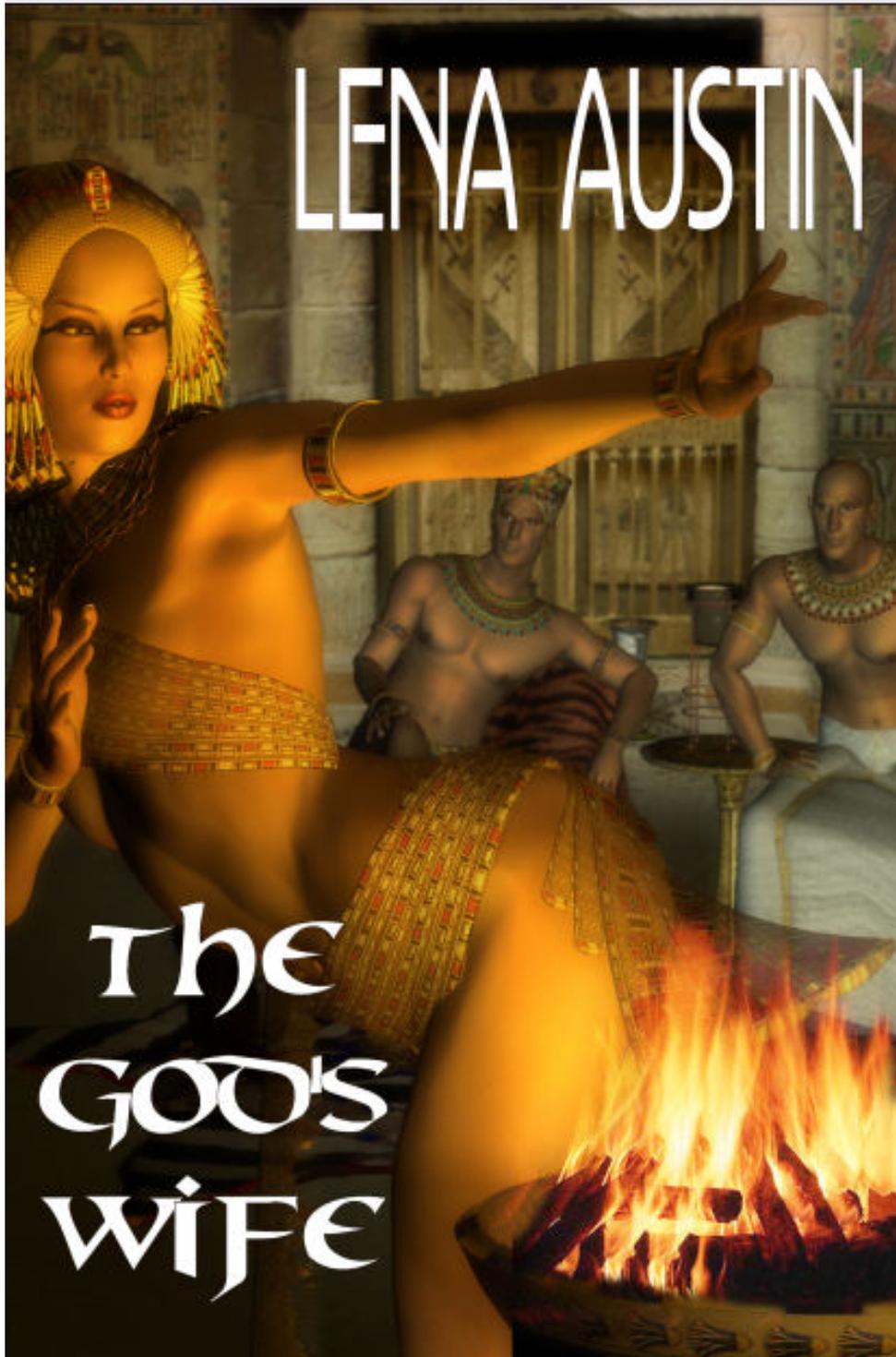


CERRIDWEN PRESS

LENA AUSTIN

The
GOD'S
WIFE



A Cerridwen Press Publication



www.cerridwenpress.com

The God's Wife

ISBN #1-4199-0260-1

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

The God's Wife Copyright© 2005 Lena Austin

Edited by: Briana St. James

Cover art by: Syneca

Electronic book Publication: June 2005

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Cerridwen Press, 1056 Home Avenue, Akron, OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

Cerridwen Press is an imprint of Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.®

THE GOD'S WIFE

Lena Austin

Author Note:

While I used some real historical figures, this is a work of fiction, not fact. The real Pharaoh Hatshepsut, the scribe Senmut, and those others whose names appear on the hieroglyphs are mysteries even to those who have spent their lives studying them. In the interest of telling a good story, certain facts were ignored or rewritten to suit myself. If you have an interest in learning more about these wonderful people, I suggest the works of Dr. Zahi Hawass, or Dr. Bob Brier. More is being learned every day, and would easily fill a book the size of an encyclopedia. However, even Egyptologists disagree on what is fact and what is speculation. I invite you to make your own decisions.

Chapter One

Thebes, Ancient Egypt c.1438 BCE

Senmut rushed as fast as dignity would allow toward the royal apartment complex in the palace. "A royal summons! Thoth's Feathers, what now?" His hands clutched the scribe's tablets that denoted his office as one of the many royal scribes that populated the palace and kept the kingdom of Tutmose II running like clockwork. What could any of the royal household want with a lowly scribe? This place was dangerous for an unwed and common ex-soldier. He had done nothing to warrant any trouble. He wished briefly he were back in the desert where work was hard and life simple.

He took no notice of the royal handmaidens and servants who rushed past on their own errands. They, however, took notice of the well-displayed muscles interplaying through his body as he ran. He wore only a few linens to cover his lower body. "Mmm..." purred one handmaiden as she missed pouring date wine into a goblet. "Now which of the royal wives will enjoy the pleasure of looking at that?" A small slap on the arm reminded her of her duties, but did not wipe the smile off her face.

Her compatriot mopped up the spill and chuckled. "That's the scribe Senmut. The one who was a soldier before turning priest-scribe. He's worked with the Master Builder for two flood seasons. Enjoy the view while you can." Even she could not resist a small sigh of longing. "No doubt he'll be back working at the mortuary temple before long. I was there when he brought the latest papyri of the hieroglyphs last night to the pharaoh."

"Then what's he doing here among the women, I will ask you?"

Senmut heard nothing of this. He was already at the door of the antechamber, and the guards were opening the great doors to let him in. The tinkling of tiny bells against metal and giggling warned him this was a dancer's antechamber. He must be especially careful of his thoughts before they translated to his linens. No doubt, preparations were already underway for the feast tonight, where a new bride for pharaoh was to be presented for his approval.

"Senmut!" shrieked a young girl's voice. "You came!"

Without warning, Senmut found his arms full of a beautiful dancer in nearly full panoply. Even the perfume cone was already on her head, filling his nostrils with the delightful scent of expensive oils. He prayed for fortitude and unwound the girl's arms from around his neck so he could see who she was.

The tiny imp in front of him turned a full circle to show off what little there was of her costume before facing him with a grin. Only then did recognition dawn. "Hati?" he gasped in wonderment. His childhood friend had grown to full womanhood in the space of the few years he'd been away in the army, serving as a common soldier at the

southern gates with Nubia. Senmut gulped and tried to think of something intelligent to say. "Um, I like that costume you're almost wearing."

Hati laughed, a cross between chuckle and giggle. He remembered the sound well. "Isn't it something?" She wiggled and pranced a moment while Senmut stared. The costume was little more than golden chains and baubles, and not a scrap of linen to hide her charms. There were plenty of charms to view. Never a tall child, she was still short, but the once flat chest was now full and lush. Long, streamlined muscles bespoke of the many years of physical training. The face was the only constant, with slashing cheekbones and the slanted, otherworldly eyes of the Egyptian nobility. Those lips that used to issue taunts were now full and tempting. The whole package was an invitation to the kind of impropriety that got a man killed without mercy. "I never dreamed I would get a costume like this when I told you I would dance before my cousin the pharaoh to win his heart, or at least his lust," she added, winking.

Senmut barely remembered that long ago conversation over a game of *mehen*, the snake game. "Yes, you said you were training to be a God's Wife in the temple and you would dance before the pharaoh and become his wife. I did not believe you then."

Hati was not offended by his childhood skepticism. She laughed as she walked over to a pitcher of plain beer and offered him some. "I remember your commoner tastes. See? Here's your horrid tasting beer." Her eyes twinkled merrily.

