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Hand of Isis

Jo Graham

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The city of Alexandria is teacher, apex of Panhellenism
And in all fields of knowledge and all the arts the wisest.

— *The Glory of the Ptolemies,*
C. P. Cavafy, translated by Aliki Barnstone



Amenti

In twilight I approached the doors, and in twilight they stood open for me. I was not surprised. I knew that I was dead.

I walked through the doors and through the hall beyond, pillars thick as the tallest trees carved round with symbols in red and gold, with stories of those who had walked this way before. Above the high capitals ornamented like lotus blossoms was not the star-painted ceiling one might expect, but the wide expanse of the night sky, blue-black and deep as eternity. I stood in the Halls of Amenti, the Uttermost West, and the sun did not come here. I walked in starlight.

Light glimmered at the end of the long hall. I walked among the pillars, my feet soundless on the stone floor. Shades make no noise, even in their sorrowing.

At last I came to the end of the hall, where the veil stretched between two pillars, and before it on a dais sat the thrones.

Serapis wore a robe of white. His gray hair was cut short and His eyes were as dark as the sky, an old man but hale, with a black hound sitting alert at His feet. Beside Him, Isis glimmered like the moon. Her gown was white as well, but Her dark hair was covered by a black veil, and beneath it Her face was pale and beautiful.

"Welcome to the Halls of Amenti, daughter," She said.

I knelt. "Gracious Ones," I said. To the side I saw the scales, Ma'at with a feather in Her hand, the golden balance waiting.

"You know what must be," He said, seeing where my gaze went.

I nodded, and moistened my lips. My heart should be measured against a feather to see whether the deeds of my life condemned or released me. I knew the formulas. Every child learns them. "Hear, Gracious Ones, how I have not offended. I have not done wrong. I have not robbed. I have not slain men. I have not spoken lies. I have not defrauded the gods. . . ."

Isis raised Her hand, and it seemed for a moment that there was amusement in Her voice. "Well We can believe that you have memorized all of the words, Charmian. But when you stand before the Thrones of Amenti, it is not enough to have learned the words that should rest by your side on a sacred scroll. Your heart must be weighed on its own merits. You must be judged by your own deeds."

I looked at Ma'at, where She stood beside the scales with justice in Her hands, and I knew how heavy my heart must be. "Then condemn me now, Gracious Lady. I shall offer no defense." I felt the tears pricking behind my eyes, and all of the sorrow of these last days came rushing back. "I have no defense to offer, and readily accept whatever punishment you shall name."

"It is not that simple," Serapis said. "We are just, and do not condemn out of hand."

"Surely if the prisoner will offer no defense, the judge must convict," I said, and heard myself choke. Whatever should happen would be no greater than this pain that already was.

Her voice was calm. "In a human court, perhaps. But We are in no hurry. We shall wait for your testimony as long as it takes."

I bent my head and the tears overflowed my eyes. "I can give no defense, for I have failed in my charge. I have failed, and through my weakness have destroyed all those I love. I can make no excuses, now or ever."

Serapis put His hands together, like a philosopher in disputation. "I think perhaps you overestimate your own culpability. But We shall see, when your testimony is complete."

"I cannot do that, Gracious Lord," I said, and I could not even see His face through my tears, my hands pressed against the stone floor. "I beg You to condemn me. There is no punishment You could devise worse than what already is."

"We will wait," She said. "In time you will be ready to speak to Us."

I pressed my forehead to the floor, my hands in fists.

Above my head, I heard Him speak. "And yet while you are here, time runs true. Even the gods may not stop time. In the world, days and nights are passing."

"And what is that to me?" I asked bitterly. "There are none I love who still walk beneath the sun and moon."

"I do not think that is true," Isis said quietly. "Are there not those you love who have not yet crossed Death's threshold? In the world that is, time is passing for them, and things happen that cannot be amended."

"And what may I amend, dead as I am?" I asked. "There is nothing I can do for them, and You cannot persuade me that I am not really dead."

"No," She said. "You are dead. Even now your mummy lies in your tomb, preserved by the embalmer's art. Your life as Charmian has ended, and never again in that mask shall you walk under the sun. And yet your spirit endures."

"I should rather that it did not," I said. "When I have lost all, and when I can do nothing for those I have failed."

