

Iras of the Empire

(excerpt from Part 1 – Servant at Caesarea)

By now, Iras, Mitos and Joseph had arrived at the Royal Portico, a public place of exceptional splendor that Herod the Great designed to appease the Jewish masses and compete with the finest architecture conceived by Roman engineers. In some ways, it reminded Iras of the elegance of the palace at Caesarea – also erected by Herod the Great – but even the palace had not prepared her for the grandeur of the Royal Portico. This was the place where the Sanhedrin held public court, the Jewish High Court that had supreme legal and religious authority as given by Jewish law. The Sanhedrin met at one end of the portico, under a soaring arch of decorative stone, the judge on a central throne and the rest arrayed on benches along each side, resplendent in their flowing robes and tasseled stoles. Those seeking justice approached up the center aisle, the tile beneath their feet becoming more ornate with each step closer to the throne. It was also a center of commerce, where lenders and traders did business with each other, and merchants sold their wares to the river of pilgrims rolling through the gates of the city each day.

The three friends strolled down a corridor of stately columns, each adorned at the top and bottom with rings of acanthus leaves and delicate rosettes. Torchères graced the top of each column, promising bright and safe passage at night; until then, above them still higher the clerestory rose, throwing golden ribbons of sunlight across their path. As they walked down the center aisle of four long rows of columns, they caught snatches of the prayers, speeches, conversations and debates taking place in the alcoves lining the way. They paused to rest where a large group had gathered; several men and women stood to hear a lesson from the scriptures before going into the inner temple area with the offerings they purchased in the outer courtyard. Joseph recognized by the ornate bronze inkpot and elegant styli on the bench at his side that the speaker was a scribe. But

more than a scribe, he was a man of great passion and eloquence – holding a papyrus scroll in his hand, but speaking freely as though the words had been inscribed upon his soul.

The scribe told the tale of a prostitute named Rahab whom God had favored with protection. She had shielded his emissaries from discovery by enemy forces in a land he had promised to his chosen people. Rahab gave the emissaries a hiding place on her rooftop when the enemy forces came hunting for them, and told them how to travel safely over the coming days as they studied the land God had promised them. The emissaries never forgot her kindness, and when war came, Rahab and her family found protection with God’s conquerors.

Iras was oblivious to much of the chatter around her as she listened to the riveting story – full of intrigue and the bravery of one woman who saved several men and her family, and of a god she never knew who could drive enemies out and bring a more just power in. Yet there were two men just next to her in the crowd whose conversation she could not shut out. They were much older, tall, broad, and roughly dressed like tradesmen, who seemed to have come with a special sacrifice in mind.

“Did you go to the healer like I told you?”

“I did, but she was more of a sorceress than a healer, so I went to my cousin’s healer instead. She gave me some silphium, I slipped it into ‘Tellus’ food when she wasn’t looking.”

“So what happened?”

“She got sick, but not sick enough, and her belly’s getting bigger.” He picked up a small wooden cage from the ground next to his feet. A soft, persistent chirping came from inside as he lifted it to his face. “Maybe a sacrifice will help,” he said as he peered in at the frantic creature. “If the spirits can bring a bastard, they can get rid of one.” The men laughed as he put the cage back on the ground, then they turned their attention back to the speaker.

Iras glazed over for a moment – all was opaque as she at once took in their callousness and tried to block it out of her mind. She tried to listen to the rest of Rahab’s story but couldn’t quite follow, alternately brushing her hair from the back of her neck and winding the sash of her tunic around her finger. Though in the open air, she felt both stifled and restless, and was ready to move on. She stooped down, sweeping her tunic to the side as she tightened her sandals. She stood and suggested to Mitos and Joseph that they walk along the inner colonnades bordering the open courtyard.

“The air is fresher, and I want to look for some oils,” she said.

“Me too,” said Mitos. “I love the alcoves and the incense, but such a thick crowd, it’s taking my breath away.”

Joseph led the girls through the crowd, tracing back along the colonnades some distance before they could break across to the open courtyard. Mitos was holding Joseph’s arm; she smiled and leaned in as he whispered something into her ear or sneaked a kiss to her temple. Iras trailed a bit behind her friends contentedly as they descended the stairs at the far end of the courtyard. She saw a stand of trees just beyond the wall and beckoned them to stop.

“The stalls are further down,” said Joseph as he spun Mitos playfully around at the foot of the stone steps. Iras just smiled at her friends from the landing and walked over to the wall, her hands tucked into her tunic.

