

The Music of The Night

by cabepfir

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Chapter 1 of 1

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They meet in the dungeons of the palace, usually, where he has his laboratory to brew philtres and draughts. Cures to their friends, poisons to their enemies.

There is a lake to cross, before reaching his chambers. He ferries her to the other shore, and all the while he sings.

For her brother, he prepares potions and strategies. They spend many hours in the throne room, maps and army models spread in front of them. The slave teaches her brother the tactics they use in his home country, Rome. They are good soldiers, the Romans.

For her, the slave sings. He has a pleasing voice, the Roman, as melodious and rich as wine. She doesn't think this is a usual characteristic of Romans either.

He sings because she asks. She always asks. He takes her to bed because she asks that, as well.

For her brother, the king, the slave makes war. For her, the princess, he makes love.

She doesn't know if he does it only because he is commanded, or because he likes it. No one can tell what the slave really thinks. He is impenetrable.

And that is good, for if their enemies were to catch him, they will never make him confess what he does for the Pharaoh, or for his sister.

Not that he behaves like a slave in other respects. His tongue is sharp and he doesn't spare rebukes, if that were the case. Her brother allows that; he says that the slave's temper amuses him. He's a Roman, he says, and they grow up on the mountains, where the soil is hard to plough, and you have to grow up tough or die.

He is not used to the southern softness, her brother says. In Egypt, the ruler is the sun, and people don't resist its power. Actions are slower, and the hours pass lazy and idle.

The foreigner claims that too much sun disturbs him, that it makes him sleepy. Therefore, he asked for his room to be in the dungeons. The Pharaoh conceded it because the slave is precious, and he needs him alert for any eventuality.

The slave prefers the night and the shadows. She prefers the lazy afternoons when other slaves would fan her with peacock's tails while she nibbles grapes from golden plates. She used to wake up at noon and lay on a triclinium for the rest of the day. Although she adheres to the relaxed timetables of the royal palace, she is not completely indolent. Teachers come to her, and she listens to them attentively. She studies arithmetic, astronomy, and poetry. She can speak eight languages: Egyptian, Greek, Latin, Persian, Libyan, Syrian, Sanskrit and Aramaic. And she has just started learning magic.

The princess and the slave meet at midnight. The Pharaoh doesn't know. After all, he will have to marry his sister one day. It wouldn't be good for him to know that she takes her pleasure from a slave. A Roman.

The foreigner is a wizard, as well. His magic bewitches her mind and ensnares her senses. She drinks from his powers as a thirsty man from a fountain.

When he sings for her, he is the prince and she the slave at his mercy.

He sings of the blue depths of the Mediterranean, of betrayed hopes, of the lures of power. He hardly ever sings, or speaks of love. Everything between them is unsaid, but for the rituals of the body and of enjoyment. Nobody could tell a daughter of Isis that they love her, in any case.

He may be a Roman, but looks like an Egyptian. His skin is olive, and his hair and eyes are as black as the Nile's waters by night. Only his nose is large and crooked, much like the one of the Roman dictator. His hands can be as strong as iron or as silky as the thin cloth she wears, hiding nothing. His voice runs through her veins like lava. She is inebriated by the foreigner, as she would be from one of his concoctions.

The king and his slave leave for the war. They return months later, victorious. The king rewards his strategist above all others. Gold, fine linens, illuminated papyrus, precious ingredients for his potions. The slave tries to refuse the gifts, but they are bestowed upon him all the same.

The other counsellors to the king begin to murmur against the slave. They suspect him of being a Roman spy, of plotting against the kingdom of Ra.

There is a pact between Egypt and Rome. Egyptian wheat in exchange for non-belligerency. But only few gullible believe it can last. In fact, everyone knows that Romans are untrustworthy and warmongers.

One day, one of the Ministers is found dead in the dungeons. Poisoned. The slave is arrested; he stands accused of making an attempt on the life of the divine Ra himself. The price for treason is death.

