus, Protector of Pharaohs! Oh, please, all you great gods! Don't take my mother away from me. Don't leave me all alone.

Hot, thick anger and a cold, clammy grief warred inside me as I glared over at Tryphena and Berenice, standing on the other side of the room, half hidden in the thick pall of lotus-flower incense which crept into my nostrils like fog. Evil Sow sisters might sound a bit over-

dramatic as a description. But in their case it wasn't. They really were vile sows (no offence to pigs, even if they are considered unclean things by some). I could see the two of them grimacing at each other, and their tightly folded arms and bored, beautifully painted faces under elaborate hairstyles told me just how much they wanted to be out of here, and hated having to stay. Now that our father the Pharaoh was gone, they didn't think my mother should even be counted as a member of the inner court, just because she was only half Greek. I mean why does a bit of Egyptian blood even matter these days? What difference does it make to anything? It wasn't as if our father was exactly legitimate either – though it didn't do to say so openly.

Of course, my horrible sisters had been plotting to take power since the minute he'd left. Did they have something to do with what had happened to my mother? Oh, why hadn't I been there when she fell? Why hadn't someone called me away from my lessons in the Great Library sooner? Maybe I could have saved her if I hadn't been so immersed in the brand new scroll Master Apollonius had brought me that morning.

Swish swish swish! I pitied Tryphena and Berenice's slaves, endlessly fanning those sweaty bodies with golden palm leaves, swatting the flies away with giraffe hair

whisks. Can you believe that only three short years ago the two of them had seemed like glamorous idols of sophistication to me? All I had wanted back then was to grow up just like them. I had learnt enough since then to know that beauty on the outside can hide a nest of venomous asps within.

I saw Berenice lean over to Tryphena. Her lips moved, and her whiny, whispering voice drifted across the room, breaking the silence.

‘Oh, really! Can’t Father’s whore-bitch even do dying right? How long do we have to stand here, anyway? I’ve got a new jewel merchant from Nubia coming in this afternoon and I wanted to watch the sacrifices after that. It’s such fun when they scream for mercy.’

As if she had heard, my mother opened her pale, blueish lips slightly and sighed. Only I could see the misty golden *ka* soul form that rose upwards from her body – a perfect mirror image of her mortal self. Only I could see the door opening in the air, the tall jackal-headed figure stepping from his reed boat and slipping into the mortal world. Only I could see his immortal hand stretching out to draw my mother’s soul through and sail off with her to the underworld realm. She held out her own hand to him and didn’t even look back once. That was what finished me off.

‘Please don’t go. Oh, please, Anubis,’ I whimpered to the shepherd of souls, falling to my knees, giving up the battle to hold back that torrent of stifled tears, ‘P-please don’t take her...’ But it was too late.

My mother’s mortal self drew one last gurgling breath as the door in the air snapped shut. She was no longer in the room.

There was only an empty body lying on a bed, and I was left behind, weeping.

Everything looked blurry through the veil of my tears. I could hardly breathe. And then I heard my sisters start in on me, just as I’d known they would. Tryphena gave me a menacing, sideways look with those hateful green eyes of hers as she flicked her nearest slave on the ear. He didn’t dare wince, of course.

‘Fetch the embalmers and get this dung out of here, you. Mind you clean the room out properly afterwards, too. It stinks. I think I’ll use it to store my second best sandals in.’

Then she pointed one of her long red-ochre painted fingers at me and hissed like an angry cobra.

‘As for you, snivelling little bastard, you’re a disgrace to the name of Ptolemy, you swotty, scroll-loving runt. You’d better start running, and hope your precious goddess and her priestesses can protect you. Because this

palace is finally mine now – and I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to you, would I? Like falling down a flight of stairs?' Suddenly she looked extremely smug, like a well-fed cat, lifting one dark eyebrow so that the minute rubies which decorated it glittered like tiny drops of shed blood.

It was at that exact moment I knew for sure my mother hadn't had an accident.

I saw Berenice shoot Tryphena a jealous glare, so quick I almost missed it, and then her face fell into its usual simpering, sycophantic expression as she sniggered behind her hand.

'Yes, Pharaoh isn't around to protect his skinny little pusscat now, is he? And nor is his half-breed concubine-bitch. Tryphena's right. I'd definitely start running if I were you. Fast.' Her voice whipped out as sharp as a hornet's sting on that last word.