Now it was Senmut's turn to laugh. It was an old game between them, and distracted him away from her changed physical appearance. He pretended to snatch the cup from her hands with a frown, and then retorted, "Give me beer, bread and salt, and I can work a full day. You, royal one, with your rich foods and date wines will be fat and drunk long before that."

"Hah! Royal family I may be, but do I look fat and drunk to you?" Hati performed the nearly impossible moves of a dancer. She flowed effortlessly into positions that made Senmut's muscles ache in sympathy. He shifted his scribe's tablet lower, and drank deeply of the bitter brew.

"Enough! Have mercy on an unmarried scribe!" You sorceresses of the God's Wives make any man hard as you well know." He looked at his beer in mock suspicion, as if she might have put any one of the many aphrodisiacs known to the women of the God's Wives in his goblet. It dawned on him Hati needed no such aids to make a man look on her with desire.

* * * * *

Hati flowed up from the dancer's pose like water, and grinned mockingly at him. She was quite well aware of the effect she had on men, since she had been trained in its ruthless use. It was cruel to continue her freshly concocted test on her old friend.

Her childhood friend stood at rigid attention, his tablets covering the front of his linens. His face mirrored his attempt to reconcile the little girl he knew with the woman who now stood in front of him. He was honorable enough to try to keep his eyes trained on her face, not her body.

But where else could she test her skills? The eunuched guards, who even now stood stone-faced around the room? She couldn't call for any minor official of the court. Only in Senmut did she have a legitimate excuse to see a full male without arousing suspicion or chancing a rape by the unscrupulous that might not recognize her true rank and think her a lowly dancer. She was sorry for making him suffer so, and promised herself she'd see to it that his health was maintained by sending him one of her maids later. No doubt, she'd get a volunteer or two, since he was very well formed. Her face fell into the soft lines of contrition.

"I am sorry to tease you so, Senmut. Let me go put on a linen robe, and then we can have a game of *mehen* for old time's sake. I have missed you so! No one else plays as well as you."

* * * * *

She turned and ran from the room, never realizing Senmut enjoyed that last view of her round, heart-shaped rump.

"Have some more beer, Commander," came a quiet whisper from one of the guards near the door. "It won't ease the ache, but at least your mouth won't be dry," came more advice from the same source.

Senmut turned and strode closer to the scar-faced guard. "Hor-heb!" He kept his voice low. "So, this is where you were reassigned! I am glad to know you're alive. That cut you took on the thigh..." and then Senmut coughed with embarrassment. Obviously, more than Hor-heb's thigh had been cut, if he stood guard here. He'd been a good soldier down at the southern gates. A Nubian spear had gotten Hor-heb during a raid they'd finally beaten back.

Hor-heb smiled wryly. "Yes, it was worse than we thought. I am lucky to have survived at all." He clapped Senmut on the shoulder. "Do not feel badly for me, Commander. I live, and it's a good duty I serve here. My wife did not divorce me, either. She says three children are enough anyway, and she still warms my bed every night. I am happy." A small sound from the other room had Hor-heb snapping to attention and looking blankly back into space. Senmut took the hint, nodded and went to pour himself more beer.

Hati strode back into the room, now decorously covered by a long white linen robe. In her hands, she carried a large wooden box that held the same *mehen* game set she and Senmut had used as children. A gaming table sat placed between two chairs for the convenience of those addicted to *mehen* or *senet*. But tonight, Hati longed for a strategy

game, not a game said to be the symbol of the struggle between good and evil. It was said the pharaoh, like so many nobles, was addicted to *senet*. Hati preferred the game of commoner and noble alike, *mehen*.

Mehen, the snake game, was a simple game to make and play. Anyone with clay could create the flat, round game board, scratching the spiral of lines and tiles to create the places where counters landed. Counters were anything from painted small flat stones to jewels, depending on the wealth of the owner. The only other thing needed was a set of dice to throw. Hati's set was simple clay, and her counters were flat stones painted red and blue. Two larger special stones of red and blue were laid to the side for use when a player attained their lion and began to eat the opponent's counters on his return journey from the center of the spiral. On cue, Senmut sat down near the blue lion. He'd always played blue to her red. An hour later, Hati sat back with a satisfied smile. Cheerful insults had flown, the strategies had been played, and Senmut had barely squeaked a win with a lucky throw of the dice. It was just as she'd wanted—a taste of home.

Senmut looked up from where he poured yet another beer for himself and saw the maidservant appear, looking anxious and carrying even more baubles and a headdress. "Looks like it's time for your performance, Hati. I'd better go and wait at the pharaoh's feet. I was told a skilled dancer was supposed to perform as a possible wife for Pharaoh, and the other scribes will happily take my place if I am but a moment late." He grabbed up his tablets of office and tried not to stare hungrily as Hati shucked off her linen robe. One of the guards winked as he looked in that guard's direction, acknowledging his discomfort. Her perfume cone had tortured him all during the game, but he blessed the robe that had hidden her charms from view. Senmut decided the best course was a retreat and he fled. All the while, as he hurried back to the main audience chamber, he berated himself. Hati had always been his best friend when they were children; right until the day he'd been released to serve his duty in the army. Even though both he and Hati had been gifts to the temple, he still had served his time in the army with pride.

He clattered down the stairs that led from the royal family apartments to the public areas of the palace. "You are pitiful, Senmut. Your best friend grows up while you are gone, and do you think about the fact that you missed her? No, your thoughts turn lusty!"

He had met his father briefly, before that one retired from soldiering. Senmut had expressed his gratitude he'd been gifted to the temple after his mother's death, and they'd had a few beers together a time or two. Hal-ra had been proud his son was well educated and dedicated to the service of Egypt. It was too bad he'd died before Senmut could come see him again.

The royal gardens called to Senmut, and he turned to walk among the lush foliage. He had a few minutes, no matter what he'd said to Hati. He sent a prayer of thankfulness skyward that the garden was empty.

Senmut had done the proper thing, and had seen to it regular gifts of food and beer appeared at his father's small tomb. Senmut had the tomb slightly decorated and

furnished, so his father had a pleasant afterlife. He'd designed the enhancements himself, and even the priests who'd blessed it all were impressed. He couldn't help the small feeling of pride that puffed up his chest slightly when no one could see. Since then, he'd done a few designs for the priests and minor nobility that had earned him a tidy sum toward his own tomb. He felt that nagging sense of urgency to get those designs done and to the priests soon. He was nearly twenty, and half his life was nearly gone! As long as he served as a scribe, he expected to live to the ripe old age of fifty, but surely not much longer.

"Poverty is a burden." Even that whisper made him glance to make sure he was still alone. Why, what he had saved barely made a decent home now for his afterlife! It would be nice to afford a few effigy-servants, good ivory canopic jars to hold his organs instead of clay and some more sturdy furniture. The cost of adequate spells to protect his body was staggering. Unlike the royal family, who commanded vast treasuries, he had to earn every sliver of gold.

He frowned. That envious thought brought him full circle back to Hati. For all she too had been a temple gift, she was royal family. Her mother had been half-sister to the present pharaoh's mother, so they were cousins. Funny, he'd never thought about the fact Hati was a child of the Gods in all the years they'd played and studied together in the temple. She'd seemed so...human. She certainly looked human now. Even now, his traitorous linens rose at the memory of Hati's beauty. Giving up, he reversed direction and walked toward the great audience hall.

Yet, she'd always had the gifts of the Gods. He'd seen that for himself. She'd controlled the dice when they played games, but only to demonstrate, never to cheat. He'd held her hand when the fits of a Seer had taken her, and had acted as her scribe when she had foretold things. Even when he hadn't understood the meaning, he'd written it all down faithfully in hieratic.

She'd even blessed a small ankh luck charm for him as protection. He'd worn it since then, and he rubbed it now where it depended almost to his breastbone. It must've worked, for his wounds had been small and not serious.

* * * * *

Hati blew out a breath at Senmut's abrupt departure. She thought he'd relaxed during the game, but he'd nearly run out of the room. Maybe she'd overdone the teasing. You could never be certain with Senmut what he thought or felt. In his own way, he was as self-disciplined as a God's Wife. She had opened her mouth to speak of their childhood games in the temple, when her maidservant had appeared with that worried look on her seamed face.

Hati put her hands on her hips, and closed her eyes. It was bad enough she'd lusted after Senmut since before he left. Now, with both of them grown, maintaining her

detachment came doubly hard. She sighed, "Resigning oneself to a life of no love is much harder than I ever thought it might be." She shook her head. "Get over it, Hati. Love was never in your destiny, and you must never confuse lust with love."

