

Chapter Three



House of Joram
Same day, after sunset

Zara

Zara stared at the emerging stars from the portico of her sleeping chamber. “I left the banquet and Auri more than an hour past, yet my thoughts are still consumed with him.”

Reah placed a basin on the table and dropped rose petals into the water. “If your *abba* knew about your desire for Auriga, he would leap from his grave to keep you from this appalling sin.”

Zara’s mind and heart were divided, but she could not help but wonder what ripples her choices this night would create. She walked inside and sat on the stone window ledge near Reah. “If my father, my *abba*, knew of my plight, he would demand a divorce and redeem his daughter from her abject loneliness.”

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“He never intended for you to suffer at Joram’s hand.”

“My *abba* could not have known Joram’s love would turn cold.” She took the comb from her hair and returned it to the secret drawer. “Where is Auri now?”

“He has gone to our Roman bath, where Joram’s slave attends him. Auri will sleep in the chamber your husband ordered for him. A chamber next to this one.”

Zara placed her palms against her burning cheeks to cool the scarlet flush she knew had spread across her face.

Reah looked toward the far panelled wall. “Does Auri know of the secret door that connects his chamber with yours?”

“No. But it taunts me.” If Auri knew of the door, would he come to her? Would his passion conquer his caution?

Reah dipped a cloth in the rosewater and took Zara’s hand.

Zara pulled it away. “I do not want to lose the lingering touch of Auri’s hand covering mine.”

“Where the mind goes, the heart begs to follow.”

“Where did you hear such wisdom?”

“When we journeyed to Galilee, a handmaid and I secretly slipped away to a hillside. There, Yeshua of Nazareth taught those gathered that anyone who looks on a woman with lust commits adultery in his heart.”

“Why should we heed the words of a mere teacher?”

“This rabbi is a worker of wonders. Many believe He is a prophet. Some say He is The Baptizer returned to life. Others hope He is the long-awaited Messiah.”

Zara shook her head. “The wonders He works are beyond belief. Many call Him a conjurer, a magician, even a sorcerer.”

“But I have seen Him heal with my own eyes. Seen the blind gain sight, seen the crippled rise and walk.” Reah knelt in front of Zara, her hands lifted, her face aglow. “Yeshua’s power must come from HaShem.”

“Is it not more likely He is a charlatan? A master of deceit?”

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“He healed the sight of a man known by all to be blind since birth. He is no charlatan. There was no deceit.”

Zara waved Reah away and stood. “Enough talk of this Yeshua.”

“Yes, my lady, I will be still, but another question tugs at me. You know women throw themselves at the feet of Auriga Maximus. Do you believe this man truly loves you?”

Zara’s heart flipped like a racing chariot cut off by a rival team. “I do not know. When Joram wooed me, he told me that with every couple, one is the Lover who seeks to please and the other is the Beloved who is content to be indulged. He claimed I was his Beloved.” Zara hugged herself and rocked from one foot to the other. “Tell me. What is love?”

“Yeshua teaches that the greatest love is the willingness to lay your life down for a friend.” Reah opened an ampule of perfume. “Would Auri die for you?”

“Again, I do not know. But I would be content to be the Lover, never the Beloved.”

“My lady, how could that kind of love ever satisfy?” Reah dabbed perfume on Zara’s wrists.

She breathed in the sweet scents. Myrrh ... rose ... and some other subtle fragrance. “I am parched for love, like a wilting flower whose roots reach for any drop of water. Only my waning sense of honor restrains me from sin. I crave the slightest kind word, gentle glance, loving touch.”

Reah lifted a silver pitcher and poured. “Perhaps a cup of warm spiced wine will ease your mind and summon sleep.” She motioned Zara to the sleeping pallet piled high with inviting pillows.

Zara settled herself and accepted the wine. The cup brushed against her lips. Lips. Three years since Joram’s lips had spoken sweetly of her. Three years since her husband’s lips warmed hers. For three long and lonely years, she had been left

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untouched, unbedded—shunned—without hope of bearing a child.

Tonight, Joram had all but offered her to Auri—whether to torment him or humble her, she did not know.

She stared at the panelled wall, longing for it to open. But sleep called to her. Her eyelids drooped and her hand faltered.

Reah took the cup from Zara and brushed her hair back from her brow. “My lady ...” Reah’s voice was soft as the whisper of a butterfly wing. “I pray you do not walk down a path that offers no way of return.”

Three days later

Zara walked across the sunlit triclinium and dropped onto her couch facing Auri at the banquet table. “Joram has not returned for three days and two nights.” Auri’s prolonged presence tempted her sorely. Only by the sheer strength of her iron will and Reah’s vigilance had she not succumbed to sin.

