

ABRAXAS

The Forgotten Songs

episode six uncut

JADE

**Reader alert!**

Nudity, adult themes and same-gender romance will be encountered in this ebook. Please read no further if you will be offended.



# ABRAXAS

## The Forgotten Songs



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The big Gypsy horse swings around, and as the mist begins to roll in off the heath Leon sets him back onto the track toward the old cenotaph. Martin hangs on -- confused, filled with questions, and fully suspecting that nothing he can say will appease either his guardian or Leon enough to spare him the chastisement he is due. The truth is, the sheriff would be merciless, and Leon -- Leon would call it luck, again, Martin thinks miserably, even while he was tanning the butt off the hapless stray.

"I had my reasons," he mutters. "They were good enough for me."

"Yes? Well, you can get fed and get warm, and then tell me," Leon growls, "and then I'll decide how much you owe us, your guardian and me -- and what coin your debt will be paid in."



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It's a glorious night for a ride under the stars, and soon enough Martin sees the old cenotaph in the distance. Those stars are blazing and he's soon warm, riding pressed against Leon's back. But he can feel how stiff with anger Leon is, and as they ride he asks, "How come you know me? I don't know you. Believe me, *you* I would remember."

Leon snorts. "You were only twelve years old the last time I passed through. You were away at school, and I stayed a week, ten days. I saw you several times, playing ball with your friends, but you never bothered to notice me. Your guardian, Roald, made me welcome, as he always does. This time around, when I showed my face at his gate it was all fear and weeping, and 'Leon, will you do an old friend a favor? He's gone.' And when I asked 'Who's gone?' Roald tells me it's his moronic little whelp of a ward, taken off into the badlands -- breaking curfew behind him, risking his stupid little life, and no one even knows what for, because in his wisdom, Martin doesn't even leave a note tacked to the door!"



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They're close to the cenotaph by the time Martin can think of anything to say. "If I'd told him where I was going, he'd have stopped me."

"Of course he'd have stopped you! It's bandits and rievvers out here," Leon barks, "and it's the sheriff and the bastinado for you in the morning, unless Roald or I take responsibility for your actions. It'll be *me* taking responsibility, because Roald has to live here after I've moved on, and he'll be disgraced, known for not being able to control his ward -- the one who calls himself a man grown, but hasn't done a day of militia service to earn his right of majority!"

The horse comes to a halt in the moonshadows by the cenotaph, and Martin slides down. "But the militia is sent to war," he protests. "I don't want to kill anyone, and I don't want to get killed myself!"

"No? But you'll come out into the badlands after dark," Leon argues, "and you'd have expected me to kill Yussan to save your skinny little neck!"



Martin hears the anger in Leon's voice. "He was going to sell me. He trades in captives, and you -- you knew him! Who is he?"

Leon seems to resent the question for a second, then he growls, "He's my cousin."  
"Your -- *cousin!*!"

Don't get excited about it. My parents had six siblings apiece. I have more than fifty cousins, some of them merchant princes and soldiers, others mercenaries like Yussan. Luckily for you, he's one of the decent ones."

"Decent?" Martin stutters, "he deals in slaves!"

"He deals in *morons*." Leon looses the horse and sets out his food, and then tends to the fire he set earlier, when he made camp in the cenotaph. He glares at Martin. "I still haven't heard a word about why you broke curfew and set up a killing field. If it had been anyone else but Yussan, I'd be cleaning my sword. And if Yussan hadn't backed off, I'd have had to wound or kill my own flesh and blood. And *you* --" he stabs a finger at Martin "-- you don't seem to care!"



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"I had to come out here," Martin says sulkily.

"Somebody made you break curfew, did they?"

Well, no, but I was going to meet a man. A guide. He was going to take me into the hills to find -- well, he's supposed to know where there's a tomb, and there's a relic hidden in it." Now he comes to put it into words, it all sounds lame. He comes to the fire to get warm, and waits for Leon to speak.



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Leon stares at him. "You've been talking to the Gypsies haven't you?"  
Yes." Martin lifts his chin. "Why shouldn't I? You have something against Gypsies?"  
"I *am* a Gypsy," Leon informs him. "I was born one of them, and I know every one of their dumb stories. Which one was this? The goldmine in the mountains? The treasures of the kings of old, hidden in a cave?"





