

It was telling. The perception of her presence transcended all five senses as she effortlessly swam through the room in a delicately embroidered, flowing dress that evoked the image of a dark swan. Her hands were laden with golden bracelets, and her ears and nose were adorned with earrings, an heirloom around her right upper arm that shone even brighter, and a distinctive tiara above vibrant eyes that made Leah fumble for composure. She noticed, ignored in such a way that made one know she very well noticed. After a good survey of the place, she swiveled with unintentional grandeur, her lucent hair flowing seamlessly, focused on the little bird. Her name was Tashmetum, and she cut the figure of a goddess.

'They call you the court's delight,' she stated, her voice having the mellow strength of eagle's wings, 'but this court here misses you.'

Leah watched her swim over to Naqia undeterred, trace the tresses of her hair. Her spleen twitched, standing stiff as a pole, six feet away from the princesses, juggling stratagems between her ears. This woman embodied formidableness, and she had timed her intrusion impeccably. Intrusion it was because she had afforded her no time to adjust to the new reality. And desolation crept. Now the slave contrived to conceal the statuettes demeaned on the marble floor. Times like this, for this was by no means the first, ignited an instinct in her that could only otherwise be associated with a cornered mother bear.

'Breathe, girl. Shrewdness now.' she reminded herself.

'Your nest is in disarray, little thrush,' the guest announced. 'What is the use of your slave girl?'

Lightning flashed through her forehead, knowing not whether to look up or down. Her mistress knew well enough to act fast but all temerity belonged to the visitor.

'She... she... she's only...' The younger princess' quivering voice trailed off to a whisper under the imposing eyes of Tashmetum.

'I only just came in, Your Highness.'

Naqia was out of the game before it even begun but her maid could not afford such cold feet. Cornered.

Perilously startled, the elder princess seemed rather amused at the sound of her voice, almost as though a cat had barked. Her stately gaze switched to predatory as she turned deliberately from princess to peasant. Awe struck Leah numb, in spite of the fact that it was indeed not her first time seeing Princess Tashmetum. She had meant to look straight at the exotic paintings on the gleaming floor once her painfully necessary reply incurred dreaded attention, but now, she couldn't move a muscle, and an unshakeable understanding of just whom she stood before chiseled itself in her mind in those few seconds of terror.

Indeed, Tashmetum was a force of nature. Six feet graceful, with a face perfect as the moon in full form, she was the crest of creation, but it was much more than her stunning allure that infused the aura of the

great goddess upon all who stood before her. A woman of class and charisma in a form almost ethereal, she seemed to float instead of walk like normal mortals. Frightening, breathtaking beauty with every breath.

Meanwhile, Leah finally gained hold of her limbs before she became prey, and she set herself to bring order out of disarray with immediate effect. Tashmetum kept her eyes on her a few seconds longer until even inanimate objects could tell someone in the room was in terrible danger.

‘Princess,’ Naqia interjected finally, though restrained and through bleeding lips, “here’s a couch to rest your weary legs.’ The visitor directed attention back to her guest with elegant subtlety, let off an adorable grin with the tip of her red tongue between delightfully lucent teeth. Naqia relaxed instantly.

‘To what do I owe this visit?’

‘Well, you have been in this city for more than a month now, thrush, and this court has yet to know your name,’ she prodded as her swanlike figure settled itself on the colourful couch. ‘I mean, of course, they know your name, but...’ she paused to catch timid eyes, ‘you know, Nineveh isn’t so bad’.

Tashmetum recognized Naqia remained reclusive. Her heart, she saw, seemed to be somewhere else. She reached out with elaborately decorated hands to call attention back to the visceral. Now, she could charm away. The perfect question availed itself.

‘Tell me about Ashur.’

The forgotten one scoped the pair through slits as she attended to the duty charged, like a scuffle. The exact same process went on in her head as she battled to suppress the alarms running amok. Two months had passed since she had been introduced to the labyrinth of guile that was this palace, and she was yet to meet anyone as unpredictable as the first wife of the man her mistress called husband. Now, the vixen sported with the thrush (as she so chose to call her), and there was nothing she could do. Her eyes watered as she stole another peek. Naqia was chatting away now. Whatever could she be so effusive about? Stooping to unstay the down cushions from the unsullied firmness of the rock-set floor, she strained to catch a note.

‘Ah! Ashur.’ Of course, good old Ashur. Her thoughts trailed off.

‘Weren’t those simpler times, Leah? Remember when you first met Naqia? Was it in the palace yard? Yes... Yes, it was. You still remember the look on her face, that timid yet precocious stare...? It’s not as if you could have seen your own face, though.’

So many memories inextricably twined with that old city. Many of them, jewels.

As she absent-mindedly steadied the last one of the statuettes on the right side of the ubiquitous bed, she felt a prick on her big toe. ‘That was not the last of the images—the one on the shelf,’ she winced a whisper, corrected. ‘Lord, I hope she did not see this.’

In a needful bid to measure the magnitude of her newfound predicament, she promptly shifted her regard to the regal pair on the couch at the distant end of the room. It would have been rather challenging anyway to read malcontent from a face of such astute ilk, even more so when she was so faraway. Now, however, it was impossible because the couch was, in fact, empty, and she was just realizing she was the only one in the room.

Where'd they go? When did they leave?!

She struck across hallowed debris, frustrated.

'Come on now, thrush,' she said with infectious enthusiasm. 'I don't know if you have noticed it, but the sun shines elsewhere here in Nineveh.'