“Joram must be enjoying strong drink and the harlots of the hippodrome.” Auri met her eyes. “Forgive my wounding words.”

Sunset crowned Auri with fiery golden light. He resembled Belenus. The image of the Gauls’ sun god was fashioned in gold on Auri’s chariot—a face encircled by long hair and a long beard fanned out like rays of the sun.

Reah poured wine into Auri’s goblet. “This is sweet and well-watered.”

“Many thanks. I never partake of strong drink. It is foolhardy for a charioteer who intends to survive the sudden swerves of a racing chariot.”

Reah filled Zara’s goblet. “My lady, at midday, Joram’s

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servant returned here and took a treasure chest away with him.”

“My husband must be casting charmed dice. Each day, treasures have been delivered.”

“The dice may be turning against Joram.” Auri raised his cup toward Zara. “We have spent countless hours together.” He glanced toward Reah. “Always under the watchful eyes of your handmaid.”

Did Zara detect a growing impatience in Auri’s voice? Would he tire of his pursuit of her and turn to another? She had ordered Reah never to leave them alone. And since the night Auri occupied the chamber that shared a wall with hers, Rhea slept at the foot of Zara’s pallet.

Zara rested her hand on Auri’s forearm. “This morning you began to tell me of your father, the gladiator.”

“It is a long tale of suffering and sorrow. A tale I am loath to share.”

“Would you not share it with me? One who will listen with the ears of her heart?”

Auri glanced toward Reah bringing fresh fruit to the serving table. He leaned close to Zara. “My father’s story rankles my bones and rakes my mind. But I will trust it to the one woman I know would soothe my wounded soul.”

Hearing Auri confess his trust in her sent Zara’s heart skittering. She took several deep breaths but failed to coax her heart back to a steady, sedate pace. She brushed her fingers along his arm, touched the hollow of his neck, then let her hand drop into her lap. “You must not tempt me to trespass the binding covenant of marriage.” Her words honored her wedding contract, but her inviting glance, her sultry voice, her sensuous touch betrayed her dishonorable desire.

Auri picked up a dripping sweet-cake and fed her a bite. Honey ran down her chin, and he swiped it away with his

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finger and brought it to his moist lips. “Have you not tempted me beyond bearing?”

“Perchance it is you who have tempted me to the brink of the Law.”

“My father taught his gladiators—in the arena or in the battle for love—all tactics are deemed fair. No feint, no ruse, no deception is forbidden.”

Reah flashed a warning look that should have made Zara send Auri away. But she wanted nothing more than to hear his secrets and set his hardened heart free.

Zara looked back at Auri. “Reah. Leave us.”

Reah dipped a towel in water, crossed to Zara, and patted her sticky chin. “With respect, is my lady certain?”

Zara’s double-minded silence seemed to grow, take on weight that yoked her to Auri.

His eyes searched hers.

Zara read the attraction in his eyes. But there was something else. Something he guarded. Something he kept hidden.

“Reah, leave us.” Zara had devised a plan to fend off her wanton desire and temptation. Reah knew thrice she must be ordered to leave Zara and Auri utterly alone before her faithful handmaid would obey. “Go. I would hear Auriga’s tale.”

Reah’s worried look flickered with foreboding.

“Reah, fear not, all will be well.”

Even though her handmaid’s face was filled with dread, she nodded and slipped through the archway.

When Reah was well out of sight, Zara gestured for Auri to share her couch.

He joined her and reclined on his back, his head resting on his clasped hands.

Zara turned on her side, her head on her arm. “Tell me of your father.”

“Armor your heart, for this story takes courage to hear.”

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Auri's voice trailed into a sigh. "My father, chieftain of a tribe from Gaul, was captured, paraded in chains, and sold on the Roman auction block to Herod the Great. The king spared no expense to have my father trained by champion gladiators in Rome. When Herod the Great returned to Judea, he brought my father to the arena in Caesarea. There, he achieved fame and a loyal following."

"Your father won a fortune for Herod as you have for Joram."

"I also race to win for you."

The sensual rasp in Auri's voice flustered Zara.

"One day, after a thrilling gladiator match, the adoring, riotous crowd demanded my father be set free. In exchange for his freedom, my father oversaw a gladiator school and split all the winnings with Herod."

"Auri, come rest your head on my shoulder."

Auri lay his head down, put an arm around her waist, and drew her close.

"Your father was a free man, but you are a slave."

