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It was the feast of Mithras and the doors of Artaxerxes' palace stood wide to receive the guests. Nisan, the month of flowers, was near its height, and from the sun-smitten plain the wind blew warmly laden with the fragrance of dying flowers, blew as from a censer. Within the walled enclosure stretching miles along the river bank rose the great edifice of the palace. Upon a terrace, of burnt and enamelled brickwork it stood, towering high above the plain and towards the north, terrace upon terrace, rose the hanging gardens of Queen Nitocris, waving with the luxuriance of tropical palm and tamarisk, its fountains breaking in a silver rain under a summer moon. Massive and silent stood the palace, vast, unlighted, except where towards the west its torch-illumined porticos looked

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upon the vast reservoir of Nebuchadnezzar, lying silent like a lake, and blue and starlight as the night. Over the porticos were inscriptions in gigantic characters, extolling the might of Nebuchadnezzar, builder of the palace. Guarding the entrance stood the winged bulls of Babylon and Assyria, and between them flowed a constant stream of attendants and of guests assembling for the feast. Within, the lofty rooms were vast and cool. The floors were laid in alabaster, carved and painted with inscriptions relating the glory of the Chaldean Kings. Along the corridors were sculptured bulls repeated in high relief, and in the great apartments of the King, long lines of bas-reliefs stretched from door to door. Warriors and priests, in scenes of battle and of sacrifice, passed in endless procession along the walls, their painted profiles repeating with strange exactness the features of the living warriors and priests who moved beside them. Carved with elaborate art in the soft

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alabaster, the whiteness of the bas-reliefs was richly relieved by the gold of a huntsman's beard, or spear, the blackness of curled hair and the jewels in the tiara of a monarch, while above them, on painted brick work, glowed a fantastic dream of battle and the chase. Huntsmen, horses and kings, immense, phantasmagoric, blazing with colour, and grotesque in form, shone from the lofty walls, and still higher under the shadow of the ceiling were engraved in gigantic characters the inscriptions and symbolic emblems of the gods. In the center of the palace about a courtyard, luxuriant with palms and melodious with singing birds, was the harem, while towards the north and approached by a long corridor leading past this courtyard, was the banquet hall of the King. A forest of pillars half concealed the painted walls, pillars of carved cedar wood brought from Lebanon by the Persian monarch, and decorated after the manner of the Susan palaces,

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with inlayings of uncut jewels and with plaques of gold. Behind the royal throne ran a gallery of bronze with a ceiling of enamelled azure. It was supported by a double row of smaller pillars, reposing on alabaster sphinxes, and inlaid richly with gold and gems. This was for the musicians. Between the pillars of the gallery were hung Persian embroideries of green and white and rose-colour, looped with silver cords. Over the mosaic floor were spread the famed carpets of Babylon, and rugs of brilliant dyes brought from Susa by the invading kings. Couches of gold and cedar wood were disposed about the room and ivory tables were piled high with golden vessels for the feast.

Arrion and Themistocles, who together were going to the banqueting room, found themselves in the midst of a great crowd of guests and attendants, passing in long procession through the door. Arrion saluted Beladon, the chief eunuch, who at the head of his attendant slaves took his

place behind the couch of the King, while Themistocles bowing in recognition to one and another among the officers and generals of the Persian army, paused to say a word in passing to those of his acquaintance among the priests and Chaldeans whom he encountered in the throng. In the gallery the musicians with their Lydian flutes were silent, and in silence also the guests took their places, for Artaxerxes had not yet raised his sceptre of welcome. The guests looked wonderingly at each other, murmured and looked askance. Arrion and Themistocles, taking their places on the couch which was reserved for the King's cupbearers, whispered in low voices to each other.

"'Tis, as I told thee, Master," said Arrion, "Artaxerxes plays ever at dice."

"I see, Arrion," answered Themistocles, "and I like it not. Artaxerxes is ill at ease, and Hamestris far too joyful."