“What are you up to?” asked Mitos, shading her eyes with her hand as she blinked up at Iras. Iras pulled back the fold of her tunic with one hand and carefully pulled out her other hand to reveal a small quivering dove. It was soft and grey and light as the morning mist. Back at the alcove when Iras stooped down just behind the tradesmen, she untied the latch of the cage to set the little bird free. Not certain if Iras’ hand brought cruelty or grace, the little bird had pecked her finger and Iras had to bite her lip to stifle a yelp. But she was able to quickly scoop up the little creature and secret it

into the folds of her tunic. It trembled in her hand as it journeyed down the colonnade in darkness, but now feeling the open air as it rested on her palm, the little bird ceased its trembling. Iras smiled and so did her friends, and with a gentle flick of her upraised hand, the little dove flew to freedom.

(excerpt from Part 2 – Daughter of Nubia)

Iras was a day and a night and a second day into her journey to Ephesus when she began to limp. In trying to put as much distance as possible between herself and the prefect's palace, she had pushed herself harder than she knew. There were other travelers on the road, and an occasional cartload would slow down and invite her to ride along; but still fearing the reach of Pontius Pilate, she wanted to be farther along lest close quarters with another traveler give her away.

Even with a limp, Iras had made good distance that day, and as late afternoon approached, she, like the other travelers on the road, scouted the rolling countryside for a place to sleep for the night. The road had been winding down toward a wide stream that could serve as a good place to rest. A chariot approached at a pace so slow she assumed the driver was looking for the same. Like the carts, she let the chariots pass without notice, but at this one she stopped and turned out of curiosity, as she could tell from her hearing that this was not a Roman chariot. The gait of the horse, though walking, seemed more fluid; the turning wheels and creaking carriage struck a different tone on the ground, somehow less menacing than the fortified vehicles of the legionaries.

Iras quickly took in the exquisite horse, then more slowly took in the exquisite driver. He was tall, with black hair down to his shoulders and braided in thick rows. A small leather cap shielded the top of his head. His skin was bare but a wide band encircled each of his upper arms. He wore a leather loincloth that was secured with a wide waist belt, a decorative woven panel trailing down the front. There was a large dagger in his belt, and a quiver of arrows strapped across his back.

His skin was, like hers, dark as cloves, a deep red blush graced his brow, cheeks, and lips. His body was chiseled and polished like onyx. He cast his eye quickly over Iras as he went by – his face was cleanly shaven, his mouth was full, his eyes were sharp as a falcon's. Iras met his glance, and didn't remember to breathe again until his chariot rounded the bend and rolled out of her sight.

Resuming her journey, Iras walked further down the road until she spied through the trees a clearing that was close to the stream, but high enough to offer a dry place to rest. She found a low tree with broad branches and surrounding shrubs that would give good cover should a cool breeze come through in the night. Iras pulled her sack from her shoulder, slumped down against the tree, and gave thanks for its gentle contours and cooling shade. She rested with her eyes closed for a few moments, then pulled out her water pouch and drank deeply for the first time that day, assured by the fast flowing stream that there would be plenty of fresh water when she needed more.

Up and down the stream, fellow travelers were taking their rest, or setting up their tents for the night, or starting fires for their evening meals. Though well spread out, there was a measure of safety in such numbers; men travelling alone could cause worry, but men travelling with families were always watchful and on guard against any trouble. There was one such family not far from Iras, so she felt comfortable with her spot for the night. She had also passed a small group of Roman soldiers encamped on the path down to the stream. If worse came to worst, she could reveal herself to them as a servant of Pontius Pilate – it would buy her enough time to pass the night safely and be on her way before first light. Feeling reasonably secure, Iras walked down to the stream, refilled her water pouch, washed her face and hands, and soaked her sore foot in the soothing waters. She massaged it with shea oil, bound it in a fresh linen wrap, then walked back to her tree to lay out her supper and settle in for the night.

Other travelers were not ready to settle down so soon. Several men and children, and even a few women and girls, were wading into the water further downstream for their evening baths. Iras

longed to scrub the road off her body, but when travelling alone she preferred to bathe at dawn. The water was colder then, but she was safer from prying eyes. And sometimes, if she had luck with her nets, she could treat herself to a breakfast of a fish, or a crab, or a turtle. Watching the bathers through the early evening prisms of shadow and light, Iras pulled from her bag her spare cloak and her supper of dried meat, a raisin cake, an apple, and a handful of almonds. It was simple and delicious, and almost filling enough. Even the animals were coming out for their evening meals. The deer were upstream, watchfully taking a drink far away from the bathers splashing in the current. The rabbits were hopping along the clumps of tall grass and small boulders that dotted the clearing and the waters' edge. Their meal of choice seemed to be a delicate, plentiful yellow blossom – no fewer than eight rabbits were taking their fill – their noses, whiskers and ears twitching in all directions should danger approach.

