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To Romans I set no boundary in space or time. I have granted them dominion, and it has no end.

— *Virgil, The Aeneid*

### ***Alternate History***

*Moses fails in leading his people out of Egypt and the Israelites are returned to captivity. Because the Hebrews cannot settle in Palestine, Jesus of Nazareth is not born. Christianity does not develop.*

*The evolution of the Roman Empire is altered. Where Christianity was named the official Roman state religion by Constantine, Islam — spreading quickly through the eastern half of the Empire — takes its place. The partnership between Rome and Constantinople endures, governed now by Caesar and Caliph. The Empire defends the Barbarian attacks on its borders and never falls, expanding across all of the known world.*

*Egypt thrives under Roman dominion as a valuable source of wealth and knowledge. Egyptian ships and explorers are the first to circumnavigate the globe and Alexandria's great libraries and universities produce the world's greatest minds. Roma may rule, but Aegyptus is the technological power of the New World...*

### ***The Prophet*** ***Christopher J. Levinson***

AUC 2633 (*ab urbe condita* - 'from the founding of the city')  
(AD 1880)

**When I was a girl my father told me that all roads lead to Roma.** I have never doubted him.

Urbs Roma is the greatest of cities, greater than Parisi or fair Alexandria or Constantinopolis in the East. Roma controls all trade and travel, and so all paths of consequence lead there.

And so I too find myself making the journey, sent by my father to marry a Roman prince.

Once reaching the Bay of Neapolis, a metal carriage carries me to Roma. This is something few people have ever seen before, a thing of steel and wood and wheels without horses, and I often see curious townsfolk ogling us on the way. Like much technology in the Empire this vehicle comes from my homeland of Aegyptus, and I think people will have to become accustomed to such sights before too long. The old ways are swiftly dying; already we have bicycles and these carriages too will spread quickly throughout the Empire.

It is a very long journey, but at last we arrive. First are the sights of the Imperial tombs lining the Via Appia, and then finally we see magnificent Roma itself, with its white marble-sheathed walls rising before us. The city has been rebuilt often but

structures still survive from the times of Augustus and Julius Caesar and Tiberius; I feel Roma's past all around me.

Now we are in the streets. Here is the great Coliseum where men are killed for sport, now the Forum and the Capitol; scattered throughout are the great mosques of Roma, and people in their thousands. Chariots, bicycles, horses, men and women cursing and jostling each other... so many elements combine that daily life here seems utterly chaotic... yet this is orderly for Roma. This is just the way things are.

"Lady Aaliyah, we're nearing the palace," Illithen says.

"Yes," I say quietly. "And a new life."

"You don't wish to be here, m'Lady," she says.

I turn from the window to face my handmaiden. "You know me too well, Illithen," I say. "No, in truth I don't desire to be here. Roma is beautiful but does little for me. I feel... hollow inside."

"We should be careful in saying such things, m'Lady," she says. "The walls of Roma have many ears. But if you are truly unhappy, I'm sure your father would understand your returning to Aegyptus."

"Would he? And would Valerius understand as well? No. There is too much at stake to turn back. This is my chosen fate and I must abide it."

"And what of love, m'Lady?"

"What of it? This is Roma, Illithen. Love doesn't exist here; only flesh and sin. This union with Valerius will benefit both our peoples. That's all I need to know."

Illithen listens to me, but says nothing.

A small entourage is waiting for us inside the palace grounds. Illithen opens the carriage door and assists me down the steps.

I turn to face Valerius Junipater Caesar, brother of the Emperor. "My Lady, I welcome you to Roma," he says. His voice is strong and firm; he is as handsome as I have been told. "I trust your journey was not too arduous?"

"Tiring, Caesar," I say, the Latin strange on my tongue, "but I'm humbled to be standing in your city. In Alexandria I heard stories of Roma's magnificence but this truly exceeds all of them."

"Roma humbles everyone," Valerius replies. "I wonder how any can doubt Allah means for Roma to rule when they have lain eyes upon our city?"

"Indeed," I say. But in truth the past ten years have been filled with numerous uprisings in the Roman provinces. The world is far from at peace and Valerius knows it.

