

READBEAST

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Cast of main characters:

Caligula: Emperor. Mad, but definitely not dull.

Helena Fundius: widowed noblewoman of Imperial ambitions.

Pertinax: overseer of Helena Fundius's estates.

Naissa: slavegirl, recently purchased.

Lenia: older slavewoman, initiate of Demeter.

Martio Imperus: newly made Consul of Rome.

The Goddess Demeter. Off on Olympia, but still in touch.

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The banquet was reaching its end, in the splendid Imperial palace high on the Palatine Hill overlooking the sprawling mass that was Rome. Splendour shone everywhere, from the white brimming marble of the pillars to the costly rugs, loot of empire, that were scattered underfoot to be trampled and ground underfoot by the jewelled sandals of the guests.

Helena Fundius looked across the wild scene over a brimming goblet of Thyrnian wine, the rich vintage mostly ignored as her narrow-slitted gaze swept the room. Those deep-set, mascara'd eyes missed nothing. From the hurrying slaves and servants in their plain white tunics, to the sprawling piles of nobles engaged in swilling princely wines and enjoying whatever pleasures came to mind. With a squeal, a slave would be pulled into the heaving mass of bodies, male or female, to be used as the decadent court desired.

She smiled. Emperor Caligula did know how to throw a good party. Recalling her own impoverished estate on the Esquiline Hill to the East, she decided to enjoy herself tonight. There wasn't much future for a widow with her past, without prospects.

Reclining languidly in the couch, Helena looked the very image of a Roman matron. Round of hip, plump but pleasing, her hair piled in the latest coiffure - appearances were so important, now she had so little else left. A little past forty, she had gone through two husbands before her thirtieth year - marrying penniless young officers, who she had shrewdly chosen as likely to get ahead. She had chosen well: both Severus and Cornix had had the good luck to come back laden not with promotions but good, hard loot - and the bad luck to not come home at all, after both being sent to the wars in the endless forests of Germania.

There was a stir from the raised dais. Caligula the Golden was rising to his feet, a goblet in hand. He waved away the trio of senators who had been whispering their latest betrayals to him, and gestured for silence.

"Subjects, countrymen," he gazed at the enthralled crowd, those who were on top turning to look interested. "As you may know, the Senate has been having a few - differences of opinion, with some of my... more innovative proposals." He stared down at them, eyes glazed.

Helena shivered. It was rumoured that the Emperor was not-so- slightly insane, and it was definitely insane to argue with him. Only Senators and Consuls were safe from being thrown into the arena at his whim - for those, he needed a well forged excuse. With just a few more seats in the senate, though, he could set about changing any law he pleased.

"So..." the boyish face took on a hellish glee, blonde hair damp with sweat in the humid August air. "I have decided to make a new consul, and have the backing of my Divine Will to do it. Welcome one

who has supported me faithfully for three long years - Consul of Rome, Martio Imperus!"

There was an automatic spattering of applause. And then it stopped, every eye glued to the parting curtains as the newly created noble entered the room. Nobody had recognised the name - but they all recognised the face.

Martio was a pure-bred roman, of the type that had served the Empire for centuries; he had even been born of a long and proud line. Muscles rippled under his skin; the hair was much the same yellow-gold as the Emperor who he had indeed supported, in the most direct way possible.

Nice tail, Helena thought to herself as she raised a fascinated eyebrow. Fourteen hands high, hooves shining with gilt shoes, and hung like a horse. Which was hardly surprising.

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"And all of Rome's talking of nothing else!" Naissa paused in her labour of sweeping the steps of the Fundus mansion. It was an eternal task: her mistress should have had a dozen extra slaves to work the house. "Whatever folk think about our Emperor, he's not stupid. Votes that aren't against him, count as for."

Naissa straightened up. Nineteen years old, she was thin and hard-muscled by a lifetime of work and little thanks. But then, her family had been Carthaginians, one of the thousands brought to Rome two generations earlier. She brushed the dust off her thin tunic, the coarse white linen hiding her small breasts, unbound beneath the robe.

Lenia, the cook, cast a wary eye towards the fountain garden. "Best keep working: the Mistress is in a bad mood today. Didn't get back till dawn, up at the palace. You know what she's like at the best of times.