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"No." Martin is blushing, and he's grateful for the firelight, which covers it. "I was talking to Miranda. You know Miranda?"

"I should. She's my great aunt. And she told you...?"

"She told me the story of the compass that points to the marker at the gates of Atlantis," Martin says resignedly. "It's not true, then?"

"It probably is, or some part of it will be," Leon growls. "It's a legend. Some part of a legend is always true, or it wouldn't have come to be a legend."



"Then, that's why I came," Martin says quickly. "I need to -- to make something of myself. I don't want to do militia service, but if I don't I'll never get my right of majority, so I'll never be able to own property and trade, even though I can work and wed already." He looks up hopefully at Leon. "You understand, don't you?"

"I understand that Roald took you in and fostered you when your parents were killed when you were five years old," Leon says tersely. "I understand that you owe him everything you have today. You're educated, you're healthy and well fed ... and ambitious, too, aren't you? I understand you don't care that you just scared the wits out of him, and put me in harm's way to bring you back, though you don't even know me. And if I'm going to keep Roald from being disgraced, it's *me* who's going to have to answer to the sheriff for you tomorrow!"



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"I didn't mean any harm," Martin mutters. "I didn't think."

"Morons rarely do," Leon scoffs. "For your information, the story as I heard it says the compass points to Lemuria, not Atlantis. And it's not a treasure of gold and jewels there, it's a magickal papyrus, so old that nobody knows where it came from. Speak its words to elder archons and daemons, and they'll grant your heart's desire in exchange for amusing them for an instant in the boring eternity of their lives."

"You know the story, then?"

"I know the story. And from what I can see, you're an ungrateful whelp. Roald put me under oath to tan the price of this out of you ... if I ever found you before you vanished into the trading caravans heading cross the mountains. Well, I've found you. And I'm still waiting to hear a syllable of remorse. All I'm hearing is a lot of excuses."



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"I have to make something of myself," Martin sighs. "Roald has four children now. Me? I'm the adopted one, the outsider. He's good to me, but the others, the little ones, they're his pride and joy. All I've got to look forward to is work, or the militia, and soldiering, killing and being killed. So I talked to the Gypsies, and your great aunt told me the story, and I came out here to meet a guide. That's the truth, and what more could I tell you?"

"You could be contrite," Leon says quietly. "You could regret what you've done, and maybe have a little gratitude to Roald -- even to me. Do you feel any of that, boy?"

"I ... *am* sorry," Martin says reluctantly.

"I wonder if you are?" Leon sounds doubtful. "The sheriff would flay the flesh off your soles, and do it with great joy, for the trouble you've caused. Now tell me. What am I going to do?"



"Accept my apology?" Martin asks hopefully.

"If I thought it was genuine, I might," Leon muses. "But I don't."

"Then, accept that I had my reasons," Martin suggests, "and also that I'm an idiot, and I didn't think about what I was doing. Just followed my nose and my heart."

"Your ambition," Leon adds. "That's an explanation and an excuse, and I understand the why, even though I can't forgive it so easily, any more than the sheriff could, or Roald."



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"I won't do it again," Martin offers.

"Damned right, you won't." And Leon sits himself down on the low wall at the side of the cenotaph. "It's remorse I wanted to hear, and I'm not hearing it. So you can hand me that hip-wrap and get yourself here." He pats his knee. "I understand what you've said, and I understand a young man's pride and ambition. But there's only one way you're going to learn, and only one way you *won't* go to the sheriff tomorrow."

Martin's eyes widen in the firelight. "You could *tell* them you tanned me."



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"And it would be a lie, and we'd both know it," Leon argues. "And Roald would know it, with one glance at you. Not good enough, Martin, and you know it. You drop that wrap, get over here, and you think about the pain you've caused Roald, the hazard you put me in, and the trouble with the sheriff you've given me, if we -- you and I! -- are going to keep your guardian from being disgraced." He holds out his hand to take the hip-wrap, and pats his knee again. "I'll take into account everything you've said ... and if you keep me sitting here, waiting, I'll take cowardice into account as well. You don't want to keep me waiting. Look inside, boy. Seek honest, genuine remorse. It's hiding in there somewhere."

