



After the Siege of Syracuse
ALEXANDRA GOWLING



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Alexandria, 156 BCE

In front of the old man, two scrolls lie unrolled on a desk. To his left is a new work, precise letters flowing across the papyrus in sharply inked lines. On his right is a brittle, tattered scroll covered in a faded script that scuttles unevenly like marching ants. The old man hunches over them, two long forefingers hovering while his head swivels back and forth. His uppermost thoughts are focused on the words running across the page and through his mind, where line repeats line as he checks the new against the old. Under that, though, is the unarticulated but familiar feeling that he should not be using the old scroll.

For forty years, he has used this scroll to check the copies, and it had been used for more than twenty years before that, ever since it had arrived at the Library. By the standards of a scroll, it is vulnerable and should be carefully preserved. Yet, every time that guilty feeling rises, he quashes it by telling himself it is important that he personally check all copies against the original, because of all of Archimedes' letters to Eratosthenes, fellow genius and former chief librarian, this treatise was the most advanced. And, of course, there is the handwriting.

"Scribe Gelo?" a voice interrupts the old man's concentration. He looks up, narrowing his eyes. Despite the sun shining through the high recessed windows of the scriptorium, the Library is a little dim at this time of day. Standing in front of the table is a young scribe, a

native Egyptian. He is holding out a scroll. Recognising it, Gelo sighs.

“Yes?”

‘It’s Archimedes’ cattle problem. I’m not sure where to file it.’

Gelo ostentatiously lays his hands across the scrolls on the table.

“Where do you think it should go?”

The young man licks his lips. “In the Archimedes section?”

“Obviously. Where, however, in the Archimedes section?”

“Umm...volume? No, of course not. Mass?”

“The problem concerns the number of cows in Sicily, not how much they weigh.”

“Oh right, yes. Well, there’s mechanics, but that’s not... I’m not really sure what the other sections are.” The young scribe is now twisting the scroll around in his hands.

Gelo frowns at his casual treatment. “Geometry. But it doesn’t fit there either. So where did you find it?”

“Well, in the first box in the section, but I assumed that must be wrong.”

“It’s not wrong,” says Gelo, looking back down at his scrolls. “It goes in the front because firstly, as you have just attempted to articulate, it is difficult to classify, and secondly because there the students can go and find it for themselves.”

“Ah, of course.”

Gelo waves the young scribe away. As a simple copyist, he has never attempted to solve the great mathematician’s famous problem himself. A question without a proof, unsolved and perhaps unsolvable, it presents an irresistible call to intellectual single combat for every new scholar who enters the Library. Which is why it is filed where it can most easily be found. And returned, although that happens rather less frequently.

Gelo’s mind drifts away from his task, as it does more often these days, and he wonders. Cattle in Sicily... Were they different in Sicily?

Again, he sees wheat fields bisected by dusty roads, and he searches them for cows. Yet the fields become a city, and fire and smoke replace dust. So he blinks to clear away the past. They're probably no different from Egyptian cows.

Late afternoon sun shoots through the Library, turning the white floors orange-gold as dust motes dance in the breeze. From where Gelo is sitting, he can see almost everything that has ever been written. Visible through the archway entrance of the scriptorium is a long, high hall, where every wall is covered with shelves upon which sit thousands and thousands of papyrus scrolls, all rolled tightly and slotted into square boxes. Tiny white tags, one for each scroll, hang swaying in the gently moving air like the leaves of a grapevine. It is one-tenth of the largest collection of texts in the world. Another nine halls stretch after this one, each visible from his desk through a white marble archway in an ever-receding vista.

Overwhelming as it is upon first sight, there is an order to the Library's immensity. It had first been set down in the Pinakes, the catalogue, over one hundred years ago. Rhetoric, law, epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, history, medicine, mathematics, natural science, and miscellanies, then in alphabetical order by author. Mathematics is Gelo's area; specifically Archimedes. A great honour, it is felt, except for the filing issues.

He sighs, stretching hands gnarled with arthritis. Now the day has moved well into dinner time, and the constant murmuring of the scholars in the halls is at a low ebb. Gelo carefully rolls up the Archimedes scroll, stows it in its special cedarwood box, and then rolls up the copy. Standing with one under each arm, he walks between the heavy stone tables that crisscross the hall, careful to pick up his heels. The grandeur of the marble that sheathes every floor, wall, shelf, and column is offset by the material's ability to magnify sound, and no one likes a sandal-slapper.

