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Opening Extract from...

Dido

Written by Adèle Geras

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Dido

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Elissa

A little before dawn; the maidservants' bedroom/the palace corridors/a royal bedchamber

You knew that you were in a dream when the edges of everything you gazed at were blurred and when figures bent and blended into the background and arrived and disappeared magically, moving in a way that wouldn't be possible in normal life. She'd been deeply asleep but now Elissa could feel herself floating up into wakefulness and the memory of her dream was leaving her. She blinked and turned over in her bed. There had been someone over there, by the door. Did he fly away? She tried to cling to what she'd seen: a slim man, wearing a strange-looking helmet. It had wings attached to it on either side, a little like an extra set of ears. Thinking this made Elissa start to giggle even though she was only half awake. Wings on his head and also on his feet. He'd hovered up and out of the door, and she most distinctly saw greenish feathers edged with gold, flapping gently at his heels as he rose up from the floor.

She'd even heard him speak but the words had disappeared almost entirely. 'Come, Maron,' she thought he'd said. 'Hermes cannot wait. You must come with me now.' Why was this winged creature speaking of Maron? She opened her eyes properly and leaned up on one elbow, forgetting her dream in the shock of seeing Tanith, her friend and one of the two girls with whom she shared this maidservants' bedroom, sitting on her bed, crying quietly – and yes, there was Maron with his arm around her. Men were not allowed anywhere near the women's rooms, and though Maron wasn't quite a man, he wasn't exactly a boy, and what did he think he was doing, whispering with Tanith while she and Nezral were sleeping? Well, I'm awake now, Elissa thought. Those two must have woken me up. Tanith's snifflings were growing louder and louder.

'Tanith!' Elissa whispered too, wondering how Nezral could sleep through the noise. 'Maron! What are you doing? Someone will come. What's the matter?' She got out of bed and went to stand in front of them. Maron, his gingery hair and sharp features making him look more than ever like a young fox, seemed sad. His smile, which could make the most churlish and bad-tempered person smile in return, was nowhere to be seen and his eyes were bright with unshed tears.

'It's happening,' he said. 'We're leaving. I have to go. Now. Tanith'll tell you. Goodbye, Elissa.'

He stood up, kissed the top of Tanith's head and ran out of the room.

'Tanith? Tell me what he said . . . please. When are they going?'

For a moment her friend did nothing but sniff and wipe her eyes. Elissa sat down on the bed beside her, overcome with sadness. Everyone in the palace knew this time had to come. From the day Aeneas had moored his ships in the harbour, the court gossips had been quite sure that he'd be on his way to somewhere else as soon as possible, but then he and the queen had fallen in love and for a while it seemed as though the Trojan and his crew would stay in Carthage for a long time. Then, more recently, everything became . . . Elissa couldn't name exactly what the change had been, but something was different, and lately the shadow of Aeneas' departure had hung over everything like a cloud billowing up and gathering darkness into itself before a storm. Dido's entire court – advisers, servants, hangers-on – had been wondering for days. They knew it would happen but no one could say exactly *when*, and now it seemed . . . But Elissa had to be sure. She said, 'Please tell me what Maron told you.'

'You heard him. They're leaving. They're down at the harbour. The ships are being loaded and prepared; they won't sail till tomorrow morning but Aeneas and his men are already at the dock. Maron says the queen took a sleeping draught so that she'd be spared the sight of him walking away from her, but how can he know such a thing? Oh, Elissa, what shall we do now they've gone? Maron . . . I'll never see him again.'

Tanith flung herself into Elissa's arms and sobbed. Elissa stroked her back and blinked back her own tears. Ascanius – even Aeneas' little son, who had been in her care since his father came to Carthage, hadn't been allowed to say farewell to her. Tanith moved away and found a cloth with which to wipe her eyes and nose. Her face was blotched with red from too much crying.

'Can we see them?' she said. 'From the window?'

Nezral gave a snore and a snuffle and turned over in her bed. Elissa and Tanith smiled through tears as they looked at their friend.

'She'd sleep through an earthquake,' Tanith said. 'Lucky Nezral.'