"Yes, yes," replied Arrion, "and dost thou see Megabysus where he reclines with

Inarus? He is not deceived, 'tis as I told thee. They are playing even now for the life of the Egyptian King. Ah! Themistocles, 'tis cruel."

Themistocles looked about the hall, among the priests and warriors who lay upon the couches. Attendants moved noiselessly from guest to guest, offering boxes of ointment and bowls of perfumed water. The gentle breeze which found its way into the room through the windows high up in the lofty wall, caught the blue smoke of the censers, twisting it into dim veils of floating gauze. Behind the throne stood the eunuchs, their smooth and heavy faces lit with eager watchful eyes, to the right the priests, to the left the seven counsellors of the King, seated on high ivory chairs about the table of honour which was reserved for them, and each wearing the fillet of his royal office. Just beyond, among the generals and soldiers, was Megabysus, the conqueror of Egypt. On his couch he lay, his brown hands, strong as a giant's,

holding fast his sword. His large eyes blazed with anger, and his bronzed face was flushed and frowning. Beside him, livid with terror and crouching on the floor, lay the captive king, Inarus the Egyptian. Artaxerxes, leaning on one arm, watched Hamestris, the queen-mother, who held the ivory squares high in her hand, pausing for the throw. Behind Hamestris, half concealed by the draperies which hung between the pillars of the gallery, were the women of the palace, summoned to the feast of Mithras by order of the King. Greeks and Persians mingled with brown-skinned women from India and Arabia; their dark and velvety eyes peered out with a bright curiosity from the floating shadow of the many-coloured curtains.

Arrion, who was leaning forward on his couch, to peer into the shadow, suddenly flushed scarlet, for he had seen Miriam. She stood in the shade of the gallery holding a long fan with crest of ostrich plumes

over the head of the queen-mother, to protect her eyes from the blazing light of a tripod which flamed too brightly near her. She stood quite still, waving the long plumed fan, with a gentle graceful motion over the head of the Queen.

"Arrion," exclaimed Themistocles, "seest thou not? 'Tis Miriam. She has been appointed chief attendant to the queen-mother."

"Yes, yes, I see," answered Arrion in a troubled voice, "a perilous honour. She is ever in the presence of the King."

A low murmur reached his ears. "Ishtar," whispered the priests, "'tis the maiden whom the people hail as Ishtar." "Ishtar," repeated the soldiers, "'tis the goddess."

Arrion looked upon her in wonder. Was this his childhood's love and playmate? The smiling, tender face he knew was still as carved alabaster, its noble beauty enhanced to an almost mysterious impressiveness by the high coiffure and the jewels

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which bound her brow. Tresses of pearls attached to her temples fell against her cheeks, and her large eyes lengthened by kohl, looked out from under her wide, arched brows with an expression of mystic innocence like some strayed spirit. Standing thus before them in the gorgeous garments of the court, she seemed indeed a goddess, high and unapproachable. What place had she among the painted women and the drunken courtiers of the palace? Arrion's hand clenched the handle of his wine-cup, while his heart grew hot with helpless rage. The King's eyes were upon the girl, turning ever from Hamestris' face to gaze upon her.

Hamestris spoke impatiently. "Artaxerxes, 'tis thy cast. We play at dice. Your Majesty forgets."

The King rose half-way on his arm, setting his feet, in their pointed saffron shoes upon the lion-footed stool which stood beside the couch, and impatiently he cast aside the embroidered coverlet

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which lay upon his knees. Over the couch was set the famous canopy of Samos, wrought marvelously by Theodorus in gold, its grapes of carven emerald and chrysolite, hanging in shining clusters over the monarch's head.