Danger came swiftly, a distant streak past the corner of Iras' eye that made no sense until she saw seven rabbits scatter and one laying still. Then, from the same direction as the streak strode the chariot driver, his bow at ease in his hand. He knelt over the fallen creature, and as he raised the arrow to examine his prize, Iras could see that the rabbit was shot cleanly through the chest and was already dead. The chariot driver laid the animal down, carefully removed the arrow, and bound the rabbit's feet. Turning and walking back toward the direction from which he came, he spotted Iras sitting in the shadows. He took a few more paces, then paused, glanced back at her again, raised the rabbit and shouted "He'll be ready just after sunset – more than enough for two." He then turned upstream and strode toward his camp.

While attending Procula's and Pilate's guests at the palace in Caesarea, there would occasionally be a man who would make Iras' eyes glaze over and her mind go blank. She'd forget what to do with her hands and walk into walls where she thought there were doors. Her mouth would go dry and her face would feel flushed. This was such a man. These men were Nubians, like

her parents and herself, and like all others who rose to prominence through trade, politics or battle in the empire, they found access to the prefects and a seat at their tables. Iras overheard their stories but never dared speak with them. Perhaps now she would have the chance.

The chariot driver had offered her the simple hospitality of the road - a fire and a meal, a bit of company to pass the time – and as much as she wanted to hear his voice again, she didn't know him and she never took such chances while travelling alone. She made up her mind to finish her meal and settle down to sleep, then unmade it again when she thought of the stories he could tell of her parent's homeland. Her resolve to stay in her own little camp strengthened and held for quite some time – until darkness fell and the first stars began to twinkle, until the wind shifted slightly and she caught the unmistakable fragrance of roasting rabbit. She inhaled deeply and smiled. She inhaled again. It wasn't just the rabbit, it was the herbs with the rabbit, a fragrance she knew from her father's fires, that he knew from his father's fires, that every man from certain parts of Nubia knew. Iras sat up, gathered up her cloak, her water pouch and her satchel, and let the fragrant smoke guide her toward the glowing fire.

He saw her before she emerged from the shadows; her cloak could not conceal her nimble body in motion. Coming into the light, he smiled and tracked her eyes with his, just for a moment dropping his gaze to study her radiant skin and graceful curves. Her eyes flickered and danced as she approached the firelight.

“Welcome,” he said, rising and extending both hands. “I am Mandulis.”

“I am Iras,” she said, the warmth of his hands lingering long after he released his gentle grasp.

Mandulis unrolled a small mat next to his in front of the fire. “Sit,” he offered to Iras, “you've come just in time. Our little friend is almost ready.”

(excerpt from Part 3 – Sorceress of Ephesus)

Pasan burst into Iras' shop and, not seeing her behind the counter, hurried through to her storage room and onto the rear yard. Not seeing her there, he came back into the store and whipped open the curtain to her prayer room. He was met by his wife's glare – hard as onyx and twice as black. With a finger to her silent pursed lips and a toss of her head to the entranced young lady next to her, Iras' gesture told Pasan all he needed to know about his transgression. He backed out of the prayer room silently and waited, pacing outside in the shelter of the massive ebony doors. Moments that seemed an eternity to Pasan passed, the young woman finally emerged from the prayer room fragrant and glowing and left the shop. Pasan entered and was stopped short again by his wife, the glare now outdone by the voice and a stern hand at his chest.

“You know better, Pasan!”

“I know, I know. I'm so sorry, but I have such exciting news I just had to come tell you,” he said, grasping her hands. “The temple priests granted me the commission for Artemis' new statue and ceremonial coins.”

“Pasan, that's wonderful! You worked so hard, more than anyone. You really deserve this!”

Pasan picked Iras up and twirled her around, their laughter ringing out into the streets.

“It's a big job, it has to be done perfectly, but they opened the temple treasury and have already given me enough to get labor and materials. I'll bring on four more men and get started tomorrow. They'll clear up the last 10 pieces we have for the governor, plus some extra amulets to have on hand for the monthly processional, then we can start on the temple coins. In the meantime I'll work on the designs for the goddess and check progress in the mines. We'll do some clay mock-ups for the priests to review and adjust...” Iras just smiled at Pasan as he rambled through his plans, his hands, his mind and his mouth competing for which could move the fastest. He caught himself

and took her hands again, settling them both on the soft cushions in the prayer room, pulling her to his chest. “Next to you and our children,” he said softly, “this is the most exciting thing I could ever hope for.”