Bala came over, now smiling, with the rest of the accoutrements Hati needed to dance. "I have marked one of the guards as a friend of Senmut, my lady. A former soldier, and more likely to be trustworthy. Shall I ask for him more often, in your name?" Her words were spoken so softly, they were unlikely to travel beyond Hati's sharp hearing.

Hati nodded and lifted a certain bracelet, as if answering which was her choice. If she succeeded tonight, then she'd need all the loyal guards and friends she could get to survive. The walls literally had ears, with secret passages, and some were designed to carry sound to another place for listeners to stand. For now, she would dance—for her very life.

* * * * *

Senmut quickly made his way to the lowest step on the dais, and got into the traditional seated position of a scribe. Sitting cross-legged on the floor allowed him to write for hours on end, in a semi-trance if necessary. A full God's Wife would be an addition to the palace the Pharaoh was unlikely to ignore. Senmut knew more than most about the skills of the God's Wives, as well as their absolute dedication to Egypt. While he had moved easily from architectural design classes to scripting and hieroglyphs, Hati had run from stillroom to dance class to cartography to other subjects he had no need to know about, and did not want to know. She'd been at the temple since the tender age of three, and had taken classes all that time, stopping only once a ten-day for rest.

Senmut shook his head and played with his stylus.

With great fanfare, and a priest proclaiming his many titles, the Pharaoh appeared with his vizier at his side, and processed to the dais. Tutmose II was not a handsome man, but he had great dignity. Dry, inflamed patches that required the constant attendance of herbalists and masseurs to rub oils to ease the itch and manage the pain that ravaged his skin. Yet, through it all, Tutmose II maintained a cheerful attitude, the respect of all, and was well liked for his justice and diplomacy. None of his sisters had survived to adulthood to be wife to him, so he sought further afield among his cousins and high nobility for spouses. So far, he'd only taken a few concubines and lesser wives for alliances, and none had given him children yet. This was Hati's big chance to impress her cousin into making her his wife.

The court moved to the sides of the large audience chamber when the Pharaoh was comfortably situated, and the priest had finished announcing him. There was quite a crowd today. Word had undoubtedly spread about this potential new wife for the

Pharaoh. Everyone who had pretensions to court life was here, from the ambitious to the social. Even a few of the palace cats wandered about, playing with dangling belts or demanding attention. How unusual.

Now, in the back, appeared a small group of priestesses. To the murmurs of the crowd, they pulled a sledge with a large, supine statue of Ra into the center of the room. The God was laid out as if asleep, even to His head reclining on a sleeping headrest. On the other side of the throne, the vizier gasped, "Divine One! They will do the sacred dance of Isis awakening Ra for you! It is too erotic!"

"My heart can stand it, Keoset," Tutmose murmured. "Can yours?"

"Ahem! No doubt, no doubt." Keoset's voice was rich with good humor. "I am concerned only in that this dance is to arouse the very Gods themselves. Many men will be in discomfort tonight." Then the vizier chuckled mercilessly.

I am going to be one of them, Senmut thought to himself. It shamed him to admit he could not control the lust he felt for Hati.

"The God's Wives had the good sense to warn me ahead of time it would be advisable to have eunuch guards at this audience. At least our guardians won't be distracted," Tutmose answered complacently. "And I took the hint and arranged for those whose services can be had for coin to join us at the feast after the dance. I am not so hard-hearted as that."

Say that after you have seen Hati dance, Divine One, thought Senmut, as he needlessly smoothed his tablet to keep from looking too anticipatory. If your privates are not as hard as that statue, then you're less feeling than it is. She is worthy of you as no other woman I have seen in the length of this kingdom. I could easily envy you, though I have never done so before.

The vizier cleared his throat abruptly, causing Senmut to look up and find himself staring into the eyes of the Pharaoh. "Where's my usual scribe? Are you not the one who gave me the designs for my temple yesterday?"

"Your royal scribe fell ill from eating too many raw dates, Serenity." Senmut kept his tone deferential. "Thank you for remembering me. Yes, I am the designer of your smaller mortuary temple, Divine One. I serve your Master Builder, normally, but I was asked to serve you this evening in his place." He was uncomfortable under the royal eye, but he couldn't help himself in liking this dignified man who sat on the throne, giving up all freedom for the sake of Egypt. If Hati had to marry one of the royal family, it was good to know she would go to one such as this. His dearest friend would be treated well, though something inside of Senmut hurt suddenly at the thought.

Tutmose II's eyes seemed to soften slightly. "Then I will thank the Master Builder for sending me the best designs I have seen, as well as his willingness to share his loyal scribe with me. He speaks well of you." With that incredible statement, the pharaoh turned his eyes back to his court, and nodded to the musicians to begin playing.

Everyone knew the story Hati would portray with her dance. Isis, wife of Ra and mother of the Gods, awakened Ra and aroused him. Her dance was so seductive that his joyous orgasm created the stars and the world.

The vizier must have thought the same, for Senmut heard him whisper to Tutmose, "I have heard it said the God's Wives perform this dance every year to ensure the fertility of Egypt."

Before the pharaoh could answer, Hati appeared from behind the women, beautifully covered only in golden ornaments. Her skin was dusted with gold, and her eyes lined with kohl until they were large and luminous. The music softened to where the drums were barely audible, and the flutes and lap harp played a slow, feminine tune. She danced around the "sleeping God", acting like a wife who had come upon her resting beloved. Never touching Ra, she gave the appearance of one who loved and worshiped, but did not awaken. Every woman who had ever done this nodded, and smiled softly, some even putting their heads to rest on the arms of their own beloveds.

Loneliness welled up inside Senmut. He longed for Hati to do that to him. He started. Where had that thought come from? Hati was his friend, and destined for better things than the home of a lowly scribe.

Then Hati danced away, smiling the secret smile all women get when they've a scheme in mind. Many of the women's smiles changed with hers. Before the entire court, Hati began to divest herself of her golden ornaments. Kneeling on the floor before the Pharaoh's feet, she took off all her jewels. Removing the headdress first, she laid it aside. Each ornament, save for the tiny perfume cone on her head, was laid at Pharaoh's feet. A long, impossible stretch followed, displaying her gloriously naked, golden body to the crowd. Every man's eyes were riveted, and every woman's eyes reflected the same half-lidded smile.

Senmut forced himself not to groan aloud. He must maintain the calm dignity and aloofness for which scribes were famous.

She mimed a short bath with a large bowl and sponge, then the application of a perfumed oil on the backs of her knees, inside of the elbows, neck, and then with a big smile, the two points just near her pubic mound. Every man squirmed, and every woman smiled the same feline grin.

The music grew suddenly stronger, and the harps faded, replaced by a drumbeat that grew steadily stronger as the dance progressed. Hati moved quickly to dance around the "sleeping God", never losing her feral smile. Senmut felt his own linens raise, and was not ashamed. At least he had his tablets to cover his reaction. Many of the men of the court had no such cover, and the audience began to look like a sea of small tents. So lost in her dance were they that none cared, and Senmut took it for the accolade that it was for Hati. She had them all envisioning themselves playing the role of their fantasies, seducer or seduced. A small voice inside his head wondered why he could see it in such an analytical light, yet still be affected.

On the floor before him, Hati's movements mimed all of the tricks a woman plays to fill a man's senses until he no longer thinks, but becomes as the wild beasts. She licked, she crawled and she writhed, both around the statue and then on it. A collective moan rose as she literally danced on her knees upon the statue, portraying her impalement and writhing while the drumbeat moved faster, like a heartbeat spiraling upwards.

Senmut's mind was filled with her beauty and seduction, and his own heartbeat pounded in time with the drums. She was more than the embodiment of Isis to him, the perfection of every woman. She was so perfect that there was no other woman in his mind. All others faded to shadow. As the music hit its climax, so did Hati mime the climax of a woman, bowing her body back, her arms reaching up to throw her hair about before clawing at the sky as the drumbeat pounded out eight beats in time with Senmut's heart.

Moreover, it seemed, his body agreed. His linens had parted in front, and now the back of his tablets gave evidence of his own pleasure in her dance. He was not the only one. Others in the audience gave the same accolade, proving they were no better than the Gods at resisting. Every woman panted, and her eyes glazed, so Senmut knew all had shared in the lust created by the dance. Some fled the room, grabbing partners. No one laughed, and many seemed not to notice.