The disturbances are the reason for our arranged marriage. For years Roma has feared Aegyptus rebelling and losing its annual harvests of grain. My father is the

Roman prefect, but prefects are more like Pharaohs themselves now, intermarried with Aegyptian royalty and no longer loyal to Roma. This marriage between Valerius and I will supposedly ensure Roma of our allegiance; in return our taxes will be lowered. All I have ever been is a bargaining tool — but in the Islamic Roman Empire, when have women ever been much more?

Valerius inclines his head. "It is good you have arrived, Lady Aaliyah. I'll leave you now to settle. Perhaps we can dine together tonight?"

"I look forward to it," I say.

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**After dining with Valerius I return to the rooms I have been given and call for Illithen.** She brings me peasant clothes and a burka and assists me in changing. Ten minutes later we move through the palace unnoticed until we are outside.

"Are you sure this is wise, m'Lady?" Illithen asks. "Things are different here to how they are in Aegyptus. This is Roma. It isn't safe to be out alone after dark."

I touch her shoulder reassuringly. "I'll be fine. I know where I need to go."

"I could come with you, m'Lady."

"No, Illithen. I need you here to cover my absence. But thank you. I mean that."

She leaves me, going back inside, still looking over her shoulder. I sigh and start off into the streets.

I have found that to learn about people, you must see how they truly live; otherwise you will only see what someone *wants* you to see. To learn more about the common people here I must become one of them, walk amongst them, as I have done in Aegyptus before. These clothes Illithen has brought me are an adequate disguise; none would know I am an Aegyptian princess.

So I walk amongst the people, looking at their tenements and towers and monuments, seeing how they live in this the greatest of cities.

Slowly I make my way to the religious sector of Roma. Many temples have arisen in this area that provide for the non-Muslim subjects of Roma — for the cults Roma willingly fosters to keep its people peaceful. It is also known as the underworld, for there are buildings here as well that deal with magic and pleasures of flesh.

Soon I am one of hundreds of people moving between gargoyles, statues and shrines. Most faiths are represented; temples for the cults of Sol Invictus, Mithras, Marduk, Jupiter Imperator, Apollo, Cybelle, Isis, a hundred more. In-between stalls sell religious goods like ritual blades and small statues; others sell magic potions and introductions to the dark arts. Then there are other buildings; the Roman whorehouses, the catacombs of Holy Prostitutes, the labyrinth of the Maenads, the drugbars that destroy body, mind and soul.

This is the real Roma, city of flesh and sin.

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I notice a man watching me. He has been tending a stall and ordinarily I would not pay him any attention... only there is something captivating about his gaze.

"Have I done something to interest you?" I ask.

A small smile finds its way to his lips. "You just don't seem to belong here. You'll find many temples in this area, yes, but few mosques."

"I'm not Muslim," I say. "I thought I might fit in better dressed like this."

"Then what are you looking for here?" he asks.

"Nothing. Or maybe everything," I reply. "I'm not really sure."

"You are an interesting woman." He busies himself closing his stall, packing away items into a wooden box. "My name is Benjamin."

I hesitate before approaching the stall. "Aaliyah. Do you sell these to live, or for your faith?"

"A little of both, I suppose," Benjamin answers. "I don't go to temple much, and these are my income, but I only sell items to do with my beliefs."

I pick up one of his artefacts, a small cylindrical statue. He has a half dozen of them. "What's this?"

"A chariot to the stars," he says, taking it from me and putting it away. "They will take us toward God, toward His Brightness."

"What faith are you?" I ask.

"I am Hebrew, more or less. I believe in Yahweh, but also in the Coming of His Son."

"The Son of God?"

"Yes. The Romans have opened the borders of Syria Palaestina and some of our people have settled there. At last we are in the Holy Land, and the Son of God will come to us now. I have seen Him in my dreams, and the chariots as well."

"You speak like a prophet," I say.

"I'm Chosen by God, for whatever that means," Benjamin replies, returning to closing his stall.

I fall silent. There's a strength in Benjamin I haven't encountered before. I feel a spark inside me; I want to hear more. It could be the only thing that, after coming here to Roma, leaving my life behind, will make me feel alive again.

"Will you tell me what you saw?" I ask. "I've been searching for something. I... I want to hear what you have to say."

For a long time he says nothing. At last when he has finished closing and has the wooden box under his arm, he looks back at me. "Come with me and I'll tell you," he

says.

I nod. Benjamin offers me his hand and we walk away.