Naissa shivered. She had been the last purchase Milady Fundius had made, before the unfortunate financial deal in Samartian wares had forced the estate to the edge of financial ruin. She had been expected to share her mistress's bed as and when required - and despite having no option in the matter, she had been unable to disguise her revulsion as she dutifully lapped at the thick, crinkly labia. Helena had eventually cursed her roundly, thrown her out of bed, and issued dark threats about selling her to a brothel. The only thing stopping her ending up on the block again, she knew, was that the estate could ill afford to replace her.

Just at that moment, a shadow fell across the two busy workers. Naissa looked up, and flinched. The Mistress must have come round the side way, to sneak up on them so silently.

But Helena Fundius was smiling, a thin and triumphal smile. For a second she looked down at Naissa, and then cupped the girl's chin in her hand.

"Why, Naissa," she purred. "I'll have to get you some new robes. We're having a wedding next week - and you're going to belong to a Consul's wife."

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Pertinax, overseer of the estate, scratched his head in bafflement. The last few days had been one frantic rush, getting the estate tidied and partly rebuilt. Most of the work he had wanted to get done for years; now there was money in plenty to carry it out. But it was the modifications to the stable block that he could only stare at in amazement.

"Well, it looks like one'o them practice rings, like gladiators use," he commented as he looked down on the refurbished room. The old stable partitions had been torn out and the floor relaid with white Etruscan tiles: the room was fresh-smelling with the freshly cut cedarwood of its furniture.

In the centre of the room, was a raised platform four paces square, waist-high and solidly built. Yet it was padded with fleeces, and covered with finely cured oiled skins, stitched so cunningly that their surface was waterproof. In the rest of the room was a haynet, a trough and a drain at one side, oddly incongruous. Oversized doors led to the cobbled patio outside.

One of the workmen grinned. "I won't tell ya, then. We're special artisans, right? You wants a secret trapdoor building, you wants a tunnel digging - no questions, we'll do it." He eyed the low, solid structure. "This ain't the first we've built. It's for them with, like, special tastes. More than a poor man can run to."

Pertinax shrugged. The ways of nobility never ceased to amaze him. But then he turned, and sighed as his stylus moved to cross off one more item from the list of jobs to be done. He hadn't seen who his mistress was marrying - he only hoped the consul was as good a man as his predecessors.

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"It isn't every day you see a wedding like THIS one." Lenia commented, as the sounds of the triumphal procession faded, heading for the Temple of Venus in its cherry grove by the Appian Aqueduct. That night, they would have - on parchment, anyway - a new head of the household.

Alaxus the ostler nodded. His newly furbished estates had been gone over with a fine curry-comb the day before by three fussy eunuchs of the Palace domestic staff, their high-pitched voices loud with indignant complaints at the slightest flaw. "I'll wager we're in for a fine time of it. You know what the Emperor's like - once he gets an idea into his head, then that's the way things are going to be." He paused. "I don't think there's anything in the Laws that says you CAN'T have a horse for a husband - just that no priest in their right mind is going to allow it."

Lenia winced, even as she kissed him. "They do say the Emperor's insane - but he's pretty shrewd, whatever. Folk who try argueing with him, though - that's real insanity for you." A speculative look came into her eyes. "I wonder what the, er, domestic arrangements are going to be like. Do we bring Martio his bran mash on a silver platter, or what?"

Alaxus grinned. "The Emperor's going to be checking, I know that." He gestured at the stable boudoir, where workmen were hanging up laurel wreathes. "If you look in the alcove behind the second pillar, you'll see a spy-hole; I saw the workmen building it. They're from the Palace, and I think they've done that sort of work before."

There was a silence. And then Lenia's stout face split in an unladylike grin. "You know, before I was... sold, my family ran a stud farm, down on the coast near Ostia? I'm an initiate of Demeter, Goddess of horses. I bet there's a few things I could tell the Mistress - but slaves speak when they're spoken to. She'll find out."

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Six hours later, the wedding feast was drawing to an end. Outside the freshly plastered walls of the estate, a convoy of litter-bearers limbered up in preparation to carry their replete guests back to the Palatine Hill.

Inside, Helena Fundius stood by the flank of her new husband, trying to suppress the gloating she

felt. Matrons and landowners daughters, the pick of her neighbours, were staring at her in mixed envy and loathing. After years of ignoring her, they now found themselves living next to a Consul's wife, one of the most favoured positions in Rome. And one whose position at the Palace had led to him acquiring various skills - he was at least house-trained.

