

The Red Amphora

“Come in and rest, dear,” my mistress purred, irresistible with her twinkling smile and dress glittering with hundreds of jewels like little stars. Her fine perfume filled the entrance with dreamy scents from all four corners of the empire.

For all his brute force, Alexander was easily lured. He sauntered into the palace where his wife’s warm welcome awaited. They floated together to a more peaceful room, with a cool breeze blowing and two silk couches. Roxana sat down on one and listened patiently.

“They all cowered at the sight of my phalanxes! I shall subdue these weak foreigners in my sleep!” he bellowed boastfully.

“The only regret I have is that good old Bucephalas isn’t here. How he would have enjoyed these glorious days!” Alexander said, now wistful.

Roxana, bored to death of hearing horse eulogies, rolled her eyes discreetly. Then she warned him:

“Be careful not to share his fate!”
But Alexander waved away her words.

“You must stop fussing, my little star,” he said in a soft tone. He smiled, but a moment later he spoiled it by asking: “Do you know where Statiera is?”

“Bring us wine,” she ordered sharply, avoiding his question, “From the red amphora.”

I hurried to fetch it, and poured it into the best, gleaming silver rhyton. Then a cup-bearer poured it into three bowls and the taster was called. He raised the shallowest bowl to his parched lips, gulping down his recurring worry with the wine. Twenty minutes of tense silence later it was pronounced safe to drink. The taster sloped out of the room, safe... for now.

Roxana passed the second bowl to her husband, a sweet smile on her face. He had a strained and troubled look as he drank the bowl in one go.

There being no more need of my presence, Roxana dismissed me with a signal. While it’s not my place to point out something like this, there seemed to be a strange, gleeful glint in her eyes.

I wandered to the slaves’ quarters, where I saw the taster. He threw me a wan glance and I was thankful, in spite of my fierce loyalty, that I wasn’t him. Captured at the last battle and starved so he ate potentially poisoned food at every meal, risking his life... The room was filled with chatter, bustle and cheap clayware, so it took me a moment to register what was happening.

But then all heads were turned by a piercing scream from the taster. I saw he was now in throes of agony! He tossed and turned on the tiled floor like a fish gasping for water. It was then that I realised.

I tore down the corridors, desperate to reach my master and mistress in time. Panting, I cried:

“NO...No... POI...SON...Poi...son!” Roxana strode towards me, livid with anger, a bear in jewelled silk garments. She put a finger to her lips and whispered through gritted teeth: “don’t... mention... this...unless you want *it!*” I saw that next to her Alexander was in a similar state to the taster downstairs, his famed strength already surrendering to the poison. There was a terrible triumph on her face. I understood what had happened... but never must I let on!

Now I remembered the time when that official came, years ago: ‘a vile serpent of a man,’ she called him before the visit. Roxana despised him but had to be polite. Forever I will hear her voice ringing out, then as now: “Bring me the wine from the red amphora...”

I burned with fury; innocent people have died from this, just because of her dislike for them. When can there be peace? Hasn’t there been enough death in this empire?

That night I crept through the labyrinth of a palace, ignoring the slumbering guards and biting back my fears and misgivings. Slowly I paced through the now dark and dismal corridors... until I saw the one I needed!

Then I saw them: the amphorae of wine stacked against the side of the wall like enemy soldiers looming over me. At the other end of the hall I knew I would find the dread of my life: the ‘Red Amphora’. It seemed to loom over me, a monstrosity of a jug, painted red ochre, the colour of

the blood of those who died by it... It seemed alive, as though it was watching me... but all I could see was the outline of its shape.

“I’m not frightened of *you!*” I whispered cautiously into the darkness to reassure myself. Hands trembling, I removed the lid which gave a pop that I was certain woke someone up. I froze like a scared deer, but a few moments later nothing stirred so I ventured back through the night, dragging the heavy amphora to a window. The river was flowing down below, and never was I so relieved and horrified to see that familiar sight as I was then, pouring the evil contents of the amphora into the rushing water, gone forever. My panic having subsided slightly, I carried the red amphora, now empty, back to the wine storeroom.

Then came the next part of my audacious plan. I saw, lying near where the red amphora was, a smaller grey one covered in dust and cobwebs. I carefully rolled it and was satisfied by hearing the sloshing wine within. I happened to notice a symbol etched on the bottom, but I thought nothing of it.

I poured the harmless wine from the other amphora into the red one, leaving the grey amphora, that hadn’t been used in ages and shouldn’t be missed, empty.

It was only once I had scurried away from the wine storeroom and what I’d done that it really sank in: I had betrayed my mistress, I had done wrong (in her mind) and should be severely punished. The rest of the night I tossed, turned and fretted on my patch of floor.

That night onwards was thrown into turmoil over Alexander’s death from a ‘severe illness’ that nobody actually understood. Wailing choruses could be heard outside the palace now

without a ruler, and inside tongues wagged about what would happen to the vast empire, with its conqueror and unifier dead.

Roxana, beneath the respectful image she projected of a bereft wife in mourning, was exultant, for good reason: now the court revolved around her, she had real power; no longer Alexander's ornament. Across the mourning period, there were no visitors so no call for the fine wine that had tormented me.

One day all that changed. Roxana told me to summon Statiera. A messenger was swiftly sent to her quarters, who returned in the evening with the response:

"Yes, Stateira would be honoured and delighted to dine with Queen Roxana tomorrow." The messenger bowed and left the room. Something about this made me feel uneasy. I had realised the courtiers, too, are slaves – to each other and the palace etiquette.

The meal Statiera was to attend was in the same chamber that Alexander was poisoned in. Returning there was unnerving, and that feeling only intensified when Roxana, lying on her silk couch, cool and composed, asked me once again.

"Bring the wine from the red amphora." I went and fetched the wine, every bit the obedient slave, but managing to hide my secret.

I poured the wine into the best rython and carried it through to the waiting guests. Another poor taster was made to drink a bowl and I smiled to myself, thinking of the lives I'd saved, yet also worried, as there isn't long until Roxana finds out the truth.

"Isn't this such incredible wine?" She said amiably to Statiera, who was perched uneasily on the other silk sofa.

Statiera gulped down her wine with the anxiety she was trying to hide and shifted on her seat. Roxana had a strange smile on her face the whole time...