Senmut found himself fighting the urge to fling aside his tablets, run to Hati and flee with her himself. Not for mindless sex, but to keep running with her, far away from the Pharaoh. No matter that he liked Tutmose, and knew this was what Hati wanted. He wanted her with him. Not for a night of pleasure, but for eternity. *Mine!* His heart screamed. *Mine! I love her like you never will!* And he knew it to be true. His heart shattered. Hati would never be his. She was destined for the Pharaoh's bed and life, not his. She was too beautiful, too good and too perfect for a common man like himself. She belonged to a living God, like Tutmose, where she would do the most good. He would go. He would leave in the morning by the fastest means possible, and return to the desert to work and bake off his pain in the sun.

Senmut remained seated and silent. He must not give one hint of his feelings away. He would not ruin Hati's chance for all she'd dreamed of. He prayed the audience would be over soon.

* * * * *

Hati lay panting for a moment atop the statue. She had expended every bit of her mental energies to control the audience and make them feel the seduction. Her reward of orgasmic energy pounded back at her, and she gathered what was fed at her like a thirsty child. When pounding footsteps faded, she knew she had gotten all that was available. She preferred to remain laying where she was, but her training was absolute. It was time to prostrate herself before her cousin and see if he found her worthy.

Still in the thrall of the dance herself, and even without the music, she flowed upwards in the seductive movements of a woman for whom sex was a pleasurable pastime to be enjoyed again. The gift of the audience's energy was enough to give her the impetus to make a good show of it, and she knelt at Tutmose's feet.

To her shock, a soft masculine voice whispered in her mind, *Tone it down, my girl. You'll give Our people their deaths from exertion. You have won. Release Our people from your thrall.*

Hati lost her control, and her head snapped up to find Pharaoh's eyes upon her. One eye descended in a slow, careful wink, to let her know her cousin was well aware of her trick. Yet, his face showed great sorrow, even to the tracks of a few tears. He glanced quickly at Senmut, who studied his tablets with great intensity and clutched at his stylus then his gaze returned to Hati.

Tutmose seemed to gather his own strength for a moment before favoring Hati with a glittering smile. *"You could seduce the Gods themselves, for you have indeed seduced me. You're indeed worthy to be the wife of a Pharaoh."* His eyes, brown with flecks of gold like her own, glowed briefly for a moment, to let her know he too had the gifts of the Gods. For a moment, she felt pity emanate from him, and wondered why. Then his gaze fell upon Senmut, who still hadn't looked up from his tablet. *"Have the decree written, scribe. The God's Wife Hatshepsut will become Pharaoh's wife. You're released from attending me for the rest of the evening to see to this."*

Senmut unfolded himself from the floor, bowed to Tutmose II, and left without ever looking at Hati once. For some reason, Hati wanted to weep. Perhaps she hadn't affected everyone in the room. His linens had shown no stain, and his face had remained a mask of cool detachment. Why this would make her feel a sense of failure and loss, she did not know. She had won her place in Pharaoh's bed. It would be up to her to prove she also could be useful at his side. Her work had just begun, but she should be joyous and revel in a moment of triumph. Tutmose drew breath to speak, and she forced her gaze back to attentiveness. Anything Pharaoh said was important.

"You also are excused from the feast," Tutmose announced. The vizier looked at him in surprise, but Tutmose appeared not to notice. *"I fear you have overwhelmed Our people tonight, and I wish you to rest. Choose only the most trusted of guards, and double the usual amount. You'll remain in seclusion until our nuptials are complete, seeing only your maidservants and attendants. Let no full male see you from the moment you leave this chamber. Cover her, and take her away. She's an invitation to rape."*

A large amount of gauze was thrown over Hati's head. She could see, but only enough to not stumble or be led. She bowed from beneath her shroud, and was surrounded by eunuch guards, who formed a solid wall around her. In this way, she left the audience chamber.

Tutmose II waved a hand languidly, and the remaining court took this for the signal for socializing before they were called to the feast. As the sound of voices and music filled the room, the vizier leaned slightly toward the throne. "Why did you do that?" Keoset asked, bewildered. "You could've ordered her modestly dressed to sit at your side in triumph. She earned her reward, and no one would expect anything less than her warming your couch tonight. She doesn't have to come to you a virgin to say her vows, only that it is certain she isn't pregnant by another man."

Tutmose sighed. "Believe it or not, Keoset, I have done her a great kindness. I hope she takes the hint I gave her, that no man may *see* her." Keoset did not catch the emphasis, and only looked more puzzled. "I'll marry her in three months' time, when I am assured she is not pregnant. I have much to arrange. I will see you at the feast." With that strange pronouncement, and another sigh, Tutmose left the room.

He climbed the stairs wearily, his two guards following closely until he was safely shut in his apartments directly above the great audience hall. If he listened on the balcony, he could have heard the conversations and music below. However, he had something more to do than listen to another round of the dance the courtiers played with one another.

Tutmose strode to a statue of Ra, and knelt quietly in front. "Lord Ra, creator of all that is, I have seen into the heart of another man and found pity for him. He wants and loves the woman I have been given. She is beautiful and stirs me. Perhaps she can even awaken what is dead within me." He bowed his head. "That poor scribe has sacrificed his own happiness for the sake of Egypt, giving us all the queen of his heart. He is nobler than my own brother, and I feel that sort of kinship with him. Perhaps I can give him a gift that benefits us all."

With that, Tutmose rose and called for a servant. He had a gift to send.

Chapter Two

All he had to do now was survive the night. He prowled the tiny chamber like a caged beast. Senmut's packs stood waiting by the door to his room, and a fresh set of linens awaited him in the morning. The decree was written and submitted. The old woman who brought him the wine hesitated a moment when he picked it up. "A gift from the Royal One," she said softly, before closing the heavy curtain and leaving.

A taste had proven the wine was mixed with herbs and honey, and was probably a sleeping draught. "Well, the Pharaoh is certainly thorough, as well as kind," he mused. Since Senmut had been dismissed from the feast and had no opportunity to ease the ache in his groin with one of the paid whores, this was a detail unexpected of the pharaoh. He downed the contents willingly, and lay down upon his platform, not bothering with the headrest. The padding over the woven ropes was cool on his naked body, further relaxing him. Outside of the curtain, the corridor lamps went out one by one, leaving only one near the bathing chamber at the far end. Darkness was his friend, for the room had begun to spin from the strength of the draught. Floating in the cool nothingness, he dropped off into slumber.

Senmut's dreams were incredibly erotic, and a tiny lucid portion of his sleeping mind laughed at him for trying to sleep when he was in such a state.

He dreamt the curtain parted silently late in the night, and he thought he heard the slither of gauze. The scent of some exotic oil filled his nostrils, mixed with the heady smell of a woman aroused. His dream-hands reached up and cupped full, lush breasts. Laughing at himself, he decided to enjoy the dream for what it was, and pleased himself with the softness, lapping and suckling at them. The dream wraith gasped and squirmed, so his hands went to the equally soft, round bottom to keep it reasonably still. After all, it was only a dream, and he could put any face on his dream wraith, and make the experience all he wished for.

He allowed his hands to roam, envisioning the firm, long muscles and youthful flesh of Hati. Never would he moan the name aloud, even in his dreams, but he envisioned all he pleased. Such a little body allowed his hands a great deal of territory to explore, and he enjoyed finding all the tiny places that made the wraith move and moan softly. However, she had plans of her own. "The floor allows us more room than your tiny sleeping platform." The hard little body left his arms.

What a pushy dream-wraith she was, putting him on the floor first, and then returning herself to her position in his arms. Well, no matter. He had what he wanted for the moment, and he filled his hands with her round firm behind.

The dream-Hati wriggled like an eel until she filled her hands and mouth with whatever she found in the dark, and made him gasp a time or two. Starting at his lips,

she gave him a lingering kiss that left his mouth tingling before moving around to nibble his earlobe and trace his ear with a soft tongue.

With a quick gasp, he writhed for a moment before he used the strength of his arms to snatch her atop him again. He positioned her above him until he could sup as he pleased. The sweetness of a woman was his favorite treat, but this was the only way he might ever show even a dream of Hati how much he loved her. It was a poor substitute for "I love you", but it was all he had in the silence. The wraith writhed, and begged in a barely audible whisper, "Do not stop. Oh, please, do not stop."