As he steps out of the double doors at the exit to the mathematics

hall, he begins to walk more quickly. He passes through the massive colonnade that connects the Library to the Museion, noting the length of the shadows at his feet. A sudden loud hooting startles him, then he smiles. Even the monkeys are hungry. The Museion's zoological gardens lie at the far end of the great complex, but the noise of its inhabitants carries a long way. Sometimes Gelo takes a short stroll through the gardens at the end of the day, when the breeze blows salty and fresh from the sea, and the animals leap or prowl or crawl about as they await their dinner. But tonight, he turns left before the colonnade leads out into the gardens. His dinner is waiting for him in the long room by the Museion's kitchen where the Library's scribes take their meals, and he is late.



“The area of any circle is equal to a right-angled triangle in which one of the sides about the right angle is equal to the radius, and the other to the circumference of the circle.”

Gelo does not raise his head at the intrusion of the speaker's voice. It is issuing, as it often does, from the lecture room on the opposite side of the mathematics hall from where he sits in his scriptorium. Kaenas, one of the Museion's more uninspired experts, begins every discussion on mathematics in this way, by reading out the starting phrase of a treatise. This one, in particular, is a favourite; Archimedes' orderly prescription in *Measurement of a Circle* suits the Corinthian scholar's rather limited abilities. And then, of course, these discussions rarely step onto new ground. What new ground is there? A circle is measured by being circumscribed and inscribed by polygons of 96 sides, and there you have it. No one has improved on Archimedes yet. Should that ever happen, Gelo would pay attention.

“If a polygon be inscribed in a circle, it is plain that the perimeter

of the inscribed polygon is less than the circumference of the circle.”

Gelo shakes his head. Why is he bothering to articulate such a basic concept? With long practice, he keeps his concentration on the texts in front of him for the rest of the lecture. An hour passes before he raises his head to watch a short, grizzled figure stomping in the direction of the door that leads to the peripatos, followed by a line of young men clutching wax boards and styluses. Now, perhaps, for some peace.

One young scholar, however, steps towards the scriptorium. In the brighter light, his saffron-dyed chiton takes on a glow, while his dark eyes under an even darker head of curly hair meet Gelo’s own.

“You.” The young man has stopped in front of the table, his thick eyebrows drawing together as he looked down at Gelo.

Fingers hovering in position, Gelo replies, “Yes, sir?”

“Are you the scribe Gelo?”

“Yes, sir,” says Gelo, surprised to be asked for by name.

“Kaenas told me you were in charge of the works of Archimedes.”

Ah. Gelo’s surprise dissipates. Kaenas has fobbed off another young pretender. What will it be this time? “Among other things, yes.”

The youth’s eyes drop to look more closely at the texts. “What are you copying?”

Gelo tries to conceal his irritation. He does not enjoy being interrupted by wealthy young men who consider searching the Library’s shelves beneath them. “I am not copying. I am checking a copy.”

“Of what?”

“Archimedes’ letter on mechanics.”

“Where he demonstrates how to use the law of the lever to determine a figure’s area by using the known centre of other figures?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” says Gelo, slightly surprised.

The young man moves around the table, leaning over Gelo's right hand. "Is this Archimedes' original letter?"

Gelo resists the urge to pull the text closer to him. "Yes, we check all copies against the original. That is how we know that the Library's copies are perfectly accurate."

The young man stretches out a hand to pick up the scroll. Now Gelo does snatch it back to his chest.

"I'm sorry, sir, but only authorised people may touch the originals."

The youth raises his head, glaring. "So a scribe may hold it, but a scholar not?"

Gelo meets his glare. "The mathematics scribes may, sir, but none other. And no scholars other than the librarians themselves."

The youth makes no further move, but his hand is still extended. "And all such copies are exact, are they?"

Nonplussed, Gelo does not reply immediately. Across the world, it is known that a copy from the Library of Alexandria is virtually indistinguishable from an original. "Naturally."

"Yet no one seems to have the plans for Archimedes' machines. Where could they be, if not in his letters?"

Gelo frowns. "But we do have the plans for his machines. They lie on the shelf on the west wall of the mathematics hall: the screw for displacing water, the model of the planets, his system for raising objects too heavy for a man to lift, his mechanism for measuring distance travelled in a cart..."

"No, I mean his defence machines. The claw, the giant sling bolts."