"Why, dear," Helena bent to whisper to Scylla, her dearest rival of ten years' standing. "I'm SO glad you could dress for the occasion. I've heard your husband keeps you dreadfully short of money. And he beats you, I've heard." She stroked the flank of Martio, feeling the powerful muscles hard beneath the fur. "I'm sure Martio won't. Why, just think of it. The estates and revenues to manage, and still never a cross word will pass between us."

Scylla's face turned an interesting colour beneath her fashionable lead oxide powder. "At least I can bear MY husband children," she snapped. And instantly regretted it.

Helena regarded her with an amused smile. After six years, she knew, her neighbour was childless. The estate did ring to the sound of young voices, but as a result of all the young Nubian girls who Scylla's husband spent his money buying and his seed in impregnating.

"Oh..." she gave a dismissive wave of an elegantly manicured hand. "If the legendary Parsiphae conceived the Minotaur with a bull, I'm sure it'll be possible. At any rate -" she ran her other hand down the stallion's flank "I intend to have fun trying."

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Night fell, and the party ended. Naissa stood behind her mistress at her toilette, untying the tight and complex hairstyle. Helena was dressed in a simple robe, the bridal wreath cast negligently in one corner.

"Err... Mistress?" Naissa asked shyly. "Will you be - requiring me tonight? I believe your... err, husband awaits." She had seen Alaxus leading the stallion into the strangely furnished room earlier on, having fed him a generous helping of oats and beans.

Helena turned and looked at her strangely. "Oh, yes. I haven't informed you of your new duties, have I? Naturally, my new... status, will bring new responsibilities. But we shall discuss this with my..." she gave a delicious shiver "...husband. Carry that tray."

Naissa picked up the silver tray, three pots of slippery unguents and a large soft sponge. At an impatient gesture, she also picked up the wreath of flowers from the corner, and followed her mistress through the incense-scented tiled corridors to the house door of the bridal chamber.

Inside the room, Alaxus was holding Martio's leather bridle, talking soothingly to the horse, who looked nervous in his new surroundings. As he saw the two women enter he slipped the bridle and retreated through the patio doors, bowing. The door slid shut, and there was an unexpected click as a lock closed tight. White walls shone in the even glow of a dozen expensive wax tapers, sheltered from the draught in alcoves around the room.

Helena removed her robe and stood naked, her hands balled as fists on her well-padded hips. Her hair was loose: she tossed it back, as she looked around triumphantly.

"Mistress?" Naissa asked hesitantly. But Helena was busy elsewhere. She had removed all her rings: dipping a hand in one of the pots of oil, she lightly rubbed the black soft skin of the horse's muzzle, massaging it till it shone. Martio snorted gently, and licked her hand. The smell of sweet almonds was in the air.

Keeping her hand on the gently heaving flank, Helena walked round to the rump, and twitched the tail aside. "Oh, Naissa," she called, softly and yet with a hidden edge to her voice "there's something here I need a hand with."

Relieved that her mistress seemed occupied, Naissa trotted round, putting the tray down carefully.

"Now. Isn't this... interesting?" Helena grabbed Naissa's wrist, and pulled her closer. "Just think about that. Imagine if you were a mare."

Naissa's hand was pushed into contact with the smooth black skin of Martio's scrotum: the horse gave a shiver at the touch of flesh. Casting a fearful glance at Helena, Naissa explored. Loose in the swollen sack, each testicle was an elongated sphere like a slightly squashed apple; she felt them moving between her fingers. She traced the slight roughness inside, feeling the finger-thick spermatic cord running up to vanish in the uncharted interior of the powerful equine body.

"Here." Helena thrust forward the jar of almond oil. Tremblingly, Naissa dipped her fingers in the cool slipperiness, and began to massage the alien skin. Someone, she noted, had already cleaned Martio's rump: he was as clean and sweet-smelling as fresh-dried hay. Soon the huge testicles were glistening like polished anthracite, and Naissa looked round at her mistress for guidance.

"Kneel. Forwards, between his legs," Helena's voice was thick with urgency. "I want everything clean and ready."

Obediently, Naissa got to her knees, and began to rub the furry sheath, hanging above her head like a barbarian's furred sleeve. This was Fascinating, she thought - I'm actually going to see this go up inside my mistress. Dipping her fingers again, she went to work on the fleshy lips to the scabbard. An oil-slick finger probed deep, working between the stretchy sidewall and the solid, rubbery shaft that was only a hand's breadth away from her face.

