

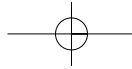
Startling her, he dropped to one knee and smeared her burning legs with the jar's fragrant paste. His fingers were cool and sure against her sun-seared skin. The pain vanished, and she was shocked. She hadn't known a man could touch a she-brat and not hurt it.

It made her wonder what else she did not know.

When he was finished he pocketed the jar and stood, staring down at her. "Do you have a name?"

A stupid question. She-brats were owed no names, no more than the stones on the ground or the dead goats in the slaughter-house waiting to be skinned. She opened her mouth to say so, then closed it again. The Trader was almost smiling, and there was a look in his eyes she'd never seen before. A question. Or a challenge. It meant something. She was sure it meant something. If only she could work out what . . .

She let her gaze slide sideways to the mud brick hovel and its mean kitchen window, where the woman thought



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she could not be seen as she dangerously watched the trading. The woman who had no name, just descriptions. *Bitch. Slut. Goatslit.* Then she looked at the man, shaking with greed, waiting for his money. If she gave *herself* a name, how angry it would make him.

But she couldn't think of one. Her mind was blank sand, like The Anvil. Who was she? She had no idea. But the Trader had named her, hadn't he? He had called her something, he had called her—

She tilted her chin so she could look into his green and gleaming eyes. "He – kat," she said, her tongue stumbling over the strange word, the sing-song way he spoke. "Me. Name. Hekat."

The Trader laughed again. "As good a name as any, and better than most." He held up his hand, two fingers raised; his fat friend tossed him a red leather pouch, clinking with coin.

The man stepped forward, black eyes ravenous. "If you like the brat so much I will breed you more! Better than this one, worth twice as much coin."

The Trader snorted. "It is a miracle you bred even this one. Do not tempt the god with your blustering lest your seed dry up completely." Nostrils pinched, he dropped the pouch into the man's cupped hands.

The man's fingers tore at the pouch's tied lacing, so clumsily that its contents spilled on the ground. With a cry of anguish he plunged to his knees, heedless of bruises, and began scrabbling for the silver coins. His knuckles skinned against the sharp stones but the man did not notice the blood, or the buzzing black flies that swarmed to drink him.

For a moment the Trader watched him, unspeaking. Then he trod the man's fingers into the dirt. "Your silver has no wings. Remove the child's chains."

The man gaped, face screwed up in pain. "Remove . . . ?"

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The Trader smiled; it made his scarlet scorpion flex its claws. "You are deaf? Or would like to be?"

"Excellency?"

The Trader's left hand settled on the long knife at his side. "Headless men cannot hear."

The man wrenched his fingers free and lurched to his feet. Panting, he unlocked the binding chains, not looking at the child. The skin around his eyes twitched as though he were scorpion-stung.

"Come, little Hekat," said the Trader. "You belong to me now."

She followed him to the waiting slave train, thinking he would put his own chains about her wrists and ankles and join her to the other naked slaves squatting on the ground. Instead he led her to his camel and turned to his friend. "A robe, Yagji."

The fat Trader Yagji sighed and fetched a pale yellow garment from one of the pack camel's baskets. Barely breathing, the child stared as the thin Trader took his knife and slashed through the cloth, reducing it to fit her small body. Smiling, he dropped the cut-down robe over her head and guided her arms into its shortened sleeves, smoothed its cool folds over her naked skin. She was astonished. She wished the man's sons were here to see this but they were away at work. Snake-dancing, and tending goats.

"There," said the Trader. "Now we will ride."

Before she could speak he was lifting her up and onto the camel.

Air hissed between the fat Trader's teeth. "Ten silver pieces! Did you have to give so much?"

"To give less would be insulting to the god."

"Tcha! This is madness, Abajai! You will regret this, and so will I!"

"I do not think so, Yagji," the thin Trader replied. "We were guided here by the god. The god will see us safe."

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He climbed onto the camel and prodded it to standing. With a muffled curse, the fat Trader climbed onto his own camel and the slave train moved on, leaving the man and the woman and the goats and the dogs behind them.

Hekat sat on the Trader's haughty white camel, her head held high, and never once looked back.