Their room was high up, on the first storey of the palace, above the kitchens. Leaning over the sill as far as she dared, Elissa could see a corner of the gardens, then a slice of the city: the yellow stone of the houses along the road that led from the palace to the harbour was almost glowing in the pale grey light just after dawn. The night, she thought, is hardly over and he's gone. He must have left in the dark, like a thief, creeping out of the palace. Not wanting to speak to anyone.

'There!' Tanith pointed. 'Behind the harbour master's house. Can you see?'

Elissa looked at the tiny, insect-like creatures moving in the distance. It was hard to believe that these were men, Aeneas' crew, loading his ships. Leaving. She gazed down on them for a while, unable to think or move.

Then a scream tore through the silence, ripping into Elissa's thoughts. It was horribly loud in the still air of the early morning and was followed at once by more screams, and then shouting and sobbing and a shrieking that sounded like a trapped animal.

'It's Dido. It's the queen,' Tanith said. 'Quick, Elissa, we must help her. Come.'

They ran down the steps to the main corridor of the palace and found Dido standing in the doorway of her bedchamber, her hair wild and tangled around her face, her eyes wide and horrified, her mouth agape. The Queen of Carthage, Elissa told herself, shrieking like someone demented. She was still screaming, but her words were clear.

'Master of the guard!' Dido's eyes blazed. She was beyond tears. 'Where in the name of all the Gods is everyone when I need them? Elissa! Tanith . . . Where are my courtiers? Where is everyone?'

Elissa and Tanith watched as, from all over the palace, they came running. The master of the guard reached Dido first.

'Madam,' he breathed, falling to his knees, 'I'm here. I'm at your service.'

'Then see to it that the bed in this room is got rid of. As soon as possible. I no longer want it here. Take it away. Now. As soon as you can gather enough men to carry it. Put it in the courtyard. You' – she turned to Elissa and Tanith and two other women of the household who had appeared in the corridor – 'all of you. Follow me, please.'

Dido set off down the corridor and Elissa found herself almost running to keep up with her. When the queen reached the chamber that used to be Aeneas', she flung open the door and stepped inside.

'Here,' Dido said, walking past the bed and into the adjoining room where he kept his armour and his clothes. 'Take these. Take everything.'

There were two trunks carved from sandalwood standing against one wall. The queen opened them both and a fragrance like old forests rose in the room. 'These are his shirts, his robes, his footwear, his sword – here . . . take them all and put them in the corridor outside. When the soldiers have dealt with the bed in my chamber, I'll give orders for them to come and help you carry out this rubbish.'

'But there's so much here, my lady,' said one of the serving women. 'And of excellent quality. There are many down in the city who'd be grateful for such garments.'

'No one will wear them. I'm going to burn them. I'm going to burn everything, every single thing that reminds me of him. All his possessions. They're tainted clothes. The leather and the wool and the fine dyes and the metal clasps and the rich embroideries – I want them destroyed, d'you understand?'

Dido sat down on a stool near one of the trunks and wiped tears from her eyes with a corner of her scarf. 'They're *my* things, if the truth be told. Mine. I gave him all of it. Every single thing in here: the garments, the weapons, the ships even. I'm the one who saw to it

that the broken-down wrecks he sailed in on were made seaworthy again. I can't get the ships back. Maybe I'll make a sacrifice to Poseidon and beg him to send storms, to wreck my bastard husband on the rocks, which is what he deserves.'

She put her hands to her eyes and bent over, with her head nearly on her knees. Elissa could feel something in her own throat that was like a great lump of grief and sorrow. The queen began to moan. Elissa wanted to go and comfort her, just as she'd comforted Tanith, but her own sadness prevented her.

Another of the women came forward and said, 'Lady, don't cry. I'll take everything outside now. You'll feel better when you don't have to look at it any longer.'

Dido stood up. 'When you've finished in here, I want you to search through every single room in the palace. Collect everything – *everything* – that used to belong to Lord Aeneas, then take it to the courtyard, and when our accursed bed is in place, you can pile all his belongings on it.' She looked round at them and must have seen the horror on every face. 'And stop staring at me like that. I know exactly what I'm doing. I no longer wish to see a single reminder of Lord Aeneas anywhere near me. That's all. Go. I want this done at once.'

She swept out of her chamber, almost running. Elissa left the others to their work and ran after her.