Looking down, Gelo begins gently to roll up the original scroll, away from the youth's hovering hand. "Archimedes left no known record of those machines."

"I don't believe that." The scholar's voice grows louder. "He must have written down plans. Otherwise, how could the machines have

been built?”

Gelo glances up to see if they have captured anyone’s attention. No one appears interested. He starts to roll up the copy scroll. “That may well be true, but he did not record them as he recorded his other works. Therefore we can say he left no record.”

Scrolls rolled, Gelo stands. The youth, seeing no threat in Gelo’s bent-backed form, blocks his way. “I don’t think that’s true.”

“Perhaps,” Gelo says, “you could consult with one of the senior librarians. They may have more knowledge than me.”

The young man, finally realising it is beneath his dignity to bully a scribe, takes a step back. Gelo waits as he turns and walks away.



Gelo is back at his table the following day. His routine does not vary; most days, he moves in a pattern laid down for many years. Today his work is to check *The Sand Reckoner*, ordered from the Library by a magistrate of Tarentum. Yet as he bends once more over the scrolls, yesterday’s conversation returns to the surface of his thoughts, distracting him from the complex numbers. My task is to manage the scrolls themselves, he reminds himself, not discuss their contents. The last thing I need is to be pointed out as some kind of expert. He bends over the texts, starting again.

“...of the numbers named by me and given in the work which I sent to Zeuxippus, some exceed not only the number of the mass of sand equal in magnitude to the earth filled up in the way described, but also that of a mass equal in magnitude to the universe.”

The words roll through him, indistinguishable from his own thoughts. He falls into his long-practised meditation, and it is only when he feels thirsty that his head rises, and he blinks. It is then that

he sees the youth enter the hall.

Gelo feels the urge to duck, but that is not the way a man of seventy or so should behave. Yet the youth is not walking in his direction, instead, he is heading for a table where a group of other young men are sitting, debating among themselves.

The youth stops at the end of the table, shoulders pulled back. His words are loud enough to carry across to Gelo.

“Tullus Oscius Rufus, I hear you have an opinion on General Hannibal.”

Rufus, a young man with thick, reddish-blond hair, leans back on his stool and raises a pointed chin at his interrogator.

“I don’t imagine you share my opinion, Melqart, but that’s hardly surprising. It’s a valid point,” he replies in Greek blurred with the accent of Latium.

Melqart’s own chin lifts. “It’s an infamous lie and you know it. He may be dead, but he was the greatest general that has ever lived. And he was no coward.”

Rufus shrugs. “Yet he feared to take Rome. How else do you explain it?”

“You mean the great Cunctator refused to face him in battle. There is your coward.”

Now Rufus rises from his stool. “Fabius Maximus did what he had to do, and without any excuses about needing reinforcements to take you Carthaginians on.”

Even from a distance, Gelo can see Melqart’s fists clenching hard. “Rome won. The whole world knows that Rome won, and how much Carthage has been made to pay. Even to banish our greatest hero and let him die in ignominy in Asia. And now you are throwing dung on his tomb.”

The Roman youth laughs. “Perhaps you should just accept that we did win, and be grateful that there is a Carthage left. For now.”

“Carthage must be destroyed, yes? Is that it?”

“So says Cato,” replies Rufus before turning to his friends. “And so say we, eh?”

The others laugh, and Melqart spins away.

Gelo watches him leave, understanding now the youth’s interest in Archimedes’ weapons. He turns his eyes back to his texts, but this time he cannot force his mind to focus; instead, he stares blindly at the wavering lines.



There is less than an hour left until dinner in the scribes’ hall when Gelo finally begins to make his way back to the Library. He has spent most of the day packing, transporting, and then storing scrolls destined for the magistrate in Tarentum on board a ship berthed at the docks in front of the Museion. Now, thankfully, the works are secured in great wooden crates stuffed with wool and covered in hides, in the driest part of the ship’s hold. On the morning tide, they will begin their journey to the other side of the sea, and Gelo hopes that the mild summer weather will see them there safely.

Finally, he can mount the steps into the Museion complex and walk down the marble-paved colonnade towards the Library. He still needs to tidy away any scattered results of scholastic enquiry before eating. The afternoon sun flashes between the tall columns as Gelo walks down the portico to the doors of the mathematics hall, this morning’s chickpea stew and flatbread a memory his stomach can no longer recall. As he reaches the entrance, he halts for a moment to let his eyes adjust.

