The Engineer: Part Four

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Blueprints lay scattered across my floor, taunting me with the sting of my failure. This aqueduct system was turning in to more work than I had ever anticipated. As the only female engineer in Carthage, and by far the most successful (though you wouldn’t find any of the men admitting it), I was appointed to design a method of transporting water throughout our city. Our city had grown so large that the wells weren’t delivering enough water to sustain our crops and sufficiently support the people. Our food was dying, and Carthage was developing an unquenchable thirst. Though we were in the throes of war with our Roman neighbors across the sea, the treaty that our countries had in place allowed a diversion of some water from various colonies near Carthage.

Feeling defeated, I slumped against the wall of my home and buried my head in my hands, filled with frustration. As I had begged and pleaded the Magistrates for this opportunity to prove myself and establish my place amongst the most respected of men, in the event of a failure, I would be brought before the people and tried for treason. I felt the weight of the world crushing me and silently thought of my fiancé, eternally quiet in his final resting place. I thought back to one week before when he left me, and the four days after that when they had brought my love back to me, skin pale, and eyes cold and dead. My beloved had fought in the Carthage Navy and his life, as well as my hope of having a precious child of my own, was slaughtered by the Romans. The more I remembered, the more tears ran down my cheeks and the more I berated myself for breaking down in my country’s time of need. Without warning, the urge to vomit threatened to overwhelm my body. Dizzy and clutching my stomach, I rushed outside, attempting to subdue my nausea with fresh air. Breathing deeply, my bare feet slapped the dirt beneath me, carrying me out of the city and on to the soft sand of the southern Mediterranean Coast. I scrunched the sand underneath my feet between my toes as the salty breeze caressed my skin and brushed the hair from my face. Exhaling deeply, I felt the wooziness begin to fade. Staring out across the sea, I spotted ships dotting the horizon, most likely carrying various pieces of jewelry and wine to our allies along the coast. Without my water system, it was only a matter of time before the crops withered beyond hope and the people were deprived of the precious resource that stretched as far as the eye could see just outside our city, but still lay beyond our grasp.

I took two steps into the tide, feeling the water lapping at my ankles and tickling my toes, and gazed towards the heavens. I said a silent prayer, pleading to the gods for guidance. My thoughts were interrupted by a cool object gently sliding across the tops of my feet. Alarmed, I glanced down and spotted a bright flash just beneath the ripples of the water. I stooped to pick up the mystery object, my fingers closing around a small pendant. I rubbed my fingers across the surface of the pendant, brushing the sand away and tracing the symbol I knew so well with my fingertips. I held a beautiful ivory, amber, and silver necklace, the silver sign of the goddess Tanit prominently raised from the ovular amber face; a circle atop a triangle with a line between the two, and a crescent moon tipped on its side hovering above the body. Carved ivory surrounded the amber, intricately carved snakes and vines slithering around the Sky Goddess. This was a sign from the Mother Goddess herself, and I knew it. I was not to forget that she was watching over me, protecting me. Staring at the beauty in my palm, I saw something new. It was not a symbol of my protector, but the answer to my burning question that, until that moment, remained unsolved. Outlining the dividing line between circle and triangle, I saw a different division; what sat on the ground and that which sat beneath its surface. Clutching the necklace to my chest, I whispered a thank you, gazed one more time across the sea, and turned on my heel to head back home.

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I sat in front of the one hundred and four magistrates, the two hundred and eight eyes boring into my soul. I shifted uncomfortably in my chair, tugging at the braid that hung loosely next to my right ear.

“Why have you come to speak with us?” The head magistrate’s voiced echoed through the large hall, reverberating in my ears. I felt small and insignificant.

Sitting tall to speak, I said, “Sirs, I would like the opportunity to engineer the water system being constructed here in Carthage.” I saw looks of pity and mild amusement in their faces.

“But you are a woman,” stated a blonde man from somewhere on the left of the table. “Such things are not done.” Several men nodded in agreement. “What makes you think you are better than all of the other male engineers in this city?”

“The fact that I am a woman should not matter, sir. Respectfully, I would like to point out that I have the highest success rate of any engineer in Carthage, male or female. I have designed twelve buildings, all within the time limit, and all still standing. Please. Just give me this opportunity to prove my abilities and earn your respect. I will not fail.” My plea was met with silence. I felt judged; they weren’t taking me seriously. Exasperated, I subtly clasped my hands into fists at my side. The men sat before me, passing looks between them, whispering softly. Finally, a hush fell over the room. The high most patriarch of the magistrates stood and cleared his throat to speak. He lifted a hand and motioned for me to stand as well. I climbed shakily to my feet, my false confidence apparent.