I scrambled to my feet, my legs trembling under me like a newborn camel's. I felt the humiliation and rage rise up from my belly, joining the choking grief, making my neck feel as if their two pairs of hands were closing round it. But I refused to be silent, whatever it cost me. I refused to be beaten down. Words bubbled up inside me, words I'd needed to say ever since my mother's accident. They came out thick and slow and

difficult through my swollen throat.

‘Isis will p-protect me,’ I said, my treacherous child’s voice squeaking and younger than my twelve summers, however defiant I tried to make it sound. ‘She sees both your h-hateful hearts, a-and it’s not a pretty sight. Just you w-wait! She’ll put my father the Pharaoh back in his rightful place and then you’ll b-both be sorry. Remember that when you scheme to sit on thrones that aren’t yours. Remember!’ I said again, my voice suddenly loud and strong, echoing with an overtone that I knew wasn’t entirely mine. ‘My goddess will be watching you!’ And then I walked past the guards and out of the room, with my head held high, as a proper Ptolemy princess should, ignoring the rising screams of outrage behind me.

I have to admit, though, once I was safely on the other side of that gilded door, I abandoned my dignity and took to my heels. I fled through the dark, stuffy palace corridors as if the fiendish serpent Apep himself was after me. As I ran, the unstoppable sobs started to rise again. All I wanted was to get away, to escape, to go anywhere but back there where my mother’s poor abandoned shell lay so still and silent. I no longer cared about anyone seeing my Nile flood of tears, or about the unattractive snail-trail of snot running from my nose. My sandalled feet flew over the marble floors, towards the one person

who would understand how I felt, the person who'd been with me since I was three years old – my only true companion in this poisonous palace – Charm.

Charm was my best friend, body slave and all-round fixer of everything terrible, and I couldn't even imagine life without her. She had never let me down yet, but what if something had happened to her? Would she have our bags packed and ready as we'd planned so hurriedly last night? The lessons my mother had drummed into me over and over since my father left – lessons about treachery and being prepared to run – began marching round my brain again like a squad of soldier ants as the walls flashed by me. One of my sandals was working loose, but I had no time to bend and tighten the strap. If only she'd taken her own advice there wouldn't have been any so-called accident, and we might all be running away together.

But now it was too late. Tryphena hadn't been joking about something bad happening to me if I stayed. I knew she'd steal my father's place as Pharaoh as soon as she could, so here was no time to lose if I was going to avoid 'slipping' down a flight of stairs too. Or something even worse, like being thrown to her horrid pet crocodiles. I shuddered, imagining sharp, white teeth tearing into my soft flesh.

We had to get out of the palace – tonight.

I tore past the chanting column of palace embalmers and priests of Seth coming up out of a dark stairway. I didn't want to look at them. I knew who they were and where they were going, and I didn't want to think about it, or go anywhere near them, the unclean beasts. How could anyone bear to delve about in dead bodies? I shuddered, smelling the decay and salts of natron underneath the aromas of cedar oil and myrrh that hung about their stained red linen robes.

And then it happened.

My loose sandal strap finally snapped in two. I tripped over and crashed into a tall boy at the rear of the line. All I took in at first was that he was dressed in ordinary white.

'Oof!' he grunted, grabbing me round the waist to save me from the inevitable fall. A moment later I was sprawled heavily on top of him, my nose pressed into his chest. All I could think of was that he didn't smell of death and decay at all, but of the comforting odours of my favourite place in all the world – the Great Library. Breathing deeply, I made out dusty papyrus, dry reed, beeswax, ink cakes and a subtle, sweet boy musk all of his own. I raised my head found myself looking down into a pair of deep brown eyes, dark as wet Delta mud, long

eyelashes clogged with oily kohl at the roots. Somehow, all the world seemed to stop for a long minute, and then start up again in a different rhythm.

Didn't I know this boy? Surely I did! There was something about him that was familiar. I examined his features silently. Curved nose – though not as strongly curved as mine – slightly chapped lips that quirked and dimpled at one corner, skin the colour of burnt honey, and a curtain of hair so black and straight and shiny it could have been cut from rare heavy silk. I reached out to touch it, wanting to tangle my fingers in it, to stroke its softness. It looked so comforting. But then adult hands were under my arms, lifting me, setting me back gently on my feet. I came back to myself suddenly. What had I been thinking?

'Apologise to the Princess Cleopatra at once for your clumsiness, librarian Khai,' said the red-robed embalmer who had parted us.

All of us knew it had been my fault – but no one was going to say so. This boy was a commoner, and I was still a Ptolemy. My father would have had him beaten for even coming near me.