The hush of the dining hour lies over the hall, and only a few scholars are still straining their eyes under beams full of dust motes. Yet Gelo sees that one of those scholars has covered a table in scrolls, and a concentration of empty space in the wall above him indicates from which author. Slumped behind the disarray is the

Carthaginian youth Melqart, head in hands. Gelo sighs.

He approaches the table. "Sir."

Melqart looks up, a lock of black hair falling into reddened eyes. "Nearly dinner then, is it? I suppose I'd better help you put these away." He gestures to the dozens of unrolled scrolls.

Gelo hesitates. Part of him, the hungry part, wants the help, while another part wants Melqart gone. But the youth is already beginning to roll up a scroll, and Gelo realises that without him, he will miss dinner altogether.

So he murmurs, "Thank you, sir," and picks up the closest scroll. It has been unrolled right to the end. Gelo begins rolling it gently back to the start. Even hunger will not make him risk damaging the scrolls.

Melqart is not so careful, but neither does he damage any. They work in silent partnership for some minutes, and the table is nearly empty when the youth speaks again.

"I didn't realise it at first, but you're no more Greek than that bastard Oscius Rufus. You sound like him. What's your real name?"

Gelo freezes in the middle of returning a scroll to the wall. No one at the Library has ever asked him this. A heartbeat later, he answers. 'Gaius.'

"You're old enough to remember the siege of Syracuse, Gaius. Tell me, were you happy when you heard that Archimedes was dead?"

The scroll slips from Gelo's fingers, but as he bends to rescue it Melqart darts down, sweeping it off the marble floor. He reads the tag, then looks up to search Gelo's face.

"The letter on spirals." He holds out the scroll. "Was that not a good question to ask?"

Gelo takes the proffered scroll and turns to put it away. "I would think that as the senior scribe responsible for Archimedes' work, I would be unlikely to celebrate that we have no more."

“Were you already here then? At the Library?” Melqart slides another scroll into a space.

Gelo does the same. “No, I came later. But I grieve his death, of course.”

“More than many Romans do, I’m sure.”

Now Gelo’s head snaps up. “It was no plan of Rome’s that Archimedes died. It was an accident. General Marcellus had given strict instructions.”

Melqart snorts in anger. “An accident? An accident does not come at the end of a sword. Archimedes was killed by a Roman soldier. They claim he didn’t know who he was, but...” His sneer is eloquent.

“Yes. He did so claim.” Gelo turns back to the shelves.

“Do you believe that?”

“It didn’t matter in the end; Marcellus banished him for the crime, conscious or not.”

“I hope he was punished.”

Gelo turns to meet Melqart’s eyes. “I am sure he was. I understand Marcellus left him in no doubt as to what he had done.”

Melqart frowns. “Were you there, then? In the army that took Syracuse?”

Suddenly Gelo feels enormously tired; standing has become almost unbearable. “Sir, I beg you to excuse me. It is nearly past time for dinner, and you must be as famished as I am. Thank you for your assistance.”

Melqart does not move immediately, but eventually the younger man nods. “I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

Gelo doesn’t answer.



With his single cup of breakfast wine sloshing acidly in his stomach,

Gelo places the cedarwood case that contains the precious originals of Archimedes' work on his table. A box of new copies already occupies a central place on the stone surface; another order for the complete works, this time for a wealthy equestrian in Volsinii. Gelo hovers behind his bench, one hand resting on the box. Can I take this elsewhere? Under this thought runs another, less articulate: how to/can I/should I avoid the boy? Both answers come simultaneously: no. His duty to the texts does not allow him to remove them from the Library, and he has learnt many years ago that Fortuna will carry him to her preferred destination regardless of his attempts to change course.

So he sits, resigned, flicking through the tags on the copies to find the first volume of *On Floating Bodies*. The only people passing through the Library are other scribes, moving with no more sound than a breeze through palm leaves. The morning wears on.

He knows, of course, that his peace is fragile. The young man is not giving up, and Gelo has thought of no way to redirect his questions. So beneath the serene, methodical figure he presents, he waits for the interruption.

It comes as the sun reaches the exact angle to shine through the ventilation windows under the ceiling, casting stripes of light and shade across the patterned tiles on the floor. As Melqart walks through them, Gelo lays down his hands, relaxing his fingers.

"I have more questions."

Melqart has not even raised a hand in greeting, but Gelo had not expected one. "I know," he replies. "Perhaps we might walk, outside the Library."