When he'd had enough, he lifted her off him and positioned his dream-Hati on the gauze. No matter that his mind said this was a dream, his wish was that this Hati was still a virgin, and he was determined to be tender. Making her join the Gods first was necessary to making this, her first time, a pleasure. He kissed his way up until he could ensure her silence if he hadn't been thorough enough, though he'd done his best. Lingering with a kiss, he made sure his dream-Hati still shuddered before positioning himself carefully at her threshold. She spread willingly for him, as if heedless of what was to come.

The real Hati would know, as part of her training. Slowly, he slid inside the hot, wet haven, carefully feeling for the barrier he'd have to break, though it cost him much in the way of control. These drugs made his head swim with desire, and he forced the snarling animal back. He'd have his dream his way, by all the Gods, no matter what.

There! There was the barrier. He moved carefully, back and forth, giving her time to adjust to the new sensation. Without warning, she clamped down around him, and nearly made him lose his control totally. It did not matter, for it was enough to make him move suddenly, thrusting forward as her muscles demanded. He covered her mouth with his own as he felt the barrier give way, and smothered her small cry.

It was more difficult than he imagined holding still, giving her a moment. He gave a former virgin all the time she needed to relax again. It was not long in coming, before her muscles released him to move. Slowly, very slowly, he began to move, but did not release her mouth yet.

Kissing his dream-Hati was a pleasure, and distracted him from wanting to plunder ruthlessly when he ached to do so. Trembling with need, he had to move, and he began to sweat. Only when the dream-girl beneath him began to move with him did he pick up the pace, filling her completely for the first time. One tiny moan escaped the dream wraith's lips, and fingers clutched at his back.

The drug in his system made the darkness lighten, and he swore his eyes really saw what mustn't be before the animal in him raged out of control. A moan of, "No!" escaped his lips as he buried his face in her hair and lost himself within her. Her renewed shudders told him he had done well enough.

Rolling off to give her room to breathe took the last of his strength, and he collapsed next to her on the floor. Moments passed as the drug took him deeper. He never felt the

girl leave, retrieve a bowl of warm water, and wash him clean. Nor did he return to consciousness when she urged him to his bed, and covered him with a soft linen sheet.

* * * * *

Hati luxuriated in a long, bone-popping stretch before opening her eyes. Judging by the angle of the sun pouring in from her balcony, she had slept long past her usual rising time. Not that it mattered. Ordered into seclusion, and after last night's dance, no one expected her to rise early. They were wrong if they thought she'd be a little lay-about and celebrate her victory. Her plans had just begun!

Flinging off her sheet, Hati padded over to perform her morning ablutions before wrapping herself in the robes Bala had laid out. There were even a few jewels, but Hati ignored them, just as she ignored the large pectoral collar beneath the robes. In a few days, when it was time to move out among the women's wing, she might try to be more impressive, but for today, she'd be comfortable. She dressed with an eye to that plan, laying the fripperies aside for later use.

Tomorrow, undoubtedly, she would receive information from the network provided by the God's Wives. Paid spies and informants, not to mention retired God's Wives, spread throughout the vast empire. A merchant might not realize the goods he carried contained hidden messages concealed in a vase or on a weaving's decoration.

Today, she was expected to plan her wedding, order a few gauzes for the ceremony and act like a young girl. The thought made her lip curl with distaste. Under the cover of all this silliness, she would lay the foundation of her own information network within the palace. As if Bala, her maidservant, needed Hati to plan a simple wedding! Hati snorted. If she so much as put one finger into Bala's plans, it would be cut off. If a small detail needed a decision, or if Hati had a request, then she and Bala would work it out together.

As if Hati's thoughts had summoned her, Bala strode into the room carrying a bundle of colorful gauzes. Seeing Hati standing and dressed, Bala sniffed. "It's about time you arose, lazy. Here're some of your choices for wedding materials. Make yourself useful and pick one or two. Then we'll have a bit of exercise. Your sword dance was sloppy last time we practiced. After lunch, I will show you the menu for the wedding feast. You'll be too busy tomorrow for this, so we'd best get it done now. Those harpies across the hall are already hovering."

Rolling her eyes skyward since only Bala could see her, Hati moved to the table to follow orders. Another sniff to let her know Bala agreed.

"The only people who care about the color and thickness of my gauzes would be those whose company is not worth my friendship for the most part."

"But, even those foolish females who care have their uses. Among their chatter is occasionally a snippet of useful information, as you well know," Bala countered. "You

risk boredom for the next few months while you sift through all the women who populate this wing, finding those who are intelligent enough to be allies and cultivating their company. Those who are not can be placated and made to feel important by giving them tasks suitable to their egos and personalities. No weapon, however minor, is wasted."

"That, you taught me too well to ignore. I assume you have already begun the same among the servants." It was not a question. Bala's ability to ferret out details was the reason she served an honorable retirement while acting as Hati's maid. The gold gauze was an easy choice. Hati lingered over the blue and the green, but one sniff of the green told her it was made with poisonous arsenic, and discarded. "Too bad, really, but the risk is not worth the color," Hati sighed. It was thrown on the discard pile with no regret. The blue went on top of the gold.

Bala came over and picked up the discards. "I see you remember your lessons in herbalism as well," and smiled her approval.

"Hmph! As if I dared forget. You'd let me wear the green until I was ill, just to bring home the lesson. I have better things to do than watch my hair fall out, thank you." Bala would, too. Few knew the poisonous nature of the common green dye. Who would suspect the wearing of a pretty color could cause death if worn too long? If there was one thing she was proud of, it was her waist-length hair. She suffered the weight and heat of it out of admitted vanity over its shining black length.

"And I will thank *you* if you manage to remember it all your life. I am looking forward to a long and peaceful retirement from assassination," Bala's mutter was just loud enough for Hati to hear.

Hati laughed. "Well, you're certainly talkative this morning. Normally, I must interpret your sniffs," she teased.

Bala moved closer, and pretended to study the gauzes, holding them up to Hati's body as if deciding how they'd be sewn and wrapped. "Soon enough we'll have to use the hand language," she whispered. "I have not cleared all the guards for the afternoon duty. May as well talk clearly while we can. Oh, and the guard Hor-heb is clear. Once you're married, I will make him the guard captain in your name. He's loyal to a fault, and you are his former Commander's friend makes you important to him."

"So he's one of Senmut's men? Good. Do so when you can." Hati grabbed up a mirror and pretended to study her hair like the young girl she was. "Any word from The Mother, yet?" Bala took the hint and began to braid it in a simple style as opposed to the elaborate coifs royal women were famous for.

"Speak more softly. Yes, it arrived this morning with your breakfast." Bala indicated a tray of fruit on a table by the door with a nod. "The Lady Mother gives information on the Nubian front. It's believed they may try to start a small war while the Pharaoh is distracted with the wedding. The general is naturally going to travel here for the wedding. No high-ranking official would miss it. He's a good strategist, so all

we'd have to do is give him a word when the time is right. He left plenty of reserves down there, so all he needs is a warning and time enough to implement his plans."

Hati handed Bala the lightweight ornaments and pushed aside the heavy gold. "So, the general is a falcon that can be trusted? Good. Keep me informed. Have you gotten the information on the other officials of the court?" That vital knowledge would tell her who to trust, who could be bribed, and who must be placated with flattery or deception.

"Not yet. The Lady Mother will send a full report ready for you tomorrow. I would hazard it will be the usual complexities of secrets. We have not seen a human yet that did not have a failing somewhere." Bala grinned. "Now, enjoy your few hours of leisure. I will be back in a bit." With that, she bustled out.

The tray of fruit on the table also contained a pitcher of cool water and a few slices of bread. Hati ignored the bread, poured herself a goblet of water and took a pear out on the balcony.

At one end of the balcony, a large brazier still smoldered. Bala had burned trash out here, and the faint stench lingered. Hati moved to the other side of the balcony with a small smile, and ate her fruit in peace. Peace was now a rare commodity, and likely would be so for the rest of her life. From this day forward, her life was full of danger and intrigue. "All for Egypt." Hati whispered the vow of the God's Wives to herself, and choked back tears.

* * * * *

Senmut swung the last of his packs into the chariot. There was just enough room for his feet to adjust to the movement of the chariot, so he was pleased. Concentrate on the task at hand, he told himself sternly. You cannot afford to think about last night, dream or not.

He stole one more look at the great line of balconies that formed the residence wing of the palace, and fancied he saw one tiny figure watching him. The love and longing nearly bent him in two, but he straightened his spine. "May Isis bless you, my love, with all the good things you wish for in your life. Your path was set from the moment of your birth, and I have no place in that path, commoner that I am. I will cherish my dream privately, never speaking it aloud, for it is my death, and perhaps yours if it weren't a dream."