Her brother, the Pharaoh, is clement. He spares the slave's life because of his past service. The slave is stripped of his precious gifts and sold again. A galley takes him away, whether to the Gymnesiae or the Cyclades she does not know.

For a whole year, she doesn't see him. The sun has turned cold, the grapes sour. Nobody sings for her now. There is no music to keep her company, but the tap of her own steps echoing among the columned passages of the palace.

When she feels lonely, she goes down to the dungeons and crosses the lake on the little boat. The new court wizard, a Maccabeus, has set his apartments in the solarium. He searches the sky and provides horoscopes and auspices. He is not interested in potions and infuses. The slave's old laboratory is left untouched. At night, the princess goes there and roams among the alembics. She brews soporifics. What she would like to obtain is a potion that tastes of his skin, of his magic, of his voice. She fails, every time, inevitably.

The day comes when she will marry her younger brother, the king. The ceremony will last seven hours, and seven thousand will be their guests. The work in the kitchens never stops. Gifts arrive from all over Egypt and the Mediterranean. From Rome, too.

The great hall shines in gold and enamel, and the porphyry statues of the gods watch her as she draws near the altar, carried by ten slaves in a sedan chair wrought in gold and gems. Her eyelids are heavy with lapis lazuli powder, and a layer of smashed rubies makes her cheeks glittery.

Under her make-up, her face is white and expressionless.

Her brother has just turned seventeen. It's time for him to have an heir, a son of Isis and Osiris. She was educated for that, but she doesn't know how she can open her legs for him. Nobody has touched her after the slave.

Priests say the words and she is married. Nobody asked her opinion on the matter.

Her brother raises a jewelled hand and strokes her cheek, eager to kiss her. This is the point of no return. The world becomes dark.

Literally.

A veil of darkness clouds the golden ceiling; the sparkle of jewels dims out. The seven thousand guests stay frozen in their seats, as if time had stopped for them. She is the only one still able to move and breathe.

No, there is another person who can.

A man walks toward her from the bottom of the hall, unhurriedly.

"Forgive me for the delay," the slave says. "I was detained."

"You are not welcome in the kingdom of Ra," she says, trembling. "You are a spy and a traitor, slave."

He waves his left forearm in the distance. The bracelet of slavery has gone. "I was a slave. I bought back my freedom," he replies.

"Slave or not, you force me to keep you as a prisoner, not like a guest. You are a murderer."

"Do you really believe it?" he asks softly, and she gnaws her lip. "I did not kill the Minister. He went too far in his attempts to frame me. He stole the poison, and he died of it, believing it was nectar."

"You labelled all the vials in your storeroom with misleading name tags. I saw it with my very eyes. Maybe you did that on purpose."

"I had to protect myself," he justifies. "Or I would die of their envy."

He begins to climb the few steps that lead to the altar. She clenches her fists.

"You are a liar."

"I never lied about you and me," he states calmly. "I came back to serve you. Now, do you want to follow me?"

"To go where? I am a daughter of Isis; I cannot leave my place."

Another step. "Come with me to the kingdom of the night. You won't have to leave your country, or even this palace. We will live in the dungeons, and enchant the lake so that nobody can reach us."

She looks away from him. The crown of Egypt on her head sways as she turns her head, as unsafe as the role it represents.

"Come with me, daughter of Isis, and you will rule over the night as Isis does."

"You ask me to rebel against my own people, to ally with an enemy of my country," she scowls.

"Rome always wins," he remarks. "In a short time, this country will become Roman in any case."

She looks at the whole court of Egypt gathered in the hall and then at her brother, frozen at her side. She thinks of being pregnant with his children, and she shudders.

"Come to me, princess of music, and I'll teach you how to bottle fame and brew glory."

"In a dungeon? A daughter of Egypt does not live in a dungeon before her time," she replies in a clear voice, and she steps back because he is getting closer, and she knows she will be lost if he ever gets to touch her.

