

THE MAUSOLEUM MURDER

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extract from chapter 5

The palace was a blur of marble, rich furnishings, Persian rugs and gilded ornaments, through which Alexis and Kichesias followed the King and the Princess in nervous silence. Finally, the King stopped before a pair of heavy doors guarded by two massive slaves with oiled skin and lily-flower designs burnt into the palms of their right hands.

Seeing the Princess, one of the slaves silently opened the door. Phoebe stood on tiptoe and kissed her father on the cheek, then beckoned to Alexis and Kichesias and led them past the impassive guards. The door thudded shut behind them.

Alexis didn't know what he'd been expecting. Giggling women, maybe, with pale, sun-starved flesh. But the corridors and rich furnishings continued on this side of the doors just as they had on the other. The only differences were the lily-branded slaves standing with folded arms at every junction, female voices rather than male ones drifting out of the shadows, and some small children playing chase around the statues. Phoebe cast a furtive look around and hurried them up a small staircase and along an upper corridor until she reached a door locked with a complicated bar mechanism. She produced a key from under her skirt, quickly unlocked the bar, and pushed them through into an unlit hall filled with peculiar silhouettes and an unpleasant, musty smell. She pulled the door to and applied a rope lock across the handles.

As soon as they were alone, the princess' manner changed. She hitched up her long skirt and grinned broadly at them. "It's all right, we're safe in here. This is my private place. The other women are too scared to come up here. Well? Aren't you going to say thank you?"

Alexis grimaced. "Did you have to slap me back there? That hurt, you know."

Kichesias elbowed him. "Princess Phoebe just rescued us from being interrogated," he hissed. "We're really grateful," he added, smiling at her. "Thank you."

Alexis sighed. "Thank you," he said grudgingly. "But we can't stay long. My stepmother will be wondering where we are. We just want a look at that body, and then we'll leave you in peace."

Phoebe wasn't listening. She moved through the hall, lighting lamps, while the silhouettes took on three-dimensional forms around her. Kichesias caught his breath. A chill crept over Alexis.

Crouched on the floor of the hall, as if they'd been surprised there and turned to stone, were some of the ugliest statues he'd ever seen. Some had been clumsily painted in lurid colours, with glowing emeralds or amber for eyes and gold-plated claws. Others had what looked like real blood on their teeth and around their snarling lips. There were centaurs – part man and part horse with long, scowling faces and curly beards. There were harpies and sirens, dragons and gryphons, and many more creatures so beloved of the story-tellers who entertained the crowds in the agora. Some were as small as his hand, others life-sized, and there was one massive white monstrosity, still raw and unpolished, with the forepart of a lion, a goat's head growing out of its back, and a snake for a tail. Someone – maybe Phoebe – had painted its three pairs of eyes red. Between the statues were other, more horrible things, the things that were making the smell. Mummified cats, a stuffed peacock with its tail spread permanently in a fan, a mangled thing that might once have been a fish but had frog's legs and human hair sewn on to it... and in pride of place, lying on a bench in the centre of the hall, was the corpse the soldiers had pulled out of the Mausoleum drains. Its dark, crystallized limbs glittered in the light of the lamps that Phoebe was carefully placing around it.

Alexis felt bile rising in his throat. "You can't keep my father's body in here!" he cried.

Find out Alexis solves the mystery of his father's murder while his city is besieged by Alexander the Great in "The Mausoleum Murder".