With that, he turned and jumped onto his chariot, and clucked at the horses. As they passed out of the gates guarded by the avenue of sphinxes, he prayed, *Please, Ra, let it be that nothing happened, and your poor priest is nothing but a fool, for her sake.*

* * * * *

The morning sun filtered into the Royal apartments and made the figurine Hati placed in the hole in the board seem to glow for a moment.

Tutmose stared at the board game, then laughed aloud. "You beat me again, Hatshepsut! I swear you would be terrible at *senet*, but you play it as well as you play your beloved *mehen* and I know you're not cheating!"

Hati batted her eyelashes in feigned innocence at Tutmose. In the weeks since he had claimed her, they had dragged each other through exhaustive royal duties, and played games together when time allowed. Tutmose took as much time as he could to include her, or escape to her apartments for what little peace he found. He finally relaxed around her enough to laugh, so perhaps it was time to establish the beginnings of a more intimate relationship. "Divine One, will you permit me to ask you to call me Hati? Hatshepsut is more than a mouthful."

"I would be delighted. However, in return, could we drop the 'Divine One' and other such ridiculous titles? You used to call me Mo before you left for the temple." Tutmose responded soberly. He reached across the *senet* board to flick her nose.

"I did? Well, I was only three. I did not think you'd remember me." Hati was flattered. She barely remembered her time at Malgatta with the other royal children.

Tutmose gave an un-royal snort. "How could I forget the only one of my royal cousins who never treated me like a statue of gold, to be envied or worshipped? You climbed on my lap and pulled my prince's lock every time I annoyed you. I did so as often as I could, brat prince that I was."

"I am sorry if I was offensive," Hati began, at a loss. "But, if I was so disrespectful, why did you choose me now?" She got up and refilled their goblets. Both preferred water or juices rather than wine, and today it was water.

Tutmose smiled wryly. "Because you have not changed much." Then he sighed sadly. "It's time you knew." With that intriguing statement, he got up and wandered to the balcony. Hati followed, and gave him his goblet. He stood there in silence for a time, and seemed to search for words. "Have you ever wondered why all of my present wives and concubines never produced a child?" He did not look at her, but stared with a wistful expression at the busy streets of Thebes.

Hati bit her lip. Oh, yes, she was curious. "Well, I admit I had wondered, Mo. I will be your third wife, and I have not managed to count all the concubines."

"Liar. You know as well as I there are eleven. Do not pretend to be stupid, Hati. I know you better than you think." He still stared out into the city and did not look at her.

"You've caught me," she smiled. "Yes, I know there are eleven. All of them long to be the first to produce a child. Yet, they are remarkably silent about how often you visit them in the night."

Mo gave her a look that was both sad and pleased. "Good, you have stopped treating me like a god. It's about time. Now I am seeing the real you." He drank of his

water as if it was wine, and he was in need of fortification. "And, my intelligent bride-to-be, how many of my wives and concubines to date are royal or near-cousins?"

"None Mo," Hati gave the answer promptly, sorely puzzled. "I'll be the only one." Where was this going? All the present ladies in the women's wing were all either foreigners for political marriages, or gifts to the pharaoh from those who wanted royal favor. Hati did not think much of them. Most were beautiful dolls without a thought in their heads, with some notable exceptions. She leaned up against the balcony wall with her back to the throngs below.

"Now, for the next question, observant one. Answer truthfully, for I already know. I want to see if you do." He turned and looked deeply into Hati's eyes. "How many of them are truly happy and wish to be here?" His hand tightened on his goblet until his knuckles were white.

Hati sighed. Oh, dear Isis. To answer truthfully was to be very rude. "None, Mo. Some are determined to make the best of it, but some languish, so unhappy and homesick it's pitiful to see." As well as feel. Hati had felt the girl from Ur's painful longing for moisture and greenery. So deep was her longing, she wore the poisonous green clothing all the time, and her rooms were lush with plants. The arsenic was killing her, and she did not care. Hati could barely be in the same room with the sad, lonely queen. She shuddered.

Mo's face was so full of sadness Hati felt pity for him, too. He turned his face to the sky. "The Pharaonic gifts are a burden, aren't they? I, too, can feel her pain, and hear her thoughts of home. None of the ladies presently in the women's wing are happy. However, as you say, some are determined to try. Take Kara, from Punt, for instance, the tall one? Did you know she's the younger sister of the Queen of Punt? I would love to send her home, but to do so would insult Punt. Kara will eventually, by sheer force of will, make herself a home here."

Hati nodded and agreed, "She is willful, and very smart." Indeed, Queen Kara was marked as one of the most useful in the women's wing. She was always doing some sort of handcraft of great beauty, for all it was strange in design.

Mo nodded, as if he was following her thoughts. Undoubtedly, he was, for he added, "I always take her to the crafting festivals. She does so well with the merchants, I thought of giving her the right to be royal patron of the crafters."

"She would love it, Mo." Hati's eyes shone. It made her want to cry for Kara's elation when she found out. It would give poor Kara something to do.

"Then I will make it so, since you agree enough your eyes shine with tears of joy for her." His voice gentled, and yet grew more pained. "But, did you know she arrived here a frightened, unhappy stranger-child who couldn't speak Egyptian?"

"No, you never would know. Her speech is perfect now," Hati mused. How long had Kara been in Thebes? She was only few years older than Hati.

"She arrived just after I took the throne, Hati. Nearly ten years ago. She was eight years old. I was just fifteen." Mo shuddered. "And I was supposed to bed a baby. A

frightened, homesick baby." He jerked back to stare at the late-afternoon crowds. The anguish poured out of him in waves. "I did not. I swear to you, I did not. My mother was still alive then. She arranged it so there was a proper bloodstain on the linens. I left Kara in peace for another eight years, until she reminded me I needed to produce an heir, like it or not. She was very frightened, still, but determined to do her duty to me." Mo shuddered again.

Hati couldn't help herself. She put her hand on his arm and felt his trembling anguish. "Oh, Mo! You could feel her fear? It must've been horrible for you, to know she did not really want to, but was doing it out of duty."

He took a shuddering breath and blew it out, long and hard. His voice lowered, and was shamed. "I...I couldn't do it, Hati. Kara remains virgin to this day. We try now and then, but her terror overwhelms me every time. Even without that, all I can see are the big brown eyes of a little child who cried in my arms ten years ago. She's a friend, and nothing more can ever be between us."

Hati got hold of herself. She felt his pain too much. If she did not distance herself, she wouldn't be able to help him. Moreover, she did want to help him, desperately. Therefore, she did what she had to, and put up a barrier between them. As calm returned, she thought furiously. "And what of the others, Mo?"

Tutmose II laughed shakily. "Practical, practical. You'll be good for me, Hati." He took a long, shuddering breath. "I have managed with the use of herbs in my wine to perform with some of them, at least once. To my shame, I rarely can go back." He began to pace the length of the balcony, never out of hearing, but his agitation was apparent.

He was a well-formed man. His head and body were perfectly shaved, so no hair disrupted the smooth flow of his nut-brown skin. "I cannot. Even with the deed done, and their physical pain over, what is the point? They lay there like a sack of grain, and pray it is over quickly."

Hati had no answer for that. It was only duty for the women in the pharaoh's palace. How could they go willingly to a man they did not know, and was not their choice? She built up her shield further. Mo's skin condition was so like leprosy many feared he was a leper. It wasn't true, of course. Fear of the contagious skin disease made many wonder if Tutmoses II was fit to rule the empire. However, it must take even more time and trust than he had granted her this day to help him with that. One problem at a time was the way to handle things.

Her eyes turned to the city, and the answer came to her like a gift from the Gods. She waved a hand to the bustling throngs below. "Do you know how much I envy them?" Mo stopped his pacing and joined her at the rail to see what she indicated. "They are so very lucky, down there. They can choose their spouses, divorce at will and live their lives with choices."

Mo nodded and sighed. "They think they serve me. Little do they know. I serve them. My choices are so very few." The clay goblet cracked in his hand.

“Yes, we serve them. It’s our duty as those born of the Gods to protect them, care for them and even die for them. We serve Egypt,” she pronounced, like an invocation. “But we do have a choice, Mo. We choose to serve. No one rules our hearts. I choose to like you, to be with you. I choose to be your friend, and perhaps more, as time goes by. However, I have one love before you. I must ask you now, can you be second in my heart behind my greater love for Egypt?” Hati prayed with all her heart to Isis. Was it answer enough to still his restless heart?