Melqart nods. He stands back as Gelo rises stiffly from his bench, and follows the old man through the Library halls and the great doors, out into Alexandria in summer.

The sky, the buildings, the sea; everything shimmers. The brilliance of Helios is reflected in an interplay of luminescence that

is almost painfully bright, causing the two men to squint as they leave the portico of the Museion and step down onto the Canopic Way.

The vast road, one-third of a stadium across and running through the city for twenty-two stadia, is busy but not crowded. In Gelo's experience, only festival days fill the street sufficiently for a person to suffer the jogging of an elbow. Today he and Melqart are able to walk freely along between the massive columns that frame the road, only occasionally moving to one side to avoid a cart or litter. It is noisy, however, and Gelo is waiting for a quieter stretch.

But Melqart does not share his patience. Over the chatter of a nearby group of servants, the Carthaginian says, "I take it this means you will answer my questions?"

After forty years as a scribe, Gelo is used to demands in place of requests, but they have rarely been of a personal nature. Other scribes respect his desire not to discuss his past, while the scholars are simply not interested. That this young man is the first to realise that Gelo might have something of interest to tell amuses him, on one level.

"I will do my best, if you will answer some for me."

Melqart's face creases in surprise. "This is not a conversation between equals."

Under the bluster, Gelo can hear a young man unsure of his place. "It is not, indeed, but I ask you humbly to answer my questions so that I may better answer yours."

Pride battles with curiosity across the Carthaginian's face, and as Gelo has guessed it would, curiosity wins.

"As you wish. Ask."

"If you found these plans of Archimedes' war machines, what would you do with them?"

Melqart lets out a bark of laughter. "What do you think? Send them straight to the Suffets."

The leaders of Carthage. Gelo glances at him. “You have such access?”

“My father does.”

“And what use do you expect the Suffets to make of them?”

“Must I answer such obvious questions? Build them to defend the city! Even you, buried deep in your scrolls, must know the Romans will attack us again. Shaming Hannibal to death is not enough, apparently.”

His voice is bitter, but Gelo ignores it, merely stepping around a man pulling a handcart.

“I suppose as a Roman, you think it is deserved,” Melqart continues. “Do you too think that Carthage ‘must be destroyed?’”

Gelo sighs. “No, I do not think that Carthage or anywhere else should be destroyed. I simply ask, do you really think having those machines would protect Carthage? Syracuse fell in the end, you recall.”

“By treachery,” Melqart shoots back. “And not before the Romans suffered grievously.”

With that word, grievously, the broad avenue dissolves from Gelo’s sight, replaced by a vision that has never dulled. He recalls, again, that giant claw reaching out over the sea walls, its iron teeth splintering wood as it crushes down on the ship’s prow, digging deep into the painted eye before jerking back, lifting it up and out of the clinging water. He sees again the claw swinging to and fro, shaking the helpless ship as its oars fall out of their locks like a shower of splinters, men falling with them into a burning sea. The screams, the shrieks of metal and wood, the powerlessness of watching, unable to see where Gnaeus is, if he is one of those distant figures in red and brown still gripping onto the ship, or if he has already fallen and been swallowed. He feels again the rawness of his throat, lashed by screaming and scraped by smoke, and once again, again and again and again, the pain cuts him in two.

But his head is turned, and his streaming eyes are already squinting from the sunshine, so he wipes them under the pretence of shading them and all Melqart notices is his silence, stretching a few seconds longer than he had expected.

“I think the machines are vital,” Melqart continues, assuming the silence means a listening audience. “And Carthage has a right to defend itself by whatever means available.”

Gelo swallows, the remembered soreness of his throat lessening to a mere tightness. “And Archimedes’ wishes in the matter? They have no bearing?”

“He designed them! Surely his wish is that they be used.” Melqart dismisses the argument with a wave of a hand.

“By Syracuse, yes, but not, I think, by Rome.”

“Well, I’m clearly not trying to find them for Rome!”

“And how do you think you will keep these designs from the Romans, once you have built them?”

“I am sure we can manage that. The Syracusans did, after all.”

“Archimedes did that by not recording the plans, sir. Whatever documents he created for making the machines have been lost or destroyed by the Syracusans. He entered into no correspondence about them. I don’t believe he considered them important.”

At this Melqart throws his hands in the air. “So you insist that he left no record of his plans? Or did the Romans destroy them when they killed him?”

Gelo shakes his head, unable right then to answer. He gestures to a side road. “Let’s turn off here.”