Naqia seemed unwilling to catch the frenzy that now magnified outside her courts. Tashmetum had dragged her along swifter than she could object; now she was too distant from home to remember Leah. If she didn't know any better, it would not be outrageous for her to label the sister-wife as rashly intrusive. But she was much too charming to be unwelcome, and her attention seemed premium, even more so now as they waltzed through dense common palace hallways, and every eye yawned in wonder. It wasn't, however, certain as to why— whether for the sheer presence of the most beautiful woman in all of Assyria or the identity of her curious lucky companion. But Tashmetum never missed a jot; as effortlessly as she heeded each bow and curtsy, she slipped her new sister's trembling arm into hers.

'Look how they marvel at your beauty, thrush. Don't you steal my shine now,' she jested in a gentle tone, smirking at the warm spots that appeared upon Naqia's cheeks. Slowly, the green looked up at the darkling in renewed awe. She could not bring herself to reckon that anything else living could elicit what she smelled, felt, and saw in the numerous lingering eyes.

'More shock of novelty than stun of comeliness.' 'I could never...' she whispered out loud, cogitant cumulation. Tashmetum caught on, of course, but chose to keep silent, trotting on, companion clasped in arm.

The accompanying Naqia looked up. Murals and carvings of the grand old illustrious kind adorned the walls on the left and the right, declaring lore of gods and country. Tint and tincture of verdant blush, vermilion hue flung up in buoyant luxury, with lilac hue casting a façade of unparalleled dignity on every inch the eye could see. A thousand words. A thousand stories. The halls were grand with towering ceilings that seemed infallible, as high as humanity. Every juncture they encountered compounded upon Naqia the panicking thought of the sheer scale of the High Court of Sargon the Second. Attendants and maidens shuffled to and fro, their strides punctuated by curtsies at the mark of twin royalty.

'Oh, my personal courts are just around the corner. I would love to show you around. You should know: my maids do gossip a lot about you.'

'I... I find that hard to believe,' Naqia replied.

'Oh, but I speak the truth,' Tashmetum responded earnestly. 'Well, not the complete truth. I join in at times.'

The astonishment in response was louder than the tongue could carry.

'It surprises how much distance, coupled with unmitigated imagination, easily intricates otherwise... pure characters, hmm?' she continued.

'Counterintuitive,' Naqia replied, timorous still. ,

Tashmetum nodded, genuinely delighted. 'A clever one.'

The pace of the pair graduated to a saunter at that moment as passersby seemed to lessen. The main had begun to observe her accessory accede in accent to this new front of personality she was determined to place athwart rightful skepticism. Now, it seemed scrutiny had disappeared and her purpose was astir.

'Here we are, thrush.'

Just as Naqia measured the imposing entrance, fatigue descended upon her without warning, pulling at her radiant forehead. The support of Tashmetum's right arm, along with her calming aura, had seemingly truncated the length of the hike until now. Then, the daze of exertion brought with it the recollection of the life that was inside her. She tilted helplessly towards an embarrassed Tashmetum, blood drained from her lips.

'Leah... I need Leah,' she confessed unwittingly.

Suddenly, the door swung open. A boy barged out of it at such a pace that it was a pure marvel how abruptly he stopped in his tracks before the two women. Naqia looked down at him through the haze. His eyes held fire, a very familiar fire, one too full for eyes so juvenile. He seemed to study her, size her up rather brashly in those few embarrassing seconds before he took off again zooming down the hall, intent, so that the two princesses seemed to catch their breath in his wake as though it was they who were sprinting.

'Wait up, will you?!' said the little maid that flashed past them in an instant in full pursuit of the jovial mischief, like it was her job. She had almost completely ignored the statuesque pair at the entrance when she interrupted her scurry, tracked back at once.

'Your highness,' she said with a curtsy. 'I will retrieve him immediately.'

'Oh no. Never mind. We already know where he's going,' Tashmetum replied rather kindly. 'That's my son, princess,' she continued, eyes still centred on the maid before her. 'His name is Adrammelech, and he is nine.' Then, she began to search for some elusive bump on Naqia's held arm as though she sought to keep something from her—something covertly impressed upon her eyebrows. Naqia touched her, unsolicited, for the first time. Startled, Tashmetum blew her cover. Eyes met. And Naqia saw in her face

something she had remembered seeing before; something, she reckoned, most unlikely on a face such as this.

'Where's he going?' the green lady interjected, breaking the uneasy moment with homely charm.

Tashmetum's countenance shifted at the distracting question.

'You... don't know!' It started as a genuine question and quickly ended as a shocking discovery. 'You cannot possibly have been indoors all day and all night since you arrived here. And even so!'

Even the attendant before them glared in bewilderment for a moment before a glance from her mistress set order back in place. She was quick to observe Naqia withdrawing from intense scrutiny.

'Well then. Come along now, Mita,' she said. 'I'm certain his brother is waiting for him there. We would not tackle the trouble of bridling the two sons the gods gave me in the garden without your help. Alert the rest.'

'Leah is a charm with children. Perhaps I shouldn't have left her behind.'

Naqia noted Tashmetum gaze fully at her, smile with excitement. She had not once let go of her hand. It was at then the young princess realized to her sheer surprise that they in fact shared the same height.

'Don't you worry.' said Tashmetum. 'You'll feel much better soon enough, I promise.' Wonted divinity seeped back into her stride as charisma's contagion suspended all the doubt aching limbs cast on Naqia's mind. And the siamese twins were on their course once again.

'You're in for the sight of your life, thrush.'