"You do not have the choice of that," Serapis said. I looked up at Him, and there was something in His face both familiar and serene, though a line of worry creased between His brows. "Your spirit is old, and you have endured much worse. But time runs true beneath the sun, and ships ply the seas homeward bound under the stars of heaven."

Ships… There had been something about ships, something in that last day… "The children," I whispered. "Oh, Gracious Lord, the children…"

"Even now they sail," Serapis said. "Horus and his brother, and the moon their sister. Even now, they are bound for Rome. And you sit here lamenting."

I knelt upon my knees, swaying before Their thrones. "Are You saying there is something I may yet do? Gracious Ones, if there is anything I may do at any cost…"

"There may be," She said. "But firstly your heart must be judged. You have come before the Thrones of Amenti, and what must be, must be. Speak true, and recall to yourself all that you have been, that We might test the weight of it."

"Then I shall begin, Gracious Lady," I said. And I stood up.

A CITY BY THE SEA



My mother was a Thracian slave girl who died when I was born, so I do not remember her. Doubtless I would have died too, as unwanted children will, had Iras' mother not intervened. Asetnefer was from Elephantine, where the Nile comes out of Nubia at the great gorges, and enters Egypt. Her own daughter was five months old when I was born, and she took me to her breast beside Iras, a pale scrap of a newborn beside my foster sister. She had attended at the birth, and took it hard when my mother died.

I do not know if they were exactly friends. I heard it said later that Pharaoh had often called for them together, liking the contrast between them, the beauty of my mother's golden hair against Asetnefer's ebony skin. Perhaps it was true, and perhaps not. Not every story told at court is true.

Whatever her reasons, Asetnefer nursed me as though I were a second child of her own, and she is the mother I remember, and Iras my twin. She had borne a son some years before Iras, but he had drowned when he was three years old, before my sister and I were born. It is this tragedy that colored our young lives more than anything else, I believe, though we did not mourn for him, having never known him. Asetnefer was careful with us. We should not play out of sight of people; we should not stray from her while she worked. She carried us both, one on each hip in a sling of cloth, Iras to the left and me to the right, until we grew too heavy and had to go on our feet like big children. She was

freeborn, and there was doubtless some story of how she had come to be a slave in Alexandria by the sea, but I in my innocence never asked what it was.

And so the first thing I remember is this, the courtyards of the great palace at Alexandria, the slave quarters and the kitchens, the harbor and the market, and the Court of Birds where I was born. In the palace, as in all civilized places, the language of choice was Koine Greek, which educated people speak from one end of the world to the other, but in the slave quarters they spoke Egyptian. My eyes were the color of lapis, and my hair might glow bronze in the sun, but the amulet I wore about my neck was not that of Artemis, but a blue faience cat of Bastet.

In truth, that was not odd. There were golden-haired slaves from Epirus and the Black Sea, sharp Numidians and Sardinians, men from Greece fallen on hard times, mercenaries from Parthia and Italy. All the world met in Alexandria, and every language that is spoken was heard in her streets and in her slave quarters. A quarter of the people of the city were Jews, and it was said that there were more Jews in Alexandria than in Jerusalem. They had their own neighborhood, with shops and theaters and their own temples, but one could not even count the Jews who studied at the Museum and Library, or who taught there. A man might have a Greek name and blond hair, and yet keep the Jewish sabbath if it suited him. So it was of little importance that I looked Greek and acted Egyptian.

Iras, on the other hand, looked as Egyptian as possible and had the mind of a skeptic philosopher. From her earliest days she never ceased asking why. Why does the sea pile against the harbor mole? Why do the stars shine? What keeps us from flying off the ground? Her black hair lay smooth in the heavy braids that mine always escaped, and her skin was honey to my milk. We were as alike as night and day, parts of one thing, sides of the same coin.

The seas pile against the harbor mole because Isis set them to, and the stars are the distant fires of people camping in the sky. We could not fly because like young birds we had not learned yet, and when we did we should put off our bodies and our winged souls should

cavort through the air, chasing and playing like swifts. The world was enchantment, and there should be no end to its magic, just as there was no end to the things that might hold Iras' curiosity. And that is who we were when we first met the Princess Cleopatra.