'I'm very sorry, Your Royal Highness. Please forgive me,' the boy said, bowing, but not afraid, as so many were of the my family (and with good reason – those pet

crocodiles of my sisters were very well fed). His voice was low and roughened, not yet a man's, but nearly. He spoke Greek with a slight Egyptian accent, and that was when I knew him. He was the boy from the Great Library. The one who'd got down a scroll for me several months ago from a shelf I couldn't quite reach, and spoken to me as if I was a real person, not an untouchable Ptolemy princess. He'd made me blush redder than a ripe plum as his hand touched mine. Charm had seen that, and teased me about it mercilessly, till I threw pillows at her. He was the boy I'd had pleasingly forbidden thoughts about for nights afterwards – until the trouble with my father began and drove him out of my mind.

He'd smiled at me then, and he smiled again now – just the flash of a crooked white grin, and something else in his eyes I couldn't quite work out. Was it sympathy? Then the red-robed priest dragged him back to his place at the end of the line, and he was gone, leaving a strange knot tied around my heart that I didn't understand, together with a mystery. Why was a librarian like him with the stinking embalmers and Seth priests? What did they need with a scroll stacker? Had he been sent to the unclean ones as a punishment? I shook my head, bending down to kick off both sandals. I couldn't think about him now. The fear of what my sisters might be sending after

me lent wings to my bare feet as I began to run again, but the boy's face stayed in my mind. *Khai*, I thought, the memory of that kind smile somehow lending me courage.

His name is Khai.

I whispered it out loud to myself.

'Khai.'

It meant 'royal scribe', and that seemed like a good omen, somehow. Scribes and scholars had always been my friends.

And this particular Khai came from my favourite place in the world, the Great Library. Maybe my goddess was finally listening. Maybe she had sent him to me as a sign.

Suddenly colliding with him seemed like a small luck talisman to hold onto. My sorrowful heart beat more strongly, urging me onwards, and I sent a quick thank you thought his way, though I was painfully sure I'd never see him again.

The women's quarters were eerily deserted and silent for the time of night. There were no sounds of laughter and gossip, no welcoming open doors, no familiar smell of patchouli, sweet honey cakes and damp, oily kohl pots wafting out on the evening breezes. The tall, ochre-painted corridors were empty and silent with menace.

Something was wrong. I slowed to a halt, panting. Suddenly the air around me felt thick with danger and the small hairs on the back of my neck rose. I'd learned to take notice of that warning instinct since before I could remember.

So I tiptoed forward cautiously, peering round each corner as I went. The marble felt smooth and cool under my sweaty bare feet, which made small sucking noises at every step as the floor tried to cling onto them. I was right to be wary. Outside the highly decorated door to my rooms stood two massive Nubian guards, white uniform kilts perfectly aligned at knee level, holding spears whose sharp silvery tips looked as though they meant business. The new and shiny silver amulet of foul Am-Heh round their thick necks made me bite my lip hard, but I couldn't stop a tiny gasp escaping. Were matters in the palace worse than I'd thought? Were my sisters openly worshipping the demon god of the fiery lake now? Were they truly turning their backs on Horus and Isis and Ra and favouring the Devourer of Souls? If they were, then the true gods would be very angry. The whole of Egypt might be in danger, not to mention the house of Ptolemy and the Double Throne.

Whatever the truth was, the two of them had definitely worked fast. They must have instructed their pet

mercenaries even before the drums for my mother's deathwatch sounded. No wonder Tryphena had looked so smug. Slowly, trying not to make another whisper of sound or let them see me, I edged my head backwards, my heart battering against the prison bars of my ribs so hard that I felt sure they must hear. But I wasn't slow or careful enough. The guards' heads both went up like desert sighthounds at the minuscule flicker of movement, and without a word they stalked forward in unison, spears lowered, silent killers on the hunt for their prey.

Me.

I whirled and ran from them, bare feet slipping and slithering as I fled down the corridor and away. My only advantage was that I knew every twist and turn of the women's quarters, every door, every column, every alcove, and they didn't. My heart fluttered and beat frantically, trying to flap its way out of my chest as I skidded left, right, left again, trying to confuse them. Their legs were so much longer than mine – I had to keep ahead, had to. I didn't dare look behind me. The sound of heavy sandals pounded over the floors, echoing off the walls, telling me I was doomed, lost, dead.