Mo stared at her for what seemed many heartbeats. Then his smile outshone the sun. “I can. I must ask the same question of you, my future queen. Can you be second only to them?” Pharaoh gestured with a sweeping hand encompassing all that the eye could see. “For I have a greater love than even for my brilliant queen-to-be, whom I now love. With all that I am, I love Egypt. Can you be second to my greater love?”

Hati touched his ravaged face, cupping it in her small hands. His eyes, so like her own, held such fear and uncertainty. “I already am. And I am content.”

Chapter Three

Hati was grateful the wedding night was upon her. She put away all the glittering accoutrements that were part of her wedding costume. It was heavy, hot and uncomfortable. Bala was busy elsewhere moving all of her things from the little apartment reserved for female guests and royal cousins into this spacious Queen's apartment. There were so many gifts that Bala would be occupied for days. "I'll have to put more than half of the gifts in storage for my tomb."

"That's what I did," said a masculine voice from the door.

Hati dropped her golden headdress with a squeak before turning to see Mo standing there with a serious expression on his face. "Mo!!" She happily ran to him. "I thought you'd still be presiding over the crowd at the feast." She grabbed his hand to pull him further in the room.

"They were so drunk on date wine they wouldn't miss me. I could've put my crown on one of the guards and sat him in my throne, and they would've never noticed the difference."

Hati heard the disgust in his voice and laughed. "Oh, poor Great One," she simpered, mocking the unctuous courtiers. "I think they might notice, and probably did." Turning to pour him some juice, she continued, "But they'll forgive you. After all, they are probably nudging one another happily, and saying they are glad you're anxious to be with your new bride tonight." Well, she was anxious, even if Mo was not.

"I am. But not the way they think," he countered, and began to pace. "The servants are even now preparing for us the special bath in the bathing pool between this room and mine. It's a special herbal bath made to ease the...um..." he stopped and looked a little embarrassed.

"Pain of breaking a maidenhood?" Hati supplied delicately, handing him his goblet.

Mo's face flamed. "Yes. It's very hot, to relax muscles, and, well, I just wanted to warn you. It looks disgusting. The herbs make it brown in color."

Hati grinned her amusement. "If we make love in that, there'll be no stained linen to display in the morning on the balcony."

Mo resumed his pacing. "That's already taken care of, as well. I have a trusted manservant who has acquired a vial of blood. We can rub it on the linens then throw it on the floor. A second set is provided to actually sleep on." His face was still very red, and he was so agitated he shook.

Hati now saw the problem. It was one she half-expected; though she'd hoped her time with him saw to it he was less fearful and relaxed. Mo was terrified of what would

happen this night. Well, she had the solution for that. "Excellent!" She laughed cheerfully. Placing her hands on her hips, she laughed. "We must have the proof of my perfection for the people."

Mo turned and stared. This was not how things had happened before, and he looked unsure how to proceed. He was wearing just his linen kilt, and had probably divested himself of all his golden ornaments before coming to see her. His skin was much improved since she'd conspired with the vizier to arrange Mo had a few hours every day to spend with her. So, it was as she had expected. The strains of being perfect and god-like all the time were part of his skin condition. Now, very little of his face was dry and patchy. Even his arms and legs were improved, and nothing remained on his torso.

Hati sauntered over to him, still smiling. This was a treat to be the one in control. "I am looking forward to what is to come," she purred. To make sure he knew she did not lie, she touched his arm and felt him tremble. She opened her mind just a bit, to let him see inside and know she truly did look forward to his hands on her body.

Mo's eyes never left her face, but widened with surprise. Even more so, she allowed him to read in her mind that she intended to be the one in charge. She let him see her plans to make sure his pleasure overrode any lingering doubts that might remain.

Hati's hand began to glide over his shoulder and lingered on a strong pectoral muscle. "You've been hunting, haven't you? Look how sleek you have gotten. Like a lion, all muscle and bone." Her Pharaoh was athletic, and that was much to her taste.

Mo nodded, not trusting himself to speak. There was something erotic about the way she put her hands on his body, and how she seemed to admire every inch. He could hardly breathe.

"And you got rid of all that armor of ornamentation. There's nothing left but you is there? Not a god for the people tonight, but a man. A man just for me," she continued, her voice growing husky. Her right hand slid down just a bit further to hard stomach muscles, and his flesh quivered. What was more, he felt she could read him now, as if a barrier was slipping. Desire was overcoming his feelings of inadequacy. He could see it fueled her own lust.

"But Hati," he forced the words past his pain. "I am still Pharaoh, even without my crown. I must know. Are you sure? Can I be more than a glittering crown and a duty to you? You're the only one I cannot read unless you choose to let me see."

"Oh, so you noticed I have been practicing, hmm? Good, I want to be a surprise to you, not an open scroll to read at leisure." Her left hand slid to a firm, sculpted buttock, making him gasp. "Feel then, and be sure this is a pleasure, as well as my duty to my Pharaoh and Egypt," and she opened her mind up totally to him.

Mo read it all, from the surface lust to her plans to aid him throughout his life. There was a place that remained closed, and this he saw as a closed door with the sign of the God's Wives upon it. That door, he sensed, he shouldn't open. *I won't go there*, he

decided. *Some things, even a pharaoh shouldn't know.* What attracted him most was the image of him Hati had. It was a man, not a god, and not Pharaoh—her friend, and perhaps a bit more.

Her plans to heal his skin flowed before him, plans to see him massaged with lotions of her own making, and the Mo-image before him stood there unblemished. Every bit of him, from the worries of ruling Egypt down to his itchy skin, concerned her.

How unique, he thought, awed, to be cared for as a man. I am not sure how to take that. He was so disconcerted; he stood there in silence, not knowing what to do next.

Hati grinned the feline smile he remembered from the dance, knowing what he had seen inside her mind. "Well, I intend to keep you mystified and bewitched as much as possible," she purred. A long slow kiss surprised him into absolute stillness. "And to start, we must have our bath, Mo."

No man still breathing could've resisted the look she shot him over her shoulder at the door to the bathing chamber. Mo was sure he was still breathing, albeit raggedly. "Move, you idiot," he commanded himself softly.

Ironically, when he could command an empire, his own body wouldn't obey him instantly. It moved like one of the wooden puppets sold in the markets, but move it did, finally. The goblet of juice dropped unheeded on the floor. For once, he refused to care about a stained fur.

Mo entered and saw Hati waited, already naked, in the brown water with her long hair piled on top of her head and held there with a single skewer. Steam rose to curl the ends of her hair and frame her face in little wisps. Her feline smile was still there, making her brown and gold eyes gleam in the lamplight like some lioness waiting to pounce on prey in the dark.

Mo hesitated in the doorway, still fighting the lingering feelings of self-doubt. With shaking hands, he turned and undid his kilt, placing it carefully out of harm's way on the bench provided.

Hati read it all in his mind; his self-doubt about his ability to perform, feeling much like a virgin himself, and unsure what to do. The images of his previous lackluster experiences threatened to un-man him totally, and that would never do. She would have to create new images this night, or he surely would be a eunuch forever. She called softly, "Mo." He did not turn, but stiffened, and his buttocks hardened. He expected a last-minute rejection, she saw.

"Come, get into the bath, Mo. I cannot relax your muscles with a massage unless you get into the water with me," she coaxed. Seizing on an easy and believable excuse, she added, "The tensions of ruling and the pomp of the wedding have made you tighter than the strings of a lyre. Let me help you. The hot water is very soothing, and smells good." It was no lie. She did intend to start the evening with a massage, and the water

did smell good for all it looked horrid. There were even tiny flowers floating in the water and sticking to her wet skin.

Mo came closer, and slid into the herbed water, trying to smile. "You look like a Nile goddess, Hati, with little flowers all over your—skin." One little flower clung desperately to a little pink nipple, and his eyes lingered hungrily there.

Hati waded over to him. The sunken pool in the floor could easily have held several people, and was deep enough that when she stood upright, the water lapped at her navel. Moving behind him, she began to rub his shoulders, and he crouched further until he nearly knelt.

When she felt the tension knots dissolve beneath her fingers, she leaned over and brushed his shoulder blades with her nipples. Mo shuddered, and she could feel the desire rising in him. "I just have one question, Mo," she breathed in his ear.

"What's that?" His words were thick and slurred. Good, she was getting beyond his fears. With her hands on his wet skin, she could feel and see his lust.

"Are these flowers edible?" and without waiting for an answer, she moved around to nibble on a smooth pectoral. She'd already smelled and tasted they were, but she wanted him to think of it. Like all of the pharaonic line, he was truly hairless, save for head, eyebrows, and a sparse sprinkling of pubic hair easily shaved off.