Cubby

Just after dawn; the palace kitchen/the courtyard

He knew that they'd only chosen him to carry the bed because he was strong and big for his age. If they'd wanted someone clever, they'd have taken any one of the other lads who did menial jobs around the palace. Cubby (he'd practically forgotten his real name) had a pretty good idea what everyone thought of him. They'd called him Cubby for two reasons. When he was small, he'd been fair-haired and lively and had bounced around the kitchen and the servants' quarters like a small animal. Like a lion cub, perhaps. That was what he liked to think. But it was also true that he spent his early days sleeping in a room that was as small as a cupboard and was used to store brooms and cleaning materials. So *Cubby* more probably came from *cupboard*. He'd stopped being like a lion cub when he got older and slowed down a little. He grew heavier and his hair became a kind of muddy brown and he had a round face and often looked puzzled.

They called him dim-witted: if not exactly backward, then certainly not advanced when it came to thinking clever things. As for speaking, he was useless at that and knew it and therefore generally kept his mouth shut and his thoughts to himself. He didn't have many friends – well, none really, until Maron fetched up at the palace with his master, Aeneas.

Maron had come into the kitchen on the very first day after the Trojans arrived and spoken to Cubby just as if he were a normal person who could chat and exchange jokes and banter like anyone else. Maron, Cubby thought, always said a pleasant word whenever he happened to bump into you. And now he wouldn't do that any more. Yesterday he'd come specially to see him. They'd sat down together on the bench near the kitchen door and Cubby couldn't stop thinking about what they'd said.

'We're friends, aren't we, Cubby?' Maron smiled at him. He had very white teeth and always seemed happy. He smiled a lot and his hair was gingery and stuck up all over his head.

Cubby nodded. Maron said: 'I'm going to tell you a secret, Cubs, but you mustn't say a word, right?'

'I won't,' Cubby said.

'That's why you're such a good person to tell things to. You don't blab, do you?'

Cubby shook his head. Maron went on, 'I've come to say goodbye. We're leaving tomorrow. And I didn't want to go without saying something. Didn't want you to find out about it later on.'

Cubby felt as though someone had come along and scooped out his insides. He'd seen the cooks pulling the innards out of lambs and chickens and wild boar but those animals were dead. He was alive so it really, really hurt, and when he'd got used to how much it hurt, he felt a hollow space where his guts used to be. He wanted to say: *Why do you have to go?* But somehow the words didn't come into his mouth in time, and Maron just carried on speaking. Cubby only half listened because it was hard to concentrate when you were feeling so bad.

'He says he has to go because the Gods have told him he must over and over again. Hermes has come to him many times, he says. Actually, I thought I saw Hermes once, just flying along down by the ships, but maybe I was dreaming. Anyway, we're off. And I have to go too. Ascanius . . . he's got attached to Elissa while we've been here, but before that I was like a kind of brother to him – know what I mean? And Aeneas will need some help with the kid, right? He's getting bigger every day and boisterous as a young puppy. You know that, Cubs.'

Cubby nodded. He would miss little Ascanius too. The child didn't seem to care that no one thought very much of Cubby and he used to come to the kitchen quite often, sometimes with Elissa, and if there were sweet cakes in the larder or just out of the oven, he'd steal one for the boy and move the others around on the tray so Cook wouldn't notice that anything was missing.

'So . . . I'm going to say goodbye now.' Maron stood up. 'We're off very early in the morning. Before you're awake.' He held out his hand and Cubby took it and they stood there for a bit, and then Maron flung his arms around Cubby and hugged him, and then he left the room and Cubby hadn't seen him again. He hadn't slept well and now he felt tired and sad because he knew Maron wasn't coming back. Not ever.

But then the master of the guard came to find him in the kitchen. He'd been right in the middle of bringing in some heavy sacks of flour from the storehouse, ready for the morning's baking, and when he'd finished doing that, there were the carcasses brought down from the market to dismember and hang up in the meat pantry. This was the coolest place to be because it was underground, but it smelled of congealed blood and you started to feel sick if you stayed there too long.

'You! The fat boy – I need you,' said the master of the guard.

'Me, sir?'

'You heard me. Drop what you're doing and follow me.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Best wash your hands first.'