“I’m so proud of you, your work is so beautiful it’s past time you should be recognized. But I thought Demetrius held all the temple commissions, how did this one get past him?”

“It didn’t. As usual the priests gave him first rights. But he’s been doing this a long time and right now he’s got more work than he can handle and more money than he knows what to do with. Fortunately he went back to the priests and suggested three other silversmiths for the job – me included. They chose me.”

“We owe Demetrius a debt of gratitude.”

“I know. Pasan held Iras in his arms and gazed out on the bustle of the agora just beyond her doors. “There’s always change, something new. Things move more quickly now than ever before. To have something like this – something sure and certain that I can build with my hands with you at my side, it’s everything I need. Our children are well, our work is hard but not too hard. What more can a man want in this world?”

Iras enfolded her arms around him, cherishing him in her embrace. “What can I do to help?”

He kissed his wife on her forehead. “Tonight, a delicious dinner and relaxing bath. Tomorrow we get to work. Right now,” he said as he rose, “I’m going down to the guild to look for some workers, then back to the shop.”

Iras sat basking in the heady mix of her husband’s joy and the musky incense – ribbons of smoke swirling through golden beams of sunlight. She had been faithful to Artemis and Artemis was now blessing them with good fortune. Everything happened for a reason, and was now coming together for their good. Iras said a prayer of gratitude and as she finished, the wind shifted off the bay, carrying a slight chill and the pungent smoke of other fires on the agora. Rising to close her

shutters, she saw down the back street her friend Milo tossing small scrolls into his firepit. With him were her servant Livia, and two men and a woman Iras didn't recognize. She knew from the smell that it was burning parchment, the smell she was noticing more and more in recent weeks up and down the agora. An expensive loss, she thought, better to reuse them than to burn them. She closed her shutters and returned to the dark privacy of her prayer room to prepare for her afternoon visitations.

Iras cleared the table of the sacred stones, the oil pot and the herbal sachets she had used that morning and returned them to the shelves lining her walls. Her prayer scrolls – slender strips on which the temple scribes wrote blessings from the Ephesia Grammata – were stacked neatly on the top shelf. Iras pulled from the next shelf down three bundles of herbs and two small red bowls. Iras had brought the bowls from Meroe; Naytal had used them to mix herbal cures and now Iras did the same. She reached behind a rug hanging on the wall to retrieve a precious jar of nard to mix with the herbs. Sitting on the small ornate stool her son had carved for her before moving to Colossae, her hands moved in the familiar rhythm of separating the herbs, bruising them with a small stone to release their essence in one bowl, and mixing them with a bit of the nard in the other bowl. Her eyes trailed back up to the rug on the wall, the prayer rug she wove before her flight from Caesarea. The colors were faded and pale, like so many memories, but a singular blue persisted – the blue strips from the cloak Joseph wore when they went to the river Jordan and she saw for the first time John the Baptist – shouting down the old ways of his people, the old messengers of law without mercy, and preaching the love and deliverance of the coming Messiah. A messenger with no trappings of fortune or power, so much less than Pilate or Herod – or even Demetrius or Pasan. But somehow more.

Iras closed her eyes. She tried to remember the Baptizer as she saw him first – voice booming, eyes flashing – but how she saw him last haunts her – destroyed by the king, debased by

his servants. Her hands shook, her heart raced, now as then. She couldn't forgive herself. She had polished the platter with girlish excitement – the platter that would serve up the head of an innocent prophet to entertain a roomful of monsters. She used to have nightmares – years later they would wake her screaming. Pasan would hold her and let her explain again how it happened. She found no comfort from the gods and goddesses, prayers or spells – at times even Artemis herself seemed mute. But Pasan's sheltering arms and soothing voice calmed her even if they could not absolve her. Now in the solitude of her prayer room, Iras rocked herself slowly and breathed deeply, trying to calm her body and spirit. She had to pull herself from the edge of the abyss, a dark pit that even Pasan's knowing and loving had not fathomed, where the memory of yet another man haunted her and the guilt of remembering consumed her. "If Herod is a monster for taking a life, am I not a monster too for taking a life?" She rocked and held herself, tears streaming from eyes wide open, staring into the abyss.