"Because my mother was a slave. When Herod the Great died, I became part of the inheritance passed down to his son, Herod Antipas. My father vowed to my mother, when she died at my birth, that he would keep me from the fate of a gladiator." Auri's tone dulled, and his voice hitched as if overcome with unspoken sadness. "Ask me nothing more. If I am to finish, I must tell this tale without pause."

Zara traced the contours of his strong arm, then let her hand come to rest.

"Once my father amassed a fortune, he went to Herod Antipas to buy my freedom. The Old Fox had me brought before him. Though my life had only spanned twelve wheat harvests, I was already a giant of a man. Antipas refused to redeem me for even double the gold. He was sure crowds

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would flock to see the son of their champion gladiator win crowns in the arena. I will never forget the look of loathing on my father's face."

Zara wanted to stop her ears, but Auri needed her to hear his tortured past.

Auri sat up and turned to her. "I faced a future where the spectre of Death hovered over my head."

Auri hated Herod Antipas with good reason. Zara must never share that her father had once been a steward for Herod Antipas in Jericho.

Zara rose and took his arm. "Come into the garden with me. The flowers, the birds, and the sunlight will give you peace." She led him under the arch and out onto the garden path.

"My father argued that it would be years before I could fight and my victories in the arena were not sure. Antipas stroked his beard, then asked if my father had a proposal."

Walking the path seemed to offer no peace. Auri continued his story with the same single-minded fervor.

"My father told Herod to promote a series of contests. He would come out of retirement and fight the three best gladiators in Judea. Herod would keep the winnings as payment for my freedom."

After the span of several breaths, Auri stopped and turned to her, his face filled with revulsion. "In order to attract the largest crowds and the highest wagers, Herod said the matches must be fought to the death."

Zara shivered at the thought of what horror she might next hear. She led Auri down a path that would lead them farther away from the house to make sure he was not overheard.

"My father's face darkened like the visage of an angry god. He told Herod he refused to kill gladiators he had trained. Herod finally relented, proclaiming that the first two matches

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would not be to the death. But the third would be fought against a champion gladiator brought in from Rome, one my father did not know. And that pairing would be a fight to the death.”

Zara pressed her lips together so she would not cry out. Herod’s cruel scheme echoed the threats Joram had made to her Auri. She should not have been astounded. Joram was Herod’s kinsman, both by bloodline and shared depravity.

“My father clutched the Belenus amulet around his neck. He pleaded to his sun god for protection in the arena. Then Herod laughed, the howling bark of a jackal. I will never forget that predatory laugh, the one that sealed my father’s fate. And mine. He said that my father had not heard all his terms.”

Auri stopped walking and met Zara’s eyes. “And I will never forget, nor forgive, what Herod said next. That I would never be freed, but he would take payment to keep me from ever fighting in an arena.”

Auri reached up and withdrew an amulet from the neck of his tunic, handling it with great reverence. “I feared that my father would strangle Herod. But thankfully, my father tamed his temper and knelt in total submission.”

Auri turned to Zara, his face an ever-shifting storm of emotion. His eyes dimmed as if he no longer saw her but stood with his father before Herod in an all-too-vivid past. “In that moment, I came to understand. A man—even an honorable man—must, at times, suffer humiliation to survive.”

“Humiliation is an ever-present stone under my foot, one that stabs me with every step.” Zara linked her arm in his and walked with him back into the triclinium. He sat at the foot of her couch. Zara sat beside him and moved so close that her knees grazed Auri’s thigh.

“Herod plotted to use me to increase his fortune, so he sent

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me to the hippodrome to train as a charioteer. I was trained by champions from the Circus Maximus in Rome.”

Auri met her eyes. “I was so young, so ignorant. My heart swelled with pride at the chance to become a famous charioteer. I gave no thought to the dangers of the hippodrome.”

He retreated into an anguished silence. A silence teeming with sorrow.

Zara reclined, calling for him with open arms. He settled next to her and pulled her into his chest. She could feel him try to smother his sobs.

After what seemed a night and a day, Auri shifted and faced her. “My father won the first two matches. The third lasted for hours, sapping his strength. He died, that I might live.”

Auri’s rough whisper sounded like a voice from the grave.

“The willing sacrifice of a loving father.” Zara stroked Auri’s brow. “The greatest love one can offer is to lay down your life for another.”

“My life was redeemed at a great price. I will never let my father’s sacrifice be in vain. Each time I am slotted to race, I remember him. My preparation for a race exceeds that of any other charioteer. Whether racing in the hippodrome or walking the road of my life, at every turn, I will always choose the path of survival. No matter the humiliation, no matter the cost to my honor.”

An unexpected chill wrapped its fingers around Zara’s heart. A chill as cold as lost love. A chill as cold as death.