Cubby dipped his fingers into a bowl of water that didn't look altogether clean but had to be a bit cleaner than his hands. The master of the guard said: 'That'll do. Come along. Haven't got all day.'

Things were mad after that. Not like daily life –

more like a dream where one thing happens after another with none of them making much sense. First he was led into the palace. He was almost pushed along the dim corridors, where flaming torches still burned in holders on the walls even though the sun had risen, and into a vast chamber, which was quite empty apart from a bed, standing in the middle of the floor. This was enormous. Four or five people could sleep in it, Cubby reckoned, and not bump into one another all night long. It was made from black wood, and the high bedhead was carved with patterns of flowers and leaves and other stuff he couldn't quite make out from where he was standing. Seven soldiers stood around the bed, which was spread with a fur coverlet and heaped with cushions at the end where someone's head might rest. He'd never seen such cushions in his life before. They were plump and soft and embroidered in threads of every colour, and just looking at them made Cubby want to lay his head on one of them and sleep for hours.

'Right. Let's move it. We're late already,' said the master of the guard. 'Orders are: out of here and into the central courtyard. Pick it up, men. You' – he pointed at Cubby – 'you go there, near the middle. Ready? One, two, three, *lift*!'

Cubby couldn't imagine why the queen would want a bed moved from a bedroom into a public courtyard, but he did know why he'd been picked. He was strong. They needed one more person to carry this thing. Fine, he was up for that. Made a change to be doing

this instead of some boring task he'd done a thousand times before. Also, it took his mind off thinking about Maron. And he was with the soldiers so he could pretend to be one of them. For a moment a crazy dream filled his head. Maybe he'd do so well at this bed-moving lark that the master of the guard would say: *Leave the kitchen and come and be a soldier. I'll train you myself.*

So taken up was he with imagining his glorious career in the military that at first he didn't really notice where they were going. It was just one step after another, and as strong as he was, and even with seven other men bearing their part of the weight, this bed was a monster. His shoulder felt bruised already and they'd only just lifted the blasted thing off the ground and got it into the corridor.

Down one passage, then round the corner into another – it seemed to Cubby as though they were walking through a kind of maze. He'd never been any further into Queen Dido's palace than the kitchen and the corridors around it, and he'd never realized that it had so many rooms and turnings and spaces and halls. After taking what seemed like thousands of steps, they were in the courtyard. This was a giant version of what you'd have found in a normal house. It was so huge that it took quite a long time to walk across it from one side to the other. Cubby made up his mind to count his steps next time he wasn't carrying a bed. The courtyard was crowded with statues. Cypress trees and palm trees grew there in gigantic glazed earthenware pots,

and right in the middle there was a raised circle paved with flat stones. In the middle of the circle, a fountain spilled its water into a wide stone basin. Cubby and the others manoeuvred the bed into position beside the fountain. Now that they'd got rid of the weight, the soldiers started whispering to one another:

'Seen some action, this bed, so they say . . .'

'Surprised it's still in one piece.'

'But what's she doing getting rid of it? She must be getting rid of it or why would she put it out here, eh? It's in good enough nick for a few more shags, I'd have thought.'

'There won't be much of that. He's buggered off. She's in despair. That's what I heard.'

'Yeah, but how long will that last, eh? Someone else'll come along and then what'll she do without a bed?'

'It's not the only one in the palace, bonehead.'

'No, but it's *the* bed. Right? It's, like, the *main* bed. The bed of beds.'

'What'll happen to it now? That's what I want to know. Who puts a bed in the middle of a courtyard? Ridiculous, that is. She could have done anything with it. Moved it to a guest room. Made a gift of it to a poor family. It'll get wrecked out here. Criminal waste, I call it.'

Cubby sat down on one of the stone benches that were set under the trees. He rubbed at his shoulder, which was going to have a massive bruise on it, for sure. He hadn't realized till that moment how sore it

felt. Suddenly he became aware of someone standing behind him and he sprang to his feet. He knew it couldn't be one of the soldiers, for they were all down near the bed, laughing and talking, happy to have got shot of their burden. He turned and saw a woman leaning against one of the columns that rose from the marble floor to the roof of the colonnade. How could that be? Who was this? Cubby had never seen anyone half as beautiful in his life. Even the queen looked quite ordinary next to this lady. He gulped and shuffled his feet.