No! I thought fiercely, my earlier anger at my goddess blooming within me again. No! I know I wasn't born to die like this. I refuse! You'll see, Isis, if you won't save me,

I'll save myself! But they were empty words, and I knew it. My breath was coming in desperate gasps now, air clotting and clogging my lungs as if it was an enemy. Dark spots had begun to cloud my eyes, when I saw the damp, mottled column that marked the entry to the ancient water cisterns and the underground slave passages that ran alongside them. It was a big risk, but it was the only chance I had now. I ducked behind it, hoping the running guards were still one corner behind, hoping they wouldn't see me, hoping they didn't know the passages existed in this part of the palace. This was it. I had no more left in me. I threw myself inside the hidden entrance and slid down the rough clay wall behind the column, burying my face in my own armpit, biting the cloth of my robe, trying to muffle the gasping sounds that came from me no matter how hard I tried to control them. I smelt of stale fear and panic even to myself. The sound of sandals was almost on me now, and I tensed my whole body, willing them onwards, willing them to be blind and deaf and stupid, willing myself small and invisible, praying once more to my deaf and silent goddess, asking her to grant me the one small piece of luck I needed to survive.

Whether she did or not, I'll never know, but the guards kept on going. I knew I had only minutes to get

away before they realised they'd lost me and retraced their steps. I opened my eyes and forced my brain to think, forced my trembling legs to stand up and move into the dim darkness of the tunnel.

Had the guards killed Charm already? Or taken her? She'd never desert me – I knew that – so she must still be in my rooms. She must. I had nothing in me to vomit up, but I felt bitter, stinging bile burn the back of my throat at the thought of losing her as well. Oh, why hadn't we made a back up plan? Why hadn't I asked her to meet me at the docks? With only the thought of her to cling to as comfort, I had to stuff down my panic. The belief that she was alive was all that was keeping me going, and that meant I'd have to get into my rooms and rescue her. But how?

Please, Isis, help me. You've got my mother now. Don't take Charm away too. Please! I prayed again. A soft breath of air touched me, caressed my cheek like a finger. It smelt of sand and the memory of wild desert places. Suddenly I was seven again, feeling the thrill of excitement as Charm led me through the secret slave passages, squeezing at intervals past the cool rounded bellies of the massive underground stone cisterns which supplied all the water for the palace. We'd stuffed our hands in our mouths to stifle giggles as we sneaked up steps and into

dusty closets to spy on Tryphena and Berenice in their chambers, and hidden behind pillars to see my father dispensing justice from his throne.

With a small shiver, I also felt the claustrophobia, the sense of stifling air and the endless fear of being caught and punished – except that this time the punishment wouldn't be a beating. It would be death. I searched through those old memories urgently. Which way had we gone? Could I even find the way back to my rooms without Charm as my guide? I didn't have any choice. I'd have to try.

I tiptoed forward carefully, slowly, looking back over my shoulder at the smallest sound, dreading the slap of sandals. Even I, young and child-short as I was then, had to stoop in the cramped, damp earth-smelling spaces, and the foul smoke-reek of the widely spaced lamps made my eyes sting, even as I welcomed their faint light. Over and over again I took a wrong turn in the dimness and had to retrace my steps, feeling more lost and alone every time. Once I heard male voices in the distance, making me freeze like a startled mouse, ears straining towards the sound, fearing that my sisters' guards were finally on my trail. By a miracle I met no one, though, and some homing instinct, whether it was my childhood memories or something else, led me true. When I eventually

recognised the flight of steps up to my own quarters and saw that there were no guards waiting for me, I raised my palms and thanked Isis for keeping me safe, just in case she actually had. It never hurts to be polite to a goddess.

The slaves' doorway to my rooms was nothing like the painted and ornately carved main entrance. It was far humbler, just a narrow opening of crumbling clay bricks leading into a small, dark closet whose shelves were piled high with too-small robes and worn sandals. It smelt of dust, musty linen and old leather. I could see a shimmer of light ahead of me, and I crept inside, once more holding my breath and taking care not to knock anything over. I poked just my big nose and one eye round the edge of the door into my bedroom. My legs were trembling again, and I reached out, grabbing onto the smooth, cool marble for support. I couldn't see any guards, so I slipped inside, ducking low, just in case.