Knowing all that she became, it is often assumed that at that age she must have been willful and imperious. Nothing is further from the truth. To begin with, she was the fifth child and third daughter, and not reckoned of much account. Her mother was dead as well, and the new queen had already produced a fourth princess. There was little reason for anyone to take note of her, another Cleopatra in a dynasty full of them. I only noticed her because she was my age.

In fact, she was exactly between me and Iras in age, born under the stars of winter in the same year, and when I met her I did not know who she was.

Iras and I were five years old, and enjoying a rare moment of freedom. Someone had called Asetnefer away with some question or another, and Iras and I were left to play under the eyes of half the other slave women of the household in the Court of Birds. There was a fountain there, with worn mosaics of birds around the base, and we were playing a splashing game, in which one of us would leap in to throw water on the other, who would try to avoid being soaked, waiting her turn to splash the other. Running from a handful of cold water, I noticed a girl watching us with something of a wistful expression on her face. She had soft brown hair falling down her back, wide brown eyes that seemed almost round, smudged with sooty lashes. She was wearing a plain white chiton and girdle, and she was my height precisely. I smiled at her.

At that she came out from the shadow of the balcony above and asked if she could play.

"If you can run fast enough," Iras said.

"I can run," she said, her chin coming up. Faster than a snake, she dipped in a full handful of water and dashed it on Iras.

Iras squealed, and the game was off again, a three-way game of soaking with no rules.

It lasted until Asetnefer returned. She called us to task immediately, upbraiding us for having our clothes wet, and then she saw the other girl and her face changed.

"Princess," she said gravely, "you should not be here rather than in the Royal Nursery. They will be searching for you and worrying if you have come to harm."

Cleopatra shrugged. "They never notice if I'm gone," she said. "There is Arsinoe and the new baby, and no one cares what becomes of me." She met Asetnefer's eyes squarely, like a grown-up, and there was no self-pity in her voice. "Why can't I stay here and play? Nothing bad will happen to me here."

"Pharaoh your father will care if something happens to you," Asetnefer said. "Though it's true you are safe enough here." A frown came between her eyes, and she glanced from the princess to Iras, who stood taller by half a head, then to me with my head to the side.

A princess, I thought with some surprise. She doesn't seem like a goddess on earth. At least not like what I think a goddess should be.

"Has he not arranged for tutors for you?" Asetnefer asked. "You are too old for the nursery."

She shrugged again. "I guess he forgot," she said.

"Perhaps he will remember," Asetnefer said. "I will take you back to the nursery now, before anyone worries. Girls! Iras! Charmian! Put dry clothes on and behave until I get back."

She did not return until the afternoon had changed into the cool shades of evening, and the birds sang in the lemon trees. Night came by the time Iras and I curled up in our cubicle in one bed, the sharp smell of meat roasted with coriander drifting in through the curtain door. Iras went straight to sleep, as she often did, but I was restless. I untangled myself from Iras' sleepy weight, and went outside to sit with the women in the cool night air. Asetnefer sat alone by the fountain, her lovely head bent to the water as though something troubled her.

I came and stood beside her, saying nothing.

"You were born here," she said quietly, "on a night like this. A spring night, with the harvest coming in and all the land green, which is the gift of the Nile, the gift of Isis."

"I know," I said, having heard this story before, but not impatient with it.

"He is your father too," she said, and for a moment I did not know who she meant. "Ptolemy Auletes. Pharaoh. Just as he is Iras' father. You are sisters in blood and bone as well as milk sisters."

"I knew that too," I said, though I hadn't given much thought to my father. I had always known Iras was my real sister. To be told it as a great truth was no surprise.

"That makes her your sister too. Cleopatra. Born under the same stars, the scholars would say."

I digested this a minute. I supposed I didn't mind another sister. She had seemed like she could be as much fun as Iras, and if she was a goddess on earth, she was really a very small goddess.

"You will start lessons with her tomorrow," Asetnefer said. "You and Iras both. You will go to the palace library after breakfast." She looked at me sideways now, and I wondered what she saw. "Cleopatra is to have a tutor, and it is better if she has companions in her studies. She is too much alone, and her half-sister Arsinoe is barely two and much too young to begin reading and learning mathematics. You and Iras have been given to her to be her companions, to belong to her."

