

Chapter Two



Jerusalem, House of Joram

Same day, early evening

Zara

Zara held a bronze mirror and watched Reah edge her eyes with kohl. “Joram has misused me. I am dead to him. It is as if he has murdered me and left me abandoned in the road.”

“I hear your desperate loneliness.” Reah colored Zara’s lids with malachite dust. “This soft green dust sets off the amber of your eyes. And I purchased this new cream made from berries and rose petals to stain your lips the red of dawn.”

“You are truly a gifted *cosmetae*. Many of the Roman women in Jerusalem vie to buy you from me for your makeup skills alone.”

Reah drew in a quick breath and dropped the lip brush.

Zara turned to face her handmaid’s watery eyes and trembling hands.

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“Would my lady like to add sparkle with the powder made from silver fish scales?”

Zara took Reah’s hand. “Surely, you know I would never sell you, no matter the price. Now let us try the sparkle powder on my cheeks and neck.”

Bonggg ... Bonggg ...

“The call of the gong. The private banquet awaits.” Reah applied the glint and blew gently across Zara’s face, clearing any loose powder. “I must finish.” Rhea took the cherished bejewelled comb from its secret drawer and drew Zara’s hair back. “My lady is ravishing. Now you must go.”

“Let the men wait for me. Did not your *ima* teach me the enchanting power of a lady’s entrance?”

“You remember my mother’s lessons well.” Reah smiled at the hint of their shared secrets. “I will go to the kitchen and present myself for service at supper.” She scurried from the room.

The sound of Reah’s mouselike pitter-patter made Zara smile. But she would not scurry. She moved along the portico like a lioness on the prowl. Her stride lengthened, becoming more graceful, more fluid, more feline. She neared the wide archway that led into the triclinium where the banquet was laid. Both Joram and Auri’s voices drifted to her, but she could not discern the content of their conversation. She slipped between the two massive pillars that bolstered the dining room arch and posed—the statue of a patrician woman.

Both men gradually sensed her presence and looked at her. A silence hovered over them. An expectant silence.

Zara captured their gaze and glided forward to the three-sided banquet table and reclining couches. The center section was laden with food, ready for the slaves to fulfill the requests of the guests.

Joram occupied the left table, positioned so he could see

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both couches across from him. He motioned her to one of the couches.

Zara stole a glance toward the couch next to her, but her view of Auri was blocked by Reah filling his wine cup. Other servants travelled the central aisle, filling silver platters and golden plates.

Reah hurried to help Zara drape her robes elegantly across the couch and gracefully recline.

Zara met Auri's eyes and suppressed a gasp. She had never expected to be looking directly upon his face. From a distance, she had always thought his eyes were deep blue, but in the golden hour sunlight, they flashed blue flecked with green.

For a moment, Zara could not make sense of the arrangement of the reclining couches. She studied Auri's couch. Joram had positioned his slave to recline on his right side, forcing him to use his left hand to eat. Zara and Auri were reclined face-to-face, eyes-to-eyes. Their couches were so close, so intimate, she wondered if Auri could hear her heart flail like a songbird trapped in a cage.

"Wife, you seem perplexed."

Another ambush from her cunning and cruel husband. He must suspect her feelings for Auri. He was tormenting her. Testing her.

"Husband, it is my mistake. Auri is reclining on his right side." She dismissed the servants with a wave and watched them leave. "Forgive me, I did not oversee the new servant who placed Auri's couch."

"There was no mistake. I ordered the reclining couch set so that Auri faced left."

Zara's anger sparked. She must choose her words, but she would not leave Auri's honor undefended. "Surely you did not mean to suggest that your faithful and prize-worthy slave is sinister—left-handed—untrustworthy."

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Joram stood. “No, by Zeus.” He sneered toward Auri. “If he ever betrayed me, he would find himself in the arena fighting fierce gladiators, not in the hippodrome racing a four-horse quadriga.”

Auri smiled the steady, subdued smile of a man who never concerns himself with foolishness. “And if I were ever to fight in the arena, my gentle lady would learn that there has been no insult. I fight with the gladius, the short sword, in my left hand. Sinister-handed gladiators have the advantage and are no more deceitful than any other men.”

“But you are a charioteer, not a gladiator.”

“Wife, surely you have not forgotten our golden slave was the son of a gladiator.”

Auri lifted his left hand, palm up. “Some may not recall that my father was left-handed. Much feared. Much revered.” Starting with the smallest finger, Auri slowly curled each inward. A gesture of homage. “My father was a slave who won his freedom in the arena. Respected for his loyalty to the hundreds of gladiators he trained.”

“Wife. No insult to our prized slave, Auri, was ever intended.”

Anger and anxiety seared Zara’s cheeks. She fisted her hands as if she could fend off her husband’s mocking tone.

Would Auri think she was a shallow woman? A woman whose mind was consumed with childish things.

Joram’s cutting words left her feeling unsure. She turned back to Auri. “How then did the son of a gladiator who gained his freedom come to be a slave charioteer?”

“It is a long tale.” Auri looked toward Joram, seeming to ask permission to continue.

Reah rushed into the room. “My lord, a runner is at the gate. His message is urgent.”

Joram gestured to a male servant. “Bring him in. But first,

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make sure he is unarmed.” Joram faced Auri. “I am sure your tale would captivate Zara, but it will have to wait.”