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**Benjamin takes me to his home.** He leaves me in the dining room and I remove my burka. There is not much here, only a few pieces of furniture and pottery. I sit at a large table. In the corridor outside two children play, laughing as they chase each other.

A woman enters, bringing a jug of water and two glasses. "I am Daphne. You're here to speak with Benjamin?"

I nod. "Yes. You're married?"

"Ten years now," Daphne says. "I love him very much." She smiles at me, pours water into my glass, and retreats to the kitchen.

Benjamin returns and sits opposite me, opening a scroll on the table. It is a diagram of his chariot, his ship. Text underneath details its workings. "I drew this after seeing it in my vision," he says. "Then I heard a voice telling me about combustion, acceleration, mass, thrust, things I don't understand, but I wrote them all down."

I study the scroll. "The Romans say spaceflight is impossible."

"And I believed that my whole life," Benjamin says. "But I saw this chariot sailing toward another world and I *know* it's possible. I just know." He looks at me. "Are you ready?"

I nod, and listen.

The vision had come to him three years ago while he slept. It had started with an image of a child being born, a child who would teach the world peace and love. As a man he would be betrayed and put to death. But a voice told Benjamin he was meant to die, for through his sacrifice the sins of the world would be forgiven.

The death of the Son of God would create a new faith in Roma that would change the Empire, inspiring a renaissance. A ship unlike any other would be created, one that could fly on streaks of fire, and people on the Earth would kneel and pray and sing as they watched it soar into the heavens. The Israelites would command it, voyaging ever-deeper into space to witness the face of God shine amongst the stars. The first ship would be sent to the moon and then there would be successive waves of these spindly chariots journeying outwards, forming settlements on other worlds, carrying Man forth to understand the wonder of God's universe.

Benjamin falls silent. I find that I am touched by his passion, but I cannot believe in all he has said, not in a God of love who allowed children to suffer and die. But the idea of these ships voyaging to other worlds stirs something inside me I have not felt for a long time: the desire to dream. In this possibility I find I want to believe.

I look at him. "Could we really do this?"

"I can only say what I believe," he replies. "You must listen to *your* own heart. What does it tell you?"

"That one day we will walk on the sands of another world," I say, a small smile forming on my lips.

"You see? You do have something to believe in after all," Benjamin says, returning the smile.

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**Three days later Illithen runs into my rooms.** "He's dead, m'Lady."

I close my eyes, knowing immediately she means Benjamin. She has been trying to learn more about the followers of the Son of God; she can mean no-one else.

"He was silenced by order of the Emperor. It's the lead story in all the news-scrolls. They say Benjamin was a threat to the Pax Romana."

I picture Benjamin as I last saw him, smiling, talking about his faith. He had been no threat to the Empire; most likely his ideas would never have come to pass. But they feared Benjamin just the same, and had silenced him to stop his words from spreading further.

"There's more, m'Lady," Illithen continues. "The news-scrolls say it was Valerius who brought the matter to his brother and pushed for execution... only it was not just Benjamin, m'Lady, but his family as well. They slaughtered them all."

"Valerius did this?" I say softly, then finally open my eyes. "I need to see their home, Illithen. I need to see where it happened."

Twenty minutes later we walk through the streets of Roma, disguised in peasant garb, until we reach Benjamin's house. The door is unlocked and we move through.

It is a mess. Chairs and tables are overturned, glass and pottery lies shattered on the floor. There are bloodstains in the bedrooms and on the stairwell. I remember Daphne, remember their children playing. The images are ruined for me now; all I see are Roman guards slitting their throats.

I touch one of the walls. "I'm sorry," I say. "You did nothing to deserve this."

Out of the corner of my eye I see the wooden box Benjamin put his models in, lying on the floor. I bend down to pick it up. Five ships have survived inside, and the scroll.

I tuck the box under my arm. I will pass it on to my father in Aegyptus to show to our best minds. If anyone will know if this idea of spaceflight is truly possible, it will be in my homeland. This I will do for Benjamin, and for myself. Our dreams don't deserve to die like this.

"Shall we go, m'Lady?" Illithen asks, taking my arm. "There's nothing left for us here."

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I walk with her, wondering how I can ever face Valerius again, let alone marry him.  
For my people, I suppose; as always.

Pausing by the door, I say, "I cannot believe in his God, but for what it's worth, I hope  
they find peace."

Illithen nods sadly. Together we walk back out into the streets.