'Charm!' I whispered, using only a tiny breath of sound. 'Charm! Are you there? It's me, Cleo. We have to go!' There was no answer, and my eyes flickered round the room again, frantic with fear. Was she lying in a pool of blood somewhere, unable to answer? But then I heard a tiny, muffled noise from inside the painted chest behind my dressing screen, which usually held bed linens. The lid creaked open a crack, and a small, brown hand

emerged, then another, and then a head covered in tight, black curls. Charm's eyes were huge, dark pools as she slithered out, and laid the lid silently against the wall. Her skin was the ashy colour of dried mud, streaked with fear and tears and I wanted to run to her, to hug her to me tight and never let go. But I knew I mustn't. There wasn't time. I put my finger to my lips and beckoned her towards me. She shook her head, though, and knelt down again, fumbling with something inside the chest till I nearly exploded with the effort of not shouting at her to hurry. The seconds dripped by as I waited, terrified, for the guards to come back and hear something, to burst through the doors and catch us, but slowly, inch by silent inch, she dragged out two bundles wrapped in rough linen. Picking them up, she came to me, her bare feet soft and noiseless. And then, finally, we ran back into the slave passages as if Am-Heh the Devourer himself were at our heels.

The Great Harbour was loud with bustle and noise, even this late at night. It was the hot Shemu season, in the month of Payni, when men preferred to work in the cooler darkness. There were ships unloading goods from near and far, and the reflected light of the distant Pharos flared and shone over it, making shadows dance

like black ghosts. Lines of slaves snaked down every gangplank, carrying reed baskets of wheat and walnuts, piles of raw fleeces and huge clay amphorae of wine towards row upon row of patient donkeys and supercilious camels. The air smelled faintly of mint, fresh coriander and other herbs brought in from the countryside, but the main odour was of unwashed bodies, animal dung and the eternal, unmistakably familiar brackish scent of the Nile Delta at harvest time. No one took a second glance at two young girls with bundles on their backs. Why should they? It was a common enough sight.

I shifted my burden and looked around, feeling the rough cloth of my tunic scrape against my skin. My unbound hair felt lank and sticky and unwashed in the heat, my face was still stiff with the dried salt of my tears, and my feet were bruised from the stone of the streets. I wasn't used to this. Princesses didn't go barefoot or in disguise – not unless they were escaping from Evil Sow sisters and certain death, anyway. I bit at my thumbnails, feeling the skin beside them rip and tear. I was trying to stop doing it, but the small pain of the familiar bad habit distracted me from my greater fears.

'Where's our barge, Charm? What if it isn't here? What if they've already left?'

‘It was tied up over there,’ she answered, pointing down the docks. ‘I checked twice this morning, and one of the other slaves told me it was due to be emptied out just after sunset and leaving upriver for Saïs at first light.’ She craned her neck and stood on tiptoe, trying to see over the crowds. ‘That’s it – the one with the bare decks. Apparently the captain is very greedy, and he’ll take a bribe without asking too many questions. They say he’s also very superstitious, which might help us.’

I craned my neck too, but I couldn’t see anything. I was too small, and my bundle was too heavy. Suddenly I shrank down, as a squad of soldiers marched past. Could they be looking for us already? Charm put out a comforting hand and squeezed my shoulder.

‘Don’t worry, Cleo. They’re just the normal harbour guards – they patrol all the time. You don’t have to worry unless we see the palace lot. Your sisters, curse their names, won’t let out the family secrets to ordinary soldiers, you can be sure of that.’

I knew she was right, but suddenly everything I’d been through already that day crashed in on me, and I caught my breath on a sob. Charm pulled me close.

‘You can’t cry, Cleo, not now,’ she hissed, giving me a tiny shake. ‘We have to get on that barge and away from here. You can’t draw attention to us!’ She pulled me

along behind her, dodging and weaving through the busy throng as if she was an eel. And there it was. The barge that would take us away from here, upriver to safety, away to the priestesses of the House of Isis at Saïs, where I hoped my sisters held no sway. That was as far ahead as I could think for the moment. All we had to do now was find an opportunity to sneak aboard without being spotted.

It soon came. As a pushing and shoving fight broke out between two roaring, spitting camels in a narrow alleyway, we took our chance and scurried up the gangplank while the only two crewmen left on board turned away to laugh at the violent animal brawl. Dropping to our knees so as not to be seen, we crawled hurriedly towards the only obvious spot to hide – an untidy pile of sail at the foot of the mast – and pulled it over ourselves. The thick linen smelt of mouldy flax and muddy river water, but I was so tired that I didn't care. I fell asleep almost at once, my head pillowed on Charm's belly, holding her hand as if it was the last safe place left in the world.