Closing her eyes against the tickling fringe of belly fur, she concentrated on her touch alone. Yes - the shaft was coming alive in her hands, thickening and pulsing into life. She shivered at the thought of where it was going: remembering the well-trodden Mount of Venus of her mistress. The thought appealed to her.

Just at that moment, trembling hands grabbed the shoulders of her tunic, yanking it off above her head in one swift motion. Helena thrust her backwards and she fell, landing on the softly padded bridal bed with legs flailing.

"I didn't say you could get up." Helena's voice was flat and hard: Naissa froze like a rabbit at the sight of a hawk. She draped the bridal wreath around Naissa's goose-bumped neck, and stroked Martio's glistening muzzle with a cold affection.

Helena looked down at the girl, legs still spread wide, her sparse bush slightly split pink-lipped, the perfect height for a mare's vulva on the specially fitted bed. "Of course, if you'd have enjoyed MY generous offers," she mused, "you wouldn't have to do this. But," she gave a deep mock sigh, "it seems you prefer a male. So be it. That's what slaves are for - to do the tasks too demeaning for their betters."

"He'll... he'll kill me!" Naissa's eyes were wide in panic. She could see a great trumpet-like bud of mottled pink and brown beginning to slip out into the open: shiveringly the impression of a giant blind leech came to mind. Her mistress looked at her coldly.

"If necessary. But then, I can afford to replace you now. And I can't possibly have the Emperor thinking his friend and supporter is... unhappy, with my household." Her fingers wrapped around the oil-glistening length, urgently rubbing it. "Now, husband dear, in we go."

But as Naissa watched, speechless, the older woman's touch seemed to shrivel the bud back into its sheath. Martio turned to look questioningly, his ears laid back: shaking his hide, he stepped away from the enraged noblewoman and disinterestedly began nosing at the haynet on the wall.

"Little witch!" Helena hissed at Naissa "you'll pay for this!"

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The evening went distinctly downhill at that point.

"Oh, you poor girl," Lenia rubbed healing balm into Naissa's raw flesh the next morning. "She's never been THIS bad before."

Naissa's eyes were downcast. "I'll recover. But..." her eyes found her friend's; they were wide and helpless "she says she's going to get a bucket of horse piss from a ripe mare, bathe me in it and tie me down... and if Martio won't do it, she'll find a stallion that WILL." She winced as Lenia massaged a tender bruise. "And poor Martio. She didn't dare beat him, of course - but she locked him into a mule-stall all night, there's not room to turn round, and nothing to drink."

"Alaxus let him out and fed him, don't worry." Lenia said consolingly. Her gaze was curious. "but - you were the one got whipped, and still you're concerned about him?"

Naissa nodded. "He can't help it. He's a Regal horse if ever there was one - he smells so nice, and he's so... stallion." She swallowed, her mouth dry. "If I was a mare, I'd like him. Only, I'm not."

Lenia carried on rubbing bruises and weals dilligently, but her eyes were distant. "Hold that thought," she said quietly "we may be slaves to some, but from some points of view... all mortals look the same."

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That night, Helena departed to look over her recently acquired estates that had come with her husband's position, promising to return in three days with "a little something - or a herd of them" for Naissa. She cast Martio in his stable a possessive glance as her bearers picked her litter up, and she departed in high spirits.

The moon rose full over the crowded seven hills of Rome. Lenia had the freedom of the city as cook and supplies buyer: she had paid a visit to a sympathetic Priestess her family had known in happier days.

Slaves were not allowed personal possessions in the Fundius household. So it was in borrowed robes that Lenia stood in the garden, the regalia of the Goddess Demeter on her head, and performed a marriage thousandsfold more sacred than the one of the day before.

Naissa and Martio were there before her in the garden, white skin and silver-gold fur blending as one in the moonlight. Martio seemed glad to be outdoors: instead of wandering off to graze he stood attentively, occasionally nickering slightly. Naissa felt her body charged with a tense expectation as she stood there, her arm around his neck, fingers entwined in the splendour of his mane. No costly orchids were her bridal wreath: in her hair was a simple band of green and white, sweet clover

picked fresh and living beneath the moon's approving sight.

Lenia raised her arms to the Heavens, and began to chant. "Oh wise Demeter, mother and guardian
Whose feet trod the green in the first of times
Before the hard stones of Man for our feet,
Before the cruel bits of
Man for our mouths
Hear us.