"Given by whom?" I asked.

"By your father," she said, "Pharaoh Ptolemy Auletes."

If before I had learned what it was to be Egyptian, now I learned what it was to be a Ptolemy.

To be a Ptolemy was to be part of the longest and most successful ruling dynasty in the world. More than two hundred and fifty years before, Alexander the Great had died in Babylon, leaving the ashes of his empire to his generals and his unborn son. In the chaos that ensued, one Ptolemy son of Lagos had seized Egypt and held off all

comers, crowned as Pharaoh by the old rites. Ruling from ancient Memphis and new Alexandria, queen of the seas, he built the greatest city in the world. It is true that Alexander himself set out the place for the city that bears his name, but he did not build it. Ptolemy did, and the men and women who came with him there from all over the world. It was he who set his stamp upon it, theaters and palaces, harbor and canals and sewers and docks and freshwater cisterns deep as three houses set into the earth, Egyptians and Macedonians and Jews and Nubians and all of the other peoples of the world in prosperity together under one king. Ptolemy son of Lagos was my grandfather's grandfather's grandfather's grandfather.

We learned that the first day, my sisters and I. We sat at the scrolls in the palace library around one table. Only Iras' feet touched the floor. On our three stools, our shoulders touched, Iras, Cleopatra, and me.

Apollodorus was a young man, with small children of his own, and came highly recommended from the Museum. He was also a well-rounded student of many arts in need of supplemental salary. The first scroll he laid before us was written by that same Ptolemy.

"This is his hand," Apollodorus said, unrolling it carefully. "Later we will work from a transcription, but you should see the original. This is what he wrote, and the paper he set his thoughts upon."

I looked at the writing, rendered spidery by two hundred years of fading. Or was his writing like that when he wrote it? He was an old man, eighty years old at the end of his life, when he wrote his memoirs.

Apollodorus took the ivory pointer, and showed us the words as he read. " 'And it came to pass that Alexander saw a piece of fair land, between the sea and Lake Mareotis, where there was a village called Rhakotis. He turned to his architect, Dinocrates, and he said, "I shall build a city here and give it my name, for this harbor is unsurpassed and could hold a great many ships." And so it was done as Alexander decreed. But when the men came to lay the boundaries in chalk, there was no chalk remaining and none to be had, so they marked the boundaries out on the earth in grain. When this happened, a great

flock of seabirds descended and the men hurried to lay out stakes and rope before the markings were obliterated. At this Callisthenes scowled, and said that it was an omen that the city would come to nothing. Alexander laughed, and said that rather it was an omen that men should flock here from all quarters of the earth. I leave it to my reader to determine whose prophecy was more accurate.' "

At this Cleopatra and Iras smiled and wanted words pointed out in the story. I was lost in the vision. I could see how it must have been, thousands of gulls descending and fighting, turning in the air, their wings beating together, and Alexander with his hat gone and his face red with sunburn, laughing. And Ptolemy impatient, ready to be gone, not knowing that this city would be his someday, that when Alexander was forty years in his grave he should write these spidery words on paper and remember.

Apollodorus looked at me. "Charmian? Can you point out words for me too?"

I hurried to do so. I wanted the word for birds.

Apollodorus was not a strict teacher, and I know now that he well understood how a young child's mind works, that there must be play and fascination rather than drudgery if there is to be real love of learning engendered. And if there was anything that was the birthright of a Ptolemy, it was learning.

When we were eight, and had learned to write ourselves, Apollodorus took us to the great Library. In that day it held more than seven hundred thousand scrolls, in five great buildings built to house them since the day that the second Ptolemy, Ptolemy Philadelphos, had decreed that the scholars of Alexandria should collect every book in the world that had ever been written, so that anyone who would study all mankind had ever achieved should find it in one place within these halls. The catalogs were nineteen hundred scrolls long. Separate buildings held different disciplines, different languages. All in all, Apollodorus told us, there were more than twenty written languages

understood in the Library, and dozens more known where people had produced no books.

"What do they produce then?" Iras asked, her long black braids swinging against her neck as she looked up at the ranked rolls of scrolls that went nearly to the ceiling, daughter of a people that had produced books for three thousand years.