“Towards the Paneum?” Melqart follows him across the paving stones.

“You have been there, then?”

The side road leading south is many times narrower than the Canopic Way, but no busier. The pointed form of the man-made hill called the Paneum rises in front of them, encircled by a spiralling

path to the summit.

“No, not yet.”

“It offers the best view of the city. And a certain amount of quiet.”

Melqart shrugs and falls into step beside Gelo.

“You haven’t answered my question. Did the Romans destroy the plans when they killed him?”

Gelo sighs audibly. “As far as I am aware, no work of Archimedes was destroyed by Romans in the fall of Syracuse. Certainly everything that he sent to the Library has been scrupulously preserved, and no plans for those machines ever arrived. I would say, with the utmost assurance, that although he may be dead, everything he wished you to know still exists.”

Gelo has been polishing this observation since the previous night, hoping it will force Melqart to stop and think. It does not.

“How can you be so sure? You were there, weren’t you?”

Gelo merely indicates the path that leads up the hill. At his first step upon the path, however, Melqart grabs him by the elbow.

“I will have an answer to this question, old man.”

Gelo halts, but does not turn around. “Yes, I was there, at the siege of Syracuse. I saw Archimedes’ genius in action, although I did not appreciate it as such at the time. All I saw then was death.”

Melqart waves away that statement as he has waved away all the others. “So you saw the machines, and you understand Archimedes’ theories. You could tell me how they worked, help me draw up some plans.”

Gelo begins to walk up the path again. “Copying his works has not given me his genius, young man. Do I know his ideas better than anyone? Yes, that could be true. Perhaps I could even explain them to you. But that does not mean I can follow him beyond what he shows.”

The path is taking them above the city, and Gelo can see over the roofs of buildings nearby. “Think of it in terms of his works. The

outcome of exhaustion as a method of measurement is still an approximation. No matter how large the polygon grows, it can never entirely fill the circle.”

Melqart snorts, his sandaled feet almost stomping. “So you remain a polygon, then?”

“There is no way I know of to recreate those machines,” Gelo repeats. “In any case, building them might provide the provocation that Cato and the rest of his adherents in Rome are looking for.”

“So we should just behave ourselves and hope they are magnanimous enough to let us live?” Melqart is sarcastic, but he cannot disguise the fear.

They have reached the summit. Gelo feels tired, far more so than the walk warrants. Melqart is right, of course; it is unlikely that Rome will leave Carthage to build up its forces again, now there is a faction in Rome that is convinced they are trying to recoup a small part of their former empire. To run the risk of another Hannibal, another Cannae... no, Carthage would not be left in peace.

He looks out, over Alexandria. Pale brown stone roads form intersections around rectangular buildings of white and blue, the whole pattern curving up to embrace the cyan sea within in its twin harbours. The Pharos lighthouse draws the eye, always, with its extraordinary height and gleaming whiteness. From under the shade of the pines growing on the hill, stunted descendants of Macedon, the city looks peaceful.

“Is there nothing else you wish to study here?” Gelo asks finally.

Melqart shakes his head, his gaze over the horizon to the west, towards Carthage. “I didn’t come here to study. I knew Archimedes had been a student here, and had corresponded with scholars, and I had hoped...we had hoped.”

“We?”

“I am not the eldest brother. I’m the third, of three, and my brothers are warriors. I have never been able to match them, despite

trying, and eventually my grandfather decided I would be useful in another way. I was good at my studies, you see.”

He speaks ruefully, not angrily, but then the ruefulness turns to despair. “I have to find something, some ideas, to help my city. There must be something here.”

Gelo shrugs. “There is only what Archimedes knew, and the fact that he turned that knowledge into machines. You could try, sir.”

Melqart crosses his arms across his chest, still staring west. Eventually his arms drop to his sides and he turns to Gelo. “So. How did a Roman army scribe end up at the Library of Alexandria?”

Gelo is silent, at first. He had planned merely to try to dissuade Melqart from his mission, to get him to understand that the machines would offer only harm, not help. But now he is up here, with the shining city in all its peaceful regularity lying before him, and he reaches a decision that he had not been aware he was even considering. Perhaps it is Melqart’s own openness, or his advanced age, but Gelo answers honestly.

“I was not a scribe in the army. I was a legionary.”

Melqart looks surprised. “To go from a legionary to a scribe is unusual. Were you one of the deserters?”