"To Rome, then," sighs the slave who is a slave no more, grabbing her hand. He slips off the ring her brother put on her finger and tosses it away. "Come to be a princess in my fatherland."

"Rome has no princes." She chokes because the touch of his fingers ignites a fire in her skin. "It has only a dictator."

"I had been a slave in Rome for nineteen years when I was bought by the Pharaoh's attendant. However, I was once a prince in my homeland, in Albion. Help me to win back my throne," he proffers.

"Albion?" Albion is but a little island in the Northern seas where men wear furs and it always rains. It's a primitive, barbaric land that cost the Romans a lot of fruitless efforts.

Unexpectedly, the daughter of Isis is interested.

"You will fight with me, my princess. Leave this idle life behind, and you'll feel free."

A call for battle? In Egypt lies her duty, but there is something else she deeply feels inclined to bravery and fighting against the oppressors and fixing wrongs.

What if, in the fresh and shady palace over the Nile, she represents the oppressor?

What if she has been so numbed by her role that she overlooked giving him freedom herself when she could?

What if he is lying?

She allows her fingers to close around his palm, and she relishes the old sensuality of his magic.

He takes one last step closer. Her cheeks flush purple from the heat surging in her body. He bends his head next to her ear, and she stops breathing. When she starts again, she inhales deeply his scent, so deeply it leaves her light-headed.

"I heard a prophecy." His breath sets flames to her neck. "Isis and the Thame will marry, and a descendant of Isis will reign on Albion's throne, one day, and she will be such a just sovereign to be called 'that part of Justice, which is Equity'. Rome always wins, but even it will fall, eventually."

She is tempted. She doesn't believe in oracles or prophecies. The new court wizard, the Maccabeus, has always managed to bore her with his predictions. But there's a new possibility that dawns over her from the foreigner's words.

"You will sing for me," she orders, trying to reassert the empty fact that she is the mistress and he is the servant.

He lifts her chin and forces her to look at him. As always, a force within his eyes drags her inside, flashing like the lighthouse of Alexandria does through the night to guide sailors. Her wrists melt, and she feels herself surrendering, once more, to his charms.

As soon as he presses his lips to hers, they Disapparate from the great hall. The Pharaoh and the noblemen can stir and breathe out again. The princess is nowhere to be found.

She will miss the sun, she knows, and the grapes. The lakes she crosses now are frozen in winter, and unknown beasts lurk in the forests. But there is this whole land to free, new and unexplored, that begins to replace her cloistered palace over the Nile. And there is music in her ears every night, so she can't really regret what she has done. The music of the night runs through her and proclaims her a queen.

A/N: This was written for Anubisankh for the 2011 SS/HG Exchange with great help from my alpha Pink Raccoon and my beta Valady. Thank you, ladies! Thanks also to Clairvoyant for the additional corrections.

The original fic prompt was: "A tale that takes place primarily in ancient Egypt. Hermione is the sister of the Pharaoh, who dotes upon her and encourages her to tap into her magical potential. The king is a powerful wizard himself and is smart despite his odd behavior and personality. Severus is the king's most trusted advisor and a powerful wizard, though he was originally born in Rome (and brought to Egypt as a slave). A foreign-born taking interest in the princess (and approved of by the king) naturally creates trouble of some kind." The original art prompt was: "A scene between Hermione and Snape that is to the sensual tune and feel of "The Music of the Night" from *Phantom of the Opera*."

The queen, descendent of Isis, who shall be "that part of Justice, which is Equity" is Elizabeth I, according to Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, V, VII, 3. For more about it please see especially René Graziani, "Elizabeth at Isis Church", *PMLA*, 79.4 (1964), pp. 376-389. The marriage of the Thame and Isis (actually Thames above Oxford) gave birth to river Thames (*Faerie Queene*, IV, IX, 24).

"Force me to keep you as a prisoner, not like a guest": *A Winter's Tale*, I, ii, 51-52 (Hermione speaking).