"Other things," Cleopatra said, standing free of us in the middle of the hall. "Grain and melons. Ships and tin and bronze and machines."

"You can't produce machines without books," Iras said.

"Stories," I said.

Apollodorus smiled. "Every people produces stories. And there are many stories written down here that are told by people who have never learned to write and have no symbols in their language. But they have told their stories to priests or scholars, and those stories are kept here too, because we never know when we may need their wisdom."

"You can produce machines without books," Cleopatra appealed to Apollodorus. "Can't you? An inclined plane is a machine, you said, and it doesn't take a book to see how that would work. Anyone with a brain can figure it out."

"An inclined plane is a simple machine," Apollodorus acknowledged. "Like a lever, a pulley, and a screw. And there are people who use simple machines without a written language. However, once you move beyond simple machines into something more mathematically complex like Archimedes' Screw, you need a symbolic language to perform calculations. So you are both right in a way. It's not books you need. It's math."

Which of course was another part of our study. By the time two years were past, I could do great columns of figures in my head, though Iras and Cleopatra were both faster and I did not enjoy it as they did. It was only interesting to me if it did something.

The next year, Apollodorus deemed us old enough to take to the theater. We had seen scenes performed in the little palace theater,

comic sketches put on for the court, and often acted in by amateurs who enjoyed that sort of thing, but at nine Apollodorus considered us old enough for Aeschylus. There was a production of *The Myrmidons* at the Theater of Ptolemy Soter, and so it was decided we should attend.

We left the palace fairly early in the morning, bringing with us our lunches, for we would eat in our seats at the inter-act.

There were seats in the front for the Royal Family, of course. Ptolemy Soter had built the theater, being a great patron of plays. It was said that Thettalos had played Alexandria in his last years, he who had been Alexander's player. I wondered if he had done the play we should see, and if whoever had the role now would be half as good.

We weren't sitting in the royal seats. One small legitimate daughter of Ptolemy, her handmaidens, and her tutor didn't rate the royal seats and the full pomp and ceremony Pharaoh did. Instead we spread our himations on the stone seats, which were still chilly from the morning air, halfway down the tiers facing the stage. Mine was green, Cleopatra's violet, and Iras' yellow. Cleopatra's was a finer material, but other than that you could not have told any difference. Apollodorus got out honey cakes, and we feasted under the clear blue sky of morning, chattering like little birds, and throwing the remains of our cakes to the finch that enterprisingly came to investigate us. He stood with his head to the side, his eyes evaluating, then hopped quickly toward me.

"He knows you've the softest touch," Cleopatra said.

"I am," I said, tossing him a crumb covered in sesame seeds.

As the theater began to fill, there was a rustle, and a boy descended the tiers above, jumping between people and leaping from seat to seat, like a bird himself. He landed beside Apollodorus, grinning. "Hello, Master Apollodorus," he said.

I looked up in surprise. He was a bit older than ourselves, eleven or twelve maybe, but still a boy, not a youth. His dark hair was neatly cut and trimmed, and his chiton was good, worked material with a border, but he somehow managed to look unkempt for all that.

"I saw you down here," he said, "and thought I'd see if anything interesting was happening."

"Hello, Dion," Apollodorus said mildly. "Run off from your tutor again?"

Dion winced. "Recitation," he said. "Nothing new. Just the same lines from the *Odyssey* until I could do them in my sleep. Thought I'd find something different to do with my day."

"I could tell your father, you know," Apollodorus said.

"You won't." The boy gave him a sideways smile. "Not when I'm the most brilliant mathematician you've ever seen."

"I never meant that for your hearing," Apollodorus said, but he smiled too. "Stand up straight now, and let me introduce the young ladies. Charmian, Iras, Cleopatra, this is Dion. He's the son of a friend of mine at the Museum, and a hopeless scapegrace."

"Hello," said Cleopatra politely. Iras and I said nothing, somewhat annoyed at this boy barging into our long-awaited special day.

"Hello," Dion said, and plopped down on the seats on the other side of Apollodorus. He leaned across him. "Have you seen the play before?"

"Not this one," Iras said quickly, forestalling my comment that I had never seen a play. She spoke strict truth, but gave him no room for superiority.