“At Leontini? No, they were killed. I was merely expelled.”

He has managed to say it easily enough; perhaps living with the reality of it for so long, almost the whole of his very long life, has rendered it almost unremarkable.

“What did you do to deserve that?”

Now it is Gelo’s turn to look over the horizon. “Disobeyed my commander.”

“And no one spoke for you?”

A very faint smile touches his lips. “Few are the men who would speak for you, when Marcellus speaks against you.”

Melqart’s brown eyes grow narrow. Gelo glances at him and looks away again, away from the suspicion he could see forming.

“Marcellus himself ordered your expulsion? And you fought at Syracuse? Did many men disobey orders there?”

Gelo draws in a great breath. His head feels light, while his eyes, squinting and watering, stare into the glittering sea. “No. No one else like me.”

Melqart takes a step back, tensing for conflict like the warrior he said he is not. “Be clear now. I have heard of one man Marcellus expelled from his army, and it was the man who killed Archimedes.”

The light here is so bright and pure, it hurts the soul as much as the eyes. He takes a step forwards, out of the shade of the pines.

“That’s right.”

It is not silent, of course, not with the sound of birds and the wind in the leaves and the life of the city below, but for now it shares the stillness of the moment of augury, as the priest reads the signs of the gods.

Gelo turns back to Melqart, whose dark face is made darker for standing in the shade. “Marcellus ordered that Archimedes be spared, for his genius, but also for his machines. He was furious when he was told that Archimedes had been killed. It damaged his honour, of course. That was why he held that great funeral, and gave money to anyone with a claim to blood relation. Archimedes alive was a prize; dead he was a humiliation.”

“But... it was an accident, wasn’t it? They say that the soldier didn’t realise who he was.”

Gelo meets the young man’s shocked eyes. “I told Marcellus that, yes, not that it mattered. What was done was done.”

“So you didn’t know? Did you...were you horrified when you realised?”

Now Gelo turns back to the sea. “I lied, Melqart. I knew who he was. Finding him had been chance, but we had told each other enough stories about our nemesis for me to recognise him: old, wild white hair, barely dressed, scarcely washed... I didn’t expect to find

him when I entered that house, but he was impossible to mistake. I was a well-educated conscript, you see, one of the thousands drafted into the army after the disaster of Cannae. I knew what I was seeing, all over the walls, covering the floor. Diagrams, calculations; he was drawing them in the dirt with his finger when I walked in. He ignored me at first, and I was busy trying to understand, but when I did, I shouted at him. ‘Get up, old man!’ He looked at me then, but I don’t think he actually saw me. I think he saw only an interruption. He waved me away. ‘Get out, young man! I’m busy.’”

Gelo stops. What happened next remains clear in his memory, clearer than yesterday, and he watches it again. Again and again and again.

“And then you, what, struck him down? Killed him?” Melqart’s voice has that careful quality people use when talking to a drunk. Or a killer.

“Yes. I became, as the poets say, blinded by anger. I didn’t see him, I saw what he had done. I saw his machines; I saw my friend, who was dead. And I struck him, with my sword, against the side of his head. He fell, and that was it. An old skull is easy to break.”

“And... you meant to kill him?”

Gelo rubs a hand across his eyes, finally succumbing to the glare. “I cannot answer that. I was angry, and then he fell and I realised he was dead. Would I have hit him twice, if he had not fallen? I don’t know. I don’t know.”

Gelo turns and starts to walk back down the path. “I would not wish those machines on any army, but if you are determined to use them, you will have to build them yourself. There are no plans.”

For several moments he walks alone, then Melqart is running after him, spinning him around with a hand on his shoulder.

“Do you know that because you destroyed them?”

Gelo shakes a head that is no longer light. “No. I believe there are none because there were no documents there. Archimedes only

wrote down his ideas to send them to other scholars, he never kept a copy. He had no need to; I imagine he could remember everything perfectly. Any plans for those machines would have been in the hands of the rulers, and I am quite sure they would have destroyed them before letting Rome have them.”

Melqart drops his hand, his eyes bleak and unfocused. Gelo leaves him there, staring out over the city, and he makes his slow way back to the Museion.



The cedarwood box lies on the table, closed and secured with a simple wooden lock. The key lies next to it. Later today he will take it to the head librarian, to recommend it be stored in the royal treasury, but for now he keeps it near him. The new copies lie to his right, while older copies, previously checked by him, lie to his left. The bright morning sunshine through the high windows illuminate the sharpness of both scripts. It is certainly easier on my old eyes, he thinks. I wonder for how much longer I will be able to do this?