Artaxerxes was attired for the feast in a royal candys of purple and a scarlet tunic, gold-embroidered and encrusted with a multitude of jewels. On his curled and perfumed hair was set the tiara of the Persian Kings, a scarlet cap set with gems, and bound with a white and azure fillet. In his ears were heavy crosses of wrought-gold and about his neck a golden collar. In this jewelled dress the beauty of the King was as imposing as that of a sculptured idol. Artaxerxes had inherited the strength and the splendid stature of his father Xerxes, and the beauty of his grandmother, the world famous Atossa. His eyes were large and almond shaped, with an expression soft as velvet and singularly sweet, his lips were full and

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red, and the nose beautifully aquiline. The dreamy boy who only reached the throne through the service of another, was still dreamy, but grown now into a voluptuary, generous to his favourites, indulgent to himself; a dangerous power when swayed by the will of another. Megabysus knew him well. He knew that his own services to the King would avail him little against the influence of Hamestris who was ever at his side. He watched this game on which hung the life of his captive, with rising anger and with plans for vengeance growing in his resourceful mind.

Hamestris still held the dice, but her hand had fallen to the table, as she watched with impatience the wandering gaze of Artaxerxes. Her hawk-like eyes gazed fiercely at the King, and her hand grasped nervously the arm of her ivory chair.

Arrion looked on with growing apprehension. "Thou sayest truth, Themis-

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tocles," he whispered with bated breath, "the woman is cruel, merciless. Pray to thy gods that the dice may fall against her."

Artaxerxes' reluctant gaze returned to Hamestris. "Play on," he said, "the cast is thine."

Suddenly there was a stir and a murmur of astonishment and fear, for Megabysus, braving the anger of the King, rose from his couch, and prostrated himself to the floor.

"Artaxerxes, live forever!" his deep and resonant voice rang through the silent room, "May thy power reach from the setting of the sun to its uprising. Thou knowest, O King, that I have led thy armies to victory, thou rememberest that since thy childhood I have delivered over thy enemies into thy hands. By my power Artabanus fell, and Darius, thy brother, who wished thy throne. I have led thy forces to victory in Egypt. I have brought captive the king who warred

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against thee, but he has my word that he shall live. Well thy servant knowest that the queen-mother importunes thee for his life, for she would avenge the glorious death of Achaemenides, her son. Be merciful, O King, be merciful; give me his life."

Artaxerxes stretched out his sceptre over the head of Megabysus. His mild eyes wavered, his long hands trembled on the handle of the sceptre. He knew well what it would mean to him to lose the first general of his empire, but he had given his word to Hamestris, and he wavered.

"Rise, Megabysus," he said, at last, "I shall remember thy services and reward thee for them, but 'tis thy word against ours. Inarus has thy word that he shall live, and to Hamestris I have promised that she shall have her will with the Egyptian, if the dice fall for her. The gods shall decide."

Megabysus, hearing the answer of the

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King, knew that he had spoken in vain, and pale with anger, he rose, and as he strode in silence to his couch, muttered with a glance at his soldiers, "'Tis a court of women."

The soldiers and generals murmured, as Hamestris again raised her hand for the cast. Her wrinkled throat throbbed under its load of jewels, and her breath came quickly in her excitement. Suddenly from behind the curtains a woman darted forward, and seized the hand of Hamestris. A woman splendidly beautiful, with painted cheeks and blazing eyes.

"Mother," she cried, "Hamestris! stay, I would save Inarus." With a furious gesture Hamestris struck down her hand.

"Have done, Amytis, I spared thy husband, Megabysus lives; but with this cast, if the gods will, I win the life of Inarus. Begone, dare thou to interfere, and thou art no longer Amytis, and my daughter."

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Amytis fell upon her knees beside her mother and clutched her dress in terror; she had seen the eyes of Megabysus, and from the curtain's shadow she had heard his prayer to Artaxerxes, and knew that he would not forgive the insult put upon him.

Once more Hamestris raised her hand, and in the silence of the listening court, the dice fell with an ominous clicking sound upon the ivory table, then her voice cried out triumphantly "'Tis mine, the cast is mine, my son shall be avenged."

Then rising to her full height and pointing to Inarus, where he lay, she spake —

"And thou, Inarus, slayer of my son, the gods have delivered thee into my hands. Thy life is mine, and thou shalt surely die."