"They do the gods with the crane here," Dion said. "They don't do it in every theater. Lots of them use the god walk above the stage instead. But this one even has fire effects for evening shows. It's really impressive in *The Furies*. I saw that last spring. Lots of people get ripped apart on stage too, and there's a big sword fight and then the rain comes down and…"

He was prevented from giving us a complete description of the effects of every play he'd ever seen by the beginning of the play. I don't, frankly, remember what I thought of it. *The Myrmidons* is not one of my favorite plays, and I have seen it half a dozen times since. Or perhaps the thing that was most memorable was Dion.

He was never quiet. All through the play he kept up a running commentary on how this effect and that effect was achieved, critiquing with knowing eyes the workings of the crane and the sets, the thunder effect that announced the death of Patroclus. I got the brunt of it, as I was sitting next to him. I wanted to slap him.

As soon as the play ended, Cleopatra gathered her himation about her shoulders, though the day was warm. "It's been very nice," she said, sounding like the best possible imitation of Asetnefer. "But we had best be going now."

We made our way up the tiers and out of the theater into the busy street, Dion sticking to us like a burr. "Athena's my favorite," he said. "Though she never gets lowered out of the sky. It's usually Hermes. One time one of his lines snapped. They wear several, you know, so they won't fall. Anyway, one of them broke and he descended from the clouds almost upside down. Everybody laughed."

I was trying to visualize that when I heard a roaring sound. Around us, the crowd was scattering, people going one way and another, trying to dash back inside the theater portico, or into one of the shops on the opposite side of the street.

Up the main street came a huge mob, fighting and shouting, waving sticks and screaming for blood. One was waving something that might have been a man's arm, blood dripping down his chiton. They were screaming and yelling.

Apollodorus grabbed Iras' hand, as she was closest. "Hold hands!" he shouted. "Hold hands and get back!"

Iras grabbed Cleopatra's hand, and Cleopatra mine. Dion grabbed my other hand just as the mob broke over us like a wave, pushing us before them with shoppers, theatergoers, and anyone who happened to be in the streets, running to stay ahead of the crowd.

My new green himation fell from my shoulders. I saw it trampled underfoot as the crowd surged forward. Cleopatra screamed as someone shoved her hard, but she stayed upright, caught between Iras' hand and mine. And then we were all pushed together, the mob surging around a corner.

Dion was pressed up against my back so tightly I could feel his heart pounding. It gave me some comfort to know he was as frightened as I was.

"Hold hands!" Apollodorus shouted again. "Don't let go!" I couldn't see him in the press. Everyone else was bigger than me. If I fell, they would step on me.

"To their gates! Impious ones!" a man shouted almost in my ear. "Killers! Impious ones!"

I had no idea who had done what impiety. I wished we could push our way into one of the shops, but the shopkeepers who could had bolted their doors and closed their shutters. A vegetable seller who hadn't been able to stood pressed against his own door, shouting imprecations while his stock was trod underfoot, ripe melons sending up a heady fragrance into the air, mixed with the smell of fear and blood. As I watched, one of the rioters picked up a melon and threw it at him. "Oh, shut up," he yelled. "Roman lover!"

"What has happened?" I shouted to the world at large, Dion's elbows in my ribs.

"A Roman killed a cat." One of the rioters looked at me, no doubt an honest drover or workman. "He killed a cat for sport and then went and hid in their ambassador's house when he was caught. So we're going to burn him out."

"A cat?" I gaped. I couldn't imagine who could be so stupid as to kill a cat, thereby calling down Isis' wrath upon himself.

"We're going to break down the gates and light the Roman embassy on fire," he said, "if they won't turn him over to Pharaoh's justice. Romans think they can go anywhere and do anything, and that we'll all just roll over and kiss their pricks. Er . . ." He stopped, embarrassed no doubt to have used such rude language in front of a well-brought-up girl. Even with my hair falling from its pins, there was no mistaking my Koine or my dress.

The crowd shoved us apart, splitting where the Canopic Way divided and the crowd must take one of two smaller streets toward their goal.

Two large men shoved in opposite directions, half-crushing Cleopatra between them. My hand was numb in hers, and I heard her struggling to get her breath. The bones in my fingers ground together.

And then she was free, shooting out like a cork bobbing up in water, staggering against me and Dion. She and Iras had let go.