That question, however, leads him back to the thought that has been underlying everything for days. Where is Melqart? The Carthaginian has not appeared in the scriptorium again, or attended any of the lectures that Gelo has overheard, and the shelves of Archimedes' works have been no more disturbed than usual.

He taps a finger on the table. The anticipation of another confrontation is affecting his concentration, yet perhaps it will never come. Perhaps Melqart has nothing left to say to him. He stares at the box, the carved wood blurring as he recalls the first time he saw the Library, forty years ago. The first ship he could find out of Syracuse had taken him to Alexandria, where scholars had boarded it, as they often did, and demanded to be given whatever scrolls there were to make copies for the Library. He had offered to help

them to take the scrolls back to the Library, an excuse to get off a ship that felt far too small to contain his grief. As he had passed into the cavernous shade of the Museion, he had decided suddenly to stay. He had asked for work as a scribe, and they had accepted him gladly, the task of collecting all the knowledge in the world always being short-handed. He had taken a Greek name, that of the famous Syracusan king, as a private, awkward commemoration, and let the Roman legionary fall away. Until four days ago.

He tries to focus again on the texts, but they skip past his eyes. Finally he stands up. A walk through the Museion gardens will calm his thoughts. The corridor leading from the scriptorium is quiet, but as he reaches the hall that leads to the gardens, footsteps sound behind him.

“Excuse us!”

He stops and turns. Two servants are trotting along with a large wooden clothes chest balanced between them, trailed by three others holding wrapped scroll cases. Gelo stands against the wall to let them pass. After them comes a man carrying only a cloak over one arm. He halts as the others pass Gelo, and stands in silence before him.

Gelo speaks first. “Are you leaving then, sir?”

Melqart nods. “It is time to return home. There is nothing here I can use.”

“I am sorry for that.”

Melqart shrugs and looks after his departing bearers. “I even thought to try the gods, but they have no more answers than the Library.”

“The gods?”

“Yes, I went to Serapis, to the champion of Alexander, but there was nothing there either.” Then he laughs, without humour. “Indeed, the only trace of a divine message I can find here is the tale of your life. Tell me,” he asks, “do you ever wonder whether your

service to Archimedes is the gods' punishment for killing him?"

Gelo sucks in a breath.

"Have you not considered this before?"

"I...yes. Yes of course, I have thought of what it means." But never had to articulate it.

Melqart watches as he gathers himself.

"What it means that I have shepherded his works, when I destroyed the man. But I never thought of it as a punishment."

"No? You were not free to return to Rome."

"Oh no, I could have gone to Rome, but there was nothing there for me. The only person I loved died at Syracuse."

Melqart is silent a moment. "Killed by one of the machines?"

"Yes." He can say no more, even now.

"So it was revenge?"

"In the moment, yes. And my life since I have viewed as the price I must pay for that gift." As shock blossoms on Melqart's face, Gelo lifts his chin, his face angled squarely to another's as it has not been in decades of quiet service. "He should not have made those machines. The gods gave him the ability to explain the universe, and yet he ground men into meat."

"He was defending his home!"

"He was playing politics." Gelo sweeps out a hand. "Anyway, he paid, and I paid, and we can only hope that the gods have squared that account."

Melqart shakes his head, as if trying to dislodge the old man's voice from his ears. "He had the right to fight an invader."

But something inside Gelo is at last unleashed, and speaks as he has never done before. "Kill whomever you like, for whatever reason suits you best, defence or conquest or revenge; it doesn't matter. You will die, they will die, and nothing will be left. Even if you build a tomb to rival the pyramids or preserve your body under crystal like Alexander, nothing will remain but stone. Posterity cannot be built

of stone, Melqart; it is the province of words. Carthage will fall, Rome will fall, but as long as words remain, we remain. So if you want to save Carthage, Melqart, gather its words and secure them. Or one day you will be nothing but stone and sand, no matter what the Romans do.'

The words fly down the empty corridor that leads to the doors through which the bright sun shines. Two heartbeats pass, then Melqart follows them, his steps masking the final echoes of Gelo's voice. The old man watches him go, seeing the youth's silhouette framed in the doorway before he turns out of sight of the shadowed hall. And he remembers Gnaeus, again and again and again, and then turns back towards the scriptorium. He will be able to concentrate now.

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