With a gulp, Martin slips off the wrap and hands it to him.



*"You've never done militia service," Leon says, "never felt a birch rod across your back. And if you get your way, you never will wear the militia badge or carry a set of stripes for a week because some sergeant took a dislike to your face and decided to use you to set an example to others your age. Lads with the same irresponsibility that's got Roald in tears tonight, and his reputation hanging by a thread. You think the sheriff will favor him next time there's a dispute, if he can't even keep his own ward in order? Damn it! A year or two in service in some city fifty miles down the spice road would teach you how to respect your home and your kin, and do right by them!"*





The phrases are punctuated by wallops heavy enough to make themselves felt and bring tears to Martin's eyes – but it's more than that. He knows by the sound of Leon's voice – he *has* felt the bite of a birch cane, borne the brunt of a sergeant's dislike. And his fierce protection of Roald's honor speaks to Martin. It's love that would make a man risk his life the way Leon has done, tonight. Whatever Leon and Roald shared, it was beyond anything Martin has yet imagined.

Would Leon have injured his cousin – maybe killed him? – for the sake of Roald's ward? Yussan could be dead now, by Leon's sword – *mercenaries like Yussan. Luckily for you, he's one of the decent ones.*



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For the first time in his life Martin is aware of his own ignorance and self-centered behavior. For the first time in his life he sees the situation from someone else's perspective, and the remorse Leon is looking for smarts much more sharply than the warrior's leathery hand falling heavily on his butt.

The remorse makes him sag over Leon's knee, and it seems this is what Leon has been waiting for. He knows to the instant when Martin wakes up to himself. Four more wallops fall on his burning cheeks, harder than those before, but the last. Then Leon turns him over and looks into his face.

"Enough? You understand now, don't you?"



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Martin would almost prefer to be tanned again than feel this remorse. He hides his face in Leon's shoulder – he wonders how he's ever going to look Roald in the eye. Leon holds him, and Martin's heart is beating like a hammer, not merely with the tanning, but with the contrition ... and more.

Leon's strength and body heat feel like heaven to him. His arms are a safe haven. Martin can't get enough of it, and he wants more. He's keenly aware of the heat and smart of his cheeks, and he knows he ought to be hanging his head in remorse, but –



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He lifts his eyes at last and looks into Leon's face, and what he sees there isn't anger and scorn – not now. It's compassion.

"Tell Roald," he says, "tell him I just didn't think. Tell him I didn't mean it to go like this ... it just happened."

"Things turn out the way they turn out, and when they go askew sometimes it comes to blood," Leon says. His voice is gruff. "I'll tell him ... but one glance at you tomorrow, and he'll *know*. He won't need me to say a word. How's your butt?"

"Smarting. Hot. Will it bruise?"

"No, but you won't sit on it for a while," Leon says wryly. "Easier than the bastinado or a birch cane, believe me, and now the sheriff will be appeased too."



But Martin has ceased to care about all that. His arms have gone around Leon, first to soak in the bigger man's body heat, and the comfort Leon somehow offers freely now Martin has set aside the selfishness that would have ended in blood and even death.

"Yussan ... would have sold me," he murmurs.

"Groomed for the finest households and then sold to someone who could barely afford you and would therefore treat you like glass," Leon says breathily. "You've the beauty for it ... you've no idea how many foundlings and fugitives perish in the badlands. Service in a house down the spice road as saved many a life. Don't think too ill of my cousin. Yussan has his own code, and he holds to it." His voice grows deeper and more breathy as Martin comes into his arms, and then ... and then...



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It's not Martin's first kiss, but it might have been. It *is* the first time he's been caught in the steel-hard arms of a warrior, and a warrior's kiss is not much like the kisses of tavern wenches and the lads he went to school with.

The kiss tells him better than any words could – he's forgiven, at least by Leon. If Roald will forgive him is another question, but Leon counts the debt settled. Yussan will find other *merchandise*, the sheriff will be appeased, Roald's name will not be dragged through the mud. And Martin –

Martin's head is spinning, his heart is hammering, because he knows what he wants now. And it isn't what he thought he wanted when he came out to these badlands.

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