A gaunt, young runner scuttled to Joram’s side and whispered in his ear. A wide-eyed look of frantic panic flitted across Joram’s face, but he quickly buried it beneath a stony mask. The runner withdrew to the entry arch.

Joram rose and looked from Auri to Zara. “I am called away. Wife, I trust you will amuse our guest with all the admiration and affection he so richly deserves.”

Zara’s anger awakened the lioness within. She wanted to leap for Joram’s throat, knock him to the ground, and scratch his taunting eyes.

He reached into his robe and handed Auri a white stone. “We have drawn the Whites as our opponents in the next race.”

Auri tossed the stone from one hand to the other. “Winning will be a challenge for our Golden.” He threw the stone back to Joram. “You have seen them race. I have not. We must devise a plan.”

Joram grabbed a wedge of cheese and a round of bread. “Our banquet was meant to last many hours, so I had chambers prepared for you here. As the Fates have decreed, I am called to deal with matters that will take all night. We will meet in the late morning.”

Zara’s brazen husband dared to tempt both her and Auri to indulge their passion for each other.

Joram seemed to gaze through her—his expression devoid of any remnant of his early love.

“Husband, I know your mind wrestles with an urgent matter, but even your impeccable reputation would be sullied if you choose to leave Auri and me here alone. The gossip geese will gather in the streets, spreading slander. They may even charge us with adultery.”

A look of calculated cruelty crossed his face. “We are

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Herodian Jews. We eat in the Roman style. Our homes feature Roman design. In Rome, patrician women visit gladiators privately. I daresay some visit charioteers. Even here in Judea.”

“I am not just any woman. I am your wife.” Zara wanted to run from her humiliation. She wanted to run from her husband. But most of all, she wanted to run from the temptation of Auri’s adoration.

Joram strode forward, grabbed her cheeks, and pinched hard. “Do you think yourself beautiful enough to attract the notice of the gossips? Why would anyone ever believe that even a slave would want you?” He dropped his hands. “You disgust me.”

Disgrace cinched Zara’s chest, binding her breath. Her heart drummed a sad, slow rhythm of lost hope. Tears blurred her vision. She could not see Joram, the man she desperately wanted to escape, or Auri, the man she desperately wanted to embrace.

Zara wiped her tears and risked a glance toward Auri. Was that tenderness or pity she read in his eyes? She did not want his pity. And she would not wallow in the sinking sands of sadness.

Fire simmered in Zara’s spirit. “Six years ago, you thought I was beautiful—beautiful enough that you wanted to win me. Six years ago, you courted me, swore to love me, swore to protect me. And married me.”

“Six years ago, your father demanded a hefty bride price.” Joram grabbed her shoulders and shook her. “But your dowry was colossal. Marriage to you was an opportunity for wealth beyond my wildest imaginings.”

Auri tensed and sat up.

Zara sent him a restraining look. He must not make any move to protect her. If he were to manhandle his master, he

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would suffer a slow, torturous end. She would not be the cause of Auri's death.

The messenger returned to Joram's side. "Please, sir, my master cannot wait."

Joram shoved Zara back onto the reclining couch and rushed after the runner.

She sat, straightened her tunic, and gazed at Auri. It was not a slave's place to speak first. "Joram's heart has been poisoned. Poisoned with the love of money. And that love of money has supplanted his love for me."

"I am sorry, my lady. The love of money has seduced Joram to risk wagers that teeter on the brink of madness." Auri's tone seemed to brim with understanding and afforded her comfort.

She studied his face. As with any great warrior, Auri's face was most often a mask. His thoughts and feelings hidden. But now he looked at her with an open gentleness she had never seen. He seemed to read her heart.

Zara met his eyes with questions of her own. Did he care for her? Did he want her?

Auri leapt up and sat on the reclining couch at her feet. "My lady, you are deserving of a gentle man. I have witnessed Joram bruise you with words, but never before have I seen him grip you with his hands. Only a coward would harm a woman. My father's tribe held women in high regard."

"You must never challenge Joram. He would have you crucified."

"Joram would gain no gold by my crucifixion. Instead, he would sponsor a preposterous match in the arena. One that would pique the bloodlust of a crowd. Spectators would come from afar to place wagers and watch Auriga Maximus—champion charioteer and son of their famed gladiator—fight to the death."

"How would your death serve Joram?"

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“In secret, he would wager vast sums against me.”

Zara moved closer to Auri. “You were so quick to state your fate.”

“Joram threatens me with the arena if I raise the slightest protest. Until now, his promises of shared victor’s purses have secured my submission to his schemes.” Auri covered her hand with his.

At Auri’s touch, pinprick shivers ran up Zara’s arms.

He gazed at her with a look that drew her deep into the sea of his blue eyes. Zara turned her hand over and let Auri’s hand softly settle into her palm.

Could it be that Auri had read her wayward longings? She gazed through the entry arch. Like the sun setting behind the Temple roof, tonight any ember of love for her husband had been snuffed out. Her feelings for Joram were as cold as mountain snow.

Could it be she had captured Auri’s heart as he had won hers? “Call me Zara.”

“I dare not.”

“Come, we are alone, and I would hear my name on your lips.” She lifted Auri’s strong, callused hand between her slender, smooth palms. “Look at me. Read my eyes.”

Auri leaned close and studied her face. He did not flinch at the sight of her cat eye. He stroked her cheek, touched her lips. “Forgive my trespass ... Zara.”

She ran her fingers through his hair. “Auri, you must know. I would forgive you anything.”