'Don't bother to speak, boy,' said this princess. She had to be at least a princess, Cubby reckoned. He had no intention of speaking, but he could see that the lady was crying. She was doing it very neatly. No bawling or red eyes for her, whoever she was. She just had a line of tears, like little pearls, creeping down her cheek. She lifted a corner of the flimsy-looking scarf she wore over her head and brushed them away.

'There! I've stopped crying now. There is no point in tears. Zeus has had his way again and that's all there is to it. Don't look so puzzled. You're too stupid to understand the ways of the Gods. I've spoken to you before – don't you remember? Never mind. You've clearly forgotten our last meeting. Dullards find it hard to keep any memory in their heads of the Gods they meet.'

'Gods? What're you on about?'

It occurred to Cubby that the woman might be drunk. Or mad. Who else would be wandering around

the palace courtyard? But now that she mentioned it, she did look a bit familiar. He tried to think where he might have seen her before, and for a few moments something fluttered at the edge of his memory, but then it was gone and no matter how hard he racked his brains, he couldn't remember a thing. He decided not to worry about it.

'You have no idea who I am, have you?' she said. 'I'm Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love. My sister, Hera, and I fostered this love and now Zeus has sent his messenger, Hermes, to speak to Aeneas, and that's that. He's seen to it that it's all over. He's taken him away from her.'

'Who? Taken who away?'

'Fool! You're nothing but a dimwit. My son, Aeneas, and his men and ships will leave Carthage very soon and it's Zeus' doing. Dido is bereft. That's why she's given orders for the bed to be brought out here.'

What did *bereft* mean? Cubby had no idea but knew it couldn't be anything good from the way she said it. Perhaps it just meant that Dido would be sad because Aeneas was leaving. Everyone knew who he was. He'd been part of life at the palace for ages. Maron had explained on the very first day that his master was a prince who came from far away, from somewhere called Troy. You couldn't live here and not know that, but how come this creature who said she was a goddess also said she was his mother? She didn't look old enough to be anybody's mother. Cubby was feeling more confused than he usually did when people told him things, and that was saying something.

He asked, 'What's going to happen to it – to the bed?'

The lady came to sit next to him on the stone bench. He blinked. Perhaps, he thought, I'm asleep and this is my dream. There was a kind of music in the air as she moved, which came, he realized, from silver bells sewn on to the hem of her dress. He could smell her now too: a fragrance like roses and almond blossom. If I put out a hand, Cubby told himself, I could touch her scarf. He imagined how it would feel under his fingers, like mist or a stream of water, but pale green and pink and threaded with gold.

She shouted at him, right in his face: 'You're stupid and witless and shouldn't be here at all. This is wasted on the likes of you. Nothing good will come of it, you can be sure of that.'

Cubby blinked. When he opened his eyes, she'd gone. The beautiful lady was nowhere to be seen.

'You!' The master of the guard was shouting at him again. 'Back inside now. Look sharp. Plenty more to bring out here. This bed's just the start of it.'

Cubby plodded along behind the other men, frowning and trying to remember what she'd said her name was. Aphra-something. What else was there to bring out? What did that mean? When would he be getting back to the kitchen? He was starting to feel a bit sleepy and stared down at his feet as they covered the ground back to the bedrooms. One foot in front of the other. Suddenly it came to him where he'd seen her before. Aphrodite – that's her name, Cubby told himself, and felt quite clever for a change, because he'd

remembered after all. It made him go red in the face just thinking about that day. He was glad the light was dim and was pretty sure the others, the real guards, hadn't noticed him blushing like a silly girl. He'd tried to put everything that had happened then out of his mind, because thinking about it made him feel confused and wobbly inside. Mostly he succeeded, but bits of what happened on the day he met Aphrodite sometimes came back to him, and then he felt a mixture of shame and a sort of longing for something he didn't quite understand. He tried to concentrate on what he was doing. He counted steps and tried to make a list in his head of all the bits and pieces he'd carried from various rooms to put on the bed, and soon the beautiful lady he'd met in the courtyard and everything she reminded him of had been pushed firmly to the back of his mind.