“Valeria,” he began. “We, the magistrates of Carthage, hereby grant you this duty: to design and oversee the construction of a water transportation system that encompasses the entirety of the city.” A smile spread across my cheeks and I resisted the urge to celebrate openly. Assuming I was dismissed, I bowed and moved to exit the room. “Valeria.” I paused. “You should be fully aware of the responsibilities that this duty requires. Should you fail, you will be brought before the citizens of Carthage and put to death for treason.” The smile fell from my face, my heart so light a moment ago now filled with dread. The magistrates stood, all one hundred four of them, and advanced towards me, like a pack of wild animals descending upon wounded prey.

“Death,” they said in unison. “Death. Death. Death.” The word echoed through the room. As I tried to run, I couldn’t move. They moved closer and closer to me, whispering the same word until I couldn’t hear anything else. Death. Death. Death. The word echoed in my ears. I screamed until I could hold no more breath in my lungs.

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I awoke in a cold sweat, my hair a tangled mess. *It was just a dream,* I assured myself. *You are okay. It was all a dream.* I exhaled deeply, trying to clear the erratic thoughts swirling in my head, deciphering fantasy from reality. True, the magistrates hadn’t collapsed in on me like vultures on fresh carrion, but the gravity of the situation was the same. If I was unsuccessful, my career, and my life, would end. No matter what, I had to make this work.

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Crumpled drafts surrounded my desk. Little scraps of torn parchment floated through the air like confetti, some alighting softly in my hair. I didn’t bother to take them out. My pens were strewn across the room, the unfortunate casualties of my immature temper tantrum. Three of my plans had been rejected by Cecil, the lead engineer of the entire city, that day alone. The vision I had was clear in my head, I just couldn’t translate it into a sketch. It was like speaking a different language and having the words not quite translate right. I stared at the layout of the city, willing it to speak to me. No matter what, I had to make this work.

\*\*\*Two Weeks Later\*\*\*

I scribbled furiously, lines and equations dancing across the scroll before me.

“Valeria!” My name echoed throughout the halls of the capitol, originating from out in the city square. Done for the moment, I scooped my plans into my arms and hurried through the elaborate building before emerging into the sunlight. Hundreds of men scurried about before me, stones balanced on their sturdy bare shoulders while shouts and orders filled my ears. Men glanced my way for a moment, confusion flashing across their faces, before returning to their back-breaking work. Mesmerized, but reminding myself I was in a hurry, I tore myself away from the construction, facing the stern-looking man who stood to my right.

“I made some changes,” I explained as I handed the plans over to his open palms. The hot sun beat down on us, making me sweat. He quickly scanned the pages before looking back at me, eyes usually stony in my presence now filled with surprise and a spark of jealousy.

“These changes are . . . extensive and we’re already behind schedule. How long with this delay the building?” he inquired.

“No more than one day,” I replied. I gestured to the lines that would be gibberish to some, but made perfect sense to the two of us. “See,” I started, tracing a line across the print. “Instead of having entirely public water sources, we install cisterns under the most heavily populated areas of the city.” I pointed out seven rectangles drawn under seven groups of buildings. “This will cause less confusion among the people and keep the contamination to a minimum.”

“What about the aqueducts already running alongside city streets?” Cecil asked me. His tone conveyed an authoritative curiosity. My vision swam and I shivered. Dismissing the sudden fit of ill feelings, I ignored my body and turned back to the plans.

“We leave them be. Some open access to the water is good for livestock and those traveling through the city.” I sat back on my heels, satisfied and confident. He was silent for a moment, then nodded and rolled up the scrolls.

“I’ll give these to the head builder,” he said over his shoulder, walking away from me. I watched him tuck the scrolls under his arm and smiled. Seeing that our meeting was done, I walked back towards the Capitol. “Valeria,” I heard as I was stepping back into the cool relief of the building.

“Yes?” I paused and pivoted towards Cecil, now stopped in the dirt.

“This is a good idea,” he stated, gesturing to my work under his arm. “I genuinely hope that, for your sake, it works.” With that, he stalked off, leaving me to my own thoughts.

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\*\*\*One week later\*\*\*

I wrung my hands nervously, feeling the smooth fabric of my dress rub against my bare wrists. I stood at the heart of Carthage, at the fountain square in the very center of the city. Twelve magistrates sat on horseback around the edges of the square, their stallions’ hooves softly pawing at the ground. People milled about around me and I could feel the electricity of their shared excitement like a cloud above our heads. I spotted a tall, dark haired man standing near the entrance. I gave him a small nod and he nodded in return before running off in the other direction. After several minutes, a hush fell over the crowd. In the distance, a great rumbling could be heard. I said a silent prayer. I stared into the dry bed of the fountain, and saw a small trail of water make its way into the center of the empty pool, like a tear from a god. Cheers erupted from the crowd as the pool filled to the brim and bursts of water shot into the air. *Thank you.* I felt the recently familiar feeling of nausea overtake my stomach, only this time, I didn’t dismiss it as illness. I realized that Tanit hadn’t left me alone when she had taken my beautiful fiancé. She had given me a different gift; a new way to love and be loved. I placed a gentle hand on my stomach and smiled as water rained down on me.