"Oh mother, mare, guide of hooves and souls
Protector of all who seek your gifts, your wisdoms
Bless now these two who stand before you, mate and mate
Hearts freely choosing, let flesh and souls
be one
Choosing, giving, feeling, sharing
Hear us."

There was a silence, in which the constant background hum of Rome seemed to fade into infinite distance. And then it happened. The narrow garden was filled with a bright, clean scent, a wind bourne surely from Olympian pastures into the hot Roman evening, that washed over all who stood there, leaving them feeling new-born as Venus rising from the waves.

Naissa looked down, half expecting to see her feet turning into hooves. They did not - but a deeper, more subtle change spread through her body. It began as a golden glow, a dawning of pleasure spreading from her loins throughout her whole body, as if she was clay being squeezed in the grasp of a divine potter. She turned to Martio - and stopped.

Martio had not changed, outwardly at least. But he had - she could smell a bewitching scent that she seemed to half-remember from some infinitely distant memory. The scent was raw, primal - and it fitted into a newly awakened part of her soul like a key in a brand new lock.

The stallion whickered, and the key turned. His smooth black muzzle nuzzled at her small breasts, and pressed lower, till it pressed firm at the pit of her stomach.

"Oh, dear. Sorry." Naissa exclaimed in shock. Her bladder emptied itself involuntarily, splashing onto the thirsty grass. Martio snorted, and his muzzle seemed to turn inside-out, the black lips riding up to show his sharp, even white teeth. A tongue explored the wetness of her thighs.

"No need to worry," Lenia smiled, relief on her face. "That always happens. It's done, now. He's yours." She took off her regalia, and quietly left them there, human mare and royal stallion.

For a few minutes, Naissa could only hug the thick neck, feeling the strong swell of the crested muscles in her arms. Then, shyly, she disengaged and stood staring at her new mate.

Her new mate. The enormity of what had happened was slow to sink in. She turned, to stare into those great brown eyes, reading things that she had never seen before.

She leaned forward and whispered in his ear.

"I want you."

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In the bridal chamber, they made love. Naissa sat on the edge of the bed, her legs dangling while Martio's tongue explored her parted vulva. She had examined herself, wondering what she would find. Nothing seemed to have greatly changed: she was as turned on as she had ever been, though how much use that would be to a full stallion, she hardly knew. Would the Goddess have shrunk him down to fit, she wondered? Looking down at her own flat, hard-muscled stomach, she envisaged the space he would take up, thrust up to the sheath in her flesh, huge black testicles bumping at her



loins. It wasn't going to physically fit, not a quarter of it.

But then she felt that warm glow again. This is a Goddess we're talking about, she told herself. If the Emperor can make things happen, a Goddess can, without anybody arguing. Turning over to present her rump, she displayed herself for Martio's approval.

Martio approved. The trumpet-shaped bulb slipped pinkly out of its sheath, an arm's length of corrugated flesh like a rolled-up flag following it. Turning round, Naissa shivered in helpless delight as she saw her husband's penis swing like a fleshy pendulum, then stiffen and point forward towards the bipedal mare beneath him.

With a lunge, Martio climbed halfway onto the bed, the specially designed structure easily taking his weight as his fore hooves pressed the padding flat on each side of Naissa's head. He dropped to his bony knees, and they were avidly grasped by his mate, who held on tightly.

Naissa felt the rubbery organ probing her soaked thighs, still feeling like a big man's fist. But then she dismissed all worries, as Martio lowered his head to snort tenderly in her face, sweet hay-scented breath filling her lungs. She wriggled, spreading the cheeks of her human rump a little wider.....

By the grace of the Goddess Demeter, the stallion slowly covered his chosen mate. Her love-lips stretched wide - unbelievably wide - as the mottled flesh sank into her pale whiteness, filling her completely. And yet further it probed, defying mundane biology, until the bristling hairs of the sheath were rasping at the tight-spread labia, tickling her pearl of joy as he gently began to rock back and forwards.

This is all a dream, Naissa's shocked brain told her. This can't be happening... but then the wash of sensation flooded over her, and all she could do was to hang on, eyes clenched shut and concentrating on what was in her vagina as a drowning man concentrates on the lifegiving rope grasped in his hands.

Cautiously, but then with more confidence as squeals of pleasure and not pain spilled out of his mate, Martio began to rock to and fro. The mare was tighter than even the unbroken onagers he had been put to cover for the Emperor's amusement - yet somehow she seemed infinitely deep, like the roundest-bellied mare ever foaled. For several minutes he rocked, lengthening his strokes as resistance slackened, and the wonderful feeling built up inside his testicles, pumping against the soft hairless rump....