A murmur of horror and dismay filled the room, but no one dared to speak. The King flushed deeply, and looked askance at Megabysus, who drew his sword and held it over the prostrate and

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trembling Inarus, and for a moment there was breathless silence. Then the King beckoned to the guard of Ethiopian slaves who stood beside his couch, and they approached and putting aside the sword of Megabysus, furious but helpless in their hands, they bound the captive, and half led, half carried him from the banqueting room. Hamestris, leaning back in her chair, watched them with triumphant eyes, but Megabysus, who might not openly defy the King, or leave the palace unpermitted, sat silently, pale and stern as a marble statue.

The King looked toward him with a clouded brow. "Megabysus," he said, "thy humour is not joyful. Mithras, the god of sunshine and of wine will not be honoured by thy presence, wouldst leave the feast? For now we drink and would be merry."

Megabysus rose, "Neither Mithras nor Artaxerxes hath need of me. No, nor conquered Egypt, nor the armies of Persia

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and of Babylon. The King needs not his generals, I go and I return not to this dishonoured court." He turned to Amytis, who was sitting at Hamestris' feet, and his stern face softened as he regarded her.

"Wilt go with me, Amytis? Although in vain, it was thy will to plead for me, wilt leave the palace and thy wicked mother? In the tent of Megabysus there is room for thee, wilt come?"

A wavering smile curved the lips of Amytis, but her eyes turned toward her mother, whose fierce gaze held her captive and slowly she shook her head.

"Thou wilt return, Megabysus," she said in a coaxing voice. "I will await thee." Megabysus' face grew purple and with a threatening gesture,

"Wanton," he thundered, "fit daughter of thy mother! Cursed be the day I saw thee. Farewell! Thou seest my face no more! Farewell, Artaxerxes.

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The day may come when thou wilt call for me. Farewell, Hamestris, I shall remember thee!"

Themistocles and the counsellors were grave and troubled, but Artaxerxes and Hamestris laughed, and Amytis looked back at Megabysus with a careless smile, as the dishonoured general took his way from the royal presence.

Then the feast began. "Wine," cried Artaxerxes. "Bring wine. I see not Nehemiah, whose turn it is to serve. Quick, Arrion, the wine of Helbon and a brimming goblet."

In an open space before the couch of the King a silver crater brimmed with wine, near by stood a eunuch, crushing in a marble mortar intoxicating drugs and perfumes. He advanced at the word of the King and poured the fragrant dust into the bowl. The rosy liquid foamed and Arrion leaping to his feet dipped deep the golden cup. Then holding it deftly on three fingers of his left hand after the

manner of the royal cupbearers, he presented it to the King. In his right hand he held the cover of the cup and over his shoulder was thrown an embroidered napkin. Artaxerxes drank deeply, his frowning brow cleared, and looking about the hall, he held out his sceptre in greeting to his counsellors and generals, and to Themistocles, to whom he spoke with favour.

"I still have generals, though not of my own family. Themistocles, I greet thee!" And he held the goblet toward him. "Thou hast found favour in this court. Xerxes, my father, honoured thee, and I may have need of thee."

Themistocles bowed his gray head to the floor. "The son of Xerxes shall be obeyed. Honour and gratitude are ever due thee from Themistocles." He answered gravely, but as he took his place again on his couch, Arrion saw that his brow was clouded, his dark eyes full of thought.

The guests breathed now more freely, seeing that the King looked kindly on them, and attendants began to pass the golden goblets carved with lions' feet, which were filled with date wine from Armenia, or with the heady liquor called Sikaru, made from corn.

In the gallery the musicians began a song to Mithras, accompanied by the sound of flutes and typanums, and Artaxerxes, drinking always of the wine of Helbon, gazed happily at his people and anon joined in the song.

"Thou hast won Inarus," he said to Hamestris, "when next we play 'twill be for the maid who stands beside thee. come hither, Miriam. I would speak to thee." And he extended his jewelled hand to the girl who slowly and reluctantly approached.

Arrion turned to Themistocles, whispering in a frightened voice, "Master, thou hast seen. The King summons her to his side."