"Oh, Goddess..." Naissa cried aloud in ecstasy. She felt the head of the stallion's pizzle beginning to expand, in preparation to trap the child inside her. Now Martio was thrusting in and out a hands' length with every stroke, pleasure-giving bumps and ridges satisfying her as no human male could possibly do: the stallion began to quiver...

A tearing, screaming neigh burst out of Martio's mouth, as he felt pleasure explode in his loins. Sharp teeth lunged down instinctively and bit hard into the rolled towel that was wrapped tight round the fragile human neck. His splendid glory of a tail flagged up and down, each spasm a fresh burst of ecstasy as hot sperm jetted into the she-mare below him.

Naissa surrendered herself utterly. Her lover was where she wanted him: thrust to the hilt, her own pleasure suddenly boiling and spilling like an unwatched pot. She felt her womb open to swallow hot beast-sperm eagerly, pulse after thick pulse pumping into her innermost depths. Nine surges she counted, and then she could do nothing but lie there, feeling the receding tide of pleasure swimming in her glutton body.

For several minutes Martio stayed inside her, before struggling to his hooves, and gently pulling his softening member out of the impregnated mare. He nickered softly to her, and was rewarded with a drowsy murmur.

Naissa rolled over and looked at him, eyes wide and deep with love. She patted the padded bedding next to her and the stallion lay down, folding his legs carefully beneath him.

She lay propped on one elbow, close to his head so that she could trade satisfied, snorting breaths. Somehow, she seemed to know what was expected of her - this felt Right, now, as if a deeper layer of knowledge had been revealed, peeled away by the moonlight outside.

Suddenly, there came a clapping from outside, and the door slid open. Emperor Caligula stood there not four paces away, six big Praetorian guards in armour looming impassively behind him. A quizzical smile was on his face.

"Majesty, I..." Naissa looked across in horror. Martio scrambled to all fours and stood by her side, head down and ears back, prepared to defend his mate.

But the Emperor smiled. "If I hadn't wanted to watch, I wouldn't have arranged a spy-hole. Though it wasn't you I was expecting." He gestured to one corner of the room. Then he extended a regal hand.

Wide-eyed, Naissa accepted it. She was acutely conscious of her position; only a towel round her neck, and her thighs awash with thick, slippery semen that trickled down her legs and pooled on the floor as she walked.

Caligula, Emperor and Deity, cocked an eyebrow. "Well, it seems that even I can make a mistake." The Praetorians looked at each other worriedly: this was the sort of information folk tended not to live to repeat around here. "My dear consul seems to have chosen a wife more to his liking - therefore, I approve. The records will be changed to match."

"Your... Ma-majesty..." Naissa stammered. "Bu. .. I'm a slave. I CAN'T be wife to a Consul."

"Do you love him?" Came the blunt question. There could be no second thoughts on this one.

Naissa wrapped her arm around the great stallion's neck, and hugged him. "I do."

"Then... your slave status is another thing we can alter. In retrospect." There was a pause, as the Emperor looked them up and down. "I may have my enemies. But one thing I DO appreciate, is how to reward my friends." With that he swept out, the Praetorians leaving without a second's glance back. In their job, they saw far stranger things every day.

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The dawn came, and Naissa made love to her husband again, this time with him lying on his side on the ample leather bed. This was her first time as a free woman: there was no urgency, just a happy, gentle sharing of pleasures. When it was done, she wept tears of happiness into his mane, as her loins spilled pearls of happiness into his matted belly-fur. She had awoken in the darkness hours before, with the heavy fullness of her lover's seed active in her womb. She silently gave thanks to Demeter, as she pressed close to the huge barrel of the equine chest - and wondered if the Goddess would do one more thing for her. She had heard tales of centaurs - or however it turned out, man-foal, beast-foal or whatever, she would welcome what child he gave her.

"I suppose it's not all fun being a Consul's wife," she mused, running a comb through his beautiful

mane a little later. "There's the status, and the money to look after - good thing Helena" (she smiled at using her ex-mistress's first name) "put me in charge of the accounts. I know how to save, and what to save."

A smile came to her face, as she decided whether or not to ring for oatmeal porridge for two. "But one thing I'll splash out on," she decided "If any Temple to Demeter needs my help - they've got it!"

END