"Yes," he moaned as she moved to make sure the other nipple was just as tasty. "I think so."

"Good," she mumbled against a brown nipple. "Because it tastes good, and there's something in the water that makes me tingle." A stimulant to heighten how much the skin felt, but also good for Mo's skin, she mused, and she blessed the herbalists. The feeling of a woman's true power soared in Hati. Here, at her mercy, was a man stimulated to near madness by the simple use of soft small lips and a tiny, busy tongue. Somehow, it fueled her lust much more than the simple herb stimulant in the water.

Mo's hands clenched futilely at the tiles. "Hati," he pled, "I have been long without, and I am near to bursting. Stop, I beg you." It was almost more than he could bear. It was not the physical sensations so much as he could hear her mind's plans for his pleasure this night. To hear someone care only for his pleasure was so unique, his heart sang with joy.

"Well then," she smiled. "You can return the favor."

It only took a caress or two for her mind to focus on what he did to her before she exploded, both physically and mentally, even as bodies joined.

Only now did he understand why the children of the Gods ran eagerly to mate with one another. Mind joined to mind, and both were pleased beyond words by this alone.

Their minds wove together to form a network that would bind them for life. They both shouted for the joy of it. There was no separate being anymore, but one ecstatic meld, both taking and giving at the same instant with every thrust and pull. When the binding was complete, his body wrenched his soul inside out. Hati felt the letting go of

his seed as if it were her own, and Mo felt the reception of it like tiny hot arrows. Her shrieks were his as well, with both uncaring who heard.

But other minds heard, and lovers young and old turned to one another, intent on seeking the same release. The whole palace writhed in a sexual embrace. The palace cats, from the great hunting cats to the smallest, sought a mate, as did every stallion and mare in the royal stable. The guards gritted their teeth and trembled, painfully aware they must stand guard through an onslaught they couldn't fight, but must simply hold fast.

One tiny, sane portion of his mind thanked a lowly scribe for a gift that could never be repaid, and his inarticulate shout was a prayer that he'd be able to try to repay that gift anyway.

* * * * *

Senmut knelt before the shrine in his father's modest tomb. At the false door in the wall that led to the world of the dead, he placed his gift of beer, bread and fruit. Here alone could he share with someone whom he believed cared for him in his misery and loneliness.

Lifting his head and letting tears fall without shame, he talked with Hal-Ra. "Father, I know now why you gave me to the temple when Mother died. I understand now the bleakness of your life without her. I comprehend, with all my own grieving heart, what it is to lose your beloved.

"Did going into the desert as a common soldier burn the pain from your heart? It isn't burning mine away. I work from the moment Osiris returns from the underworld until long after he begins his journey again the next night, and there is only the ache to companion me when I am too tired to continue. Did you seek danger in the fighting, in hopes that an enemy spear would end your loneliness? Perhaps I ended my soldiering days too soon. I would welcome the cool night of death."

For a time, he wept alone. At one point, he would swear he'd felt a cool hand on his shoulder, but did not dare raise his head to see if his father had come through the door to comfort him. Somehow, he did feel comforted, and eventually wiped his eyes.

"Thank you, Father." His whisper echoed in the tiny tomb. "I do not ask for intercession with the Gods from you. It is wrong, this I know. I must go on, as you forced yourself to go on. But, I cannot seek another woman, just as you never did. They are all as shadows to me now. Perhaps you felt the same. If you have strength to spare, impart some to me, that I might live out my days with the same fortitude you did."

With that, he rose from the sandy floor and brushed off his knees. It was a hard ride back to the mortuary tombs, but he welcomed the wind in his face and the sun to beat down on him to hide the marks of sorrow. No one alive must ever know. He sealed the

door, and went to his horse, resting in the cool shade of a nearby stand of palms. The small boy who had cared for his horse caught the coin he flipped with a happy shout and ran for home. Without a backward glance, Senmut mounted and rode into the mountains.

* * * * *

Hati awoke abruptly, half-smothered. Something heavy lay across her ribs, and she could barely breathe. After a moment of fear, she shoved at Mo's arm until its weight no longer threatened to shut off her ability to take a full breath. Mo was no more used to sharing his bed than she, and rolled over, taking all of the sheets with him. At least this bed was built for two, and reasonably comfortable.

Giggles threatened, and she smothered them with her arm until she achieved calm. Six times! Holy Mother Isis, six separate times she and Mo had joined minds and bodies in an enthusiastic romp that surely would've killed ordinary men. Bala couldn't claim that Hati had not gotten any exercise recently. Hati was not sure she could walk, but her body claimed it couldn't wait much longer for her to rise. The attempt must be made, even if she had to crawl to the pot.

A few minutes later, Hati sighed with relief and got a good look around at Mo's rooms. Walking was not nearly as bad as she'd thought, so a quiet peek around the Pharaoh's apartment was a rare treat not to be missed. Mo had always come to her rooms. What incredible things he had, though it was nearly as sparse as a priest's room. What there was went beyond luxury! Golden chairs draped with fine furs, more furs on the floor and a golden goblet with dust on it. Not that Hati blamed him for that. Gold did not taste as well as plain-fired clay in her opinion.

Bala waited when Hati returned to her own apartments without ever having awakened Mo. "He'll sleep the sleep of the sated for a few more hours," she whispered to Bala.

Bala sniffed approvingly. "I should think so. One might assume a cat was tangled in a thorn bush considering the way you kept the entire wing entertained well into the night."

Hati blushed, but retorted, "Then maybe the others will get over their ridiculous fears and be proper wives. Hmph. He's quite good, I would say."

"You have no basis for comparison, m'girl. But, judging by what I heard, yes, I can agree. He'll do. Let's just hope you're pregnant."

"Oh, wouldn't that be wonderful? I would love to ease that burden from him and provide him with many children, and..."

There was a throat-clearing sound from the door. Bala immediately went to rigid attention and servility. That gave Hati all the clues she needed. She turned and leapt into Mo's arms, chirping, "Good morning!"

"No respect, no respect," he chuckled. "What will Bala do with you?" He looked at Bala with the same easy good humor that Hati now knew was his true self, not the public Pharaoh. "Bala, can you spare my Queen this morning? Or will she turn into a lump of flab without her morning exercise?"

Bala heard Hati's "Hmph!" and ignored it. "So, you shared minds last night as well, then? Good, then I can drop the servility act. Yes, I can spare her. You gave her enough exercise last night, and it could be expected that you'd want her for more today. But I wouldn't suggest public appearances, Divine One." She raised her hand at his frown. "Yes, yes, I know you prefer 'Mo', but that is a bad habit for me to get into, so I will keep with the fancy titles and hot air."

Mo nodded, and sighed. "Yes, I can see that, you secret weapon in an old woman's flesh." Bala gave him the ultimate accolade of a sniff for that. "Nothing more than a strategy session on the sand table and a map with Keoset to scandalize. Even my guards will be outside the room, so Hati can speak freely. I assume Keoset has been cleared of any unfortunate divided loyalties. I know that much about the God's Wives' famous abilities."

Sniff. "He has been cleared, Serenity."

"Good. Just let me get on the pectoral and other nonsense. Dress Hati up for me, will you?" At Hati's outraged pout, Mo patted her bottom and strode from the room.

* * * * *

Keoset got over his outrage very quickly, and Mo congratulated himself on allowing Hati in on this strategy session before the ideas were presented to the generals.

"See, Keoset?" Hati explained, moving another counter into the southwestern desert region of the empire, "If we move one small garrison here, and have them keep the trade routes of the desert people open, the desert people become an immediate conduit around Nubia to Punt for us at little cost to us."

Keoset stood there, stunned for a few moments, but the vizier was a quick-witted man. "An elegant and simple solution, Divine Lady. The desert sheiks have long wished this, but we had no reason to accommodate them. It wouldn't drive up the price of goods over much, if we offer this to them. They get the protection from Nubian bandits, and we get the wealth of Punt to trade for our wheat."

"Indeed, Keoset. I have spoken with Queen Kara. Her sister Queen Hathor desires closer ties and trade with us. We've been dilatory, after Queen Hathor was so generous as to provide our Pharaoh with such a good wife as Queen Kara ten years ago."

"Quite true, Serene Lady. Perhaps we should send the Assistant Chancellor Nehsy, first to deal with the sheiks and thence on to Punt?"

Mo jumped in, to make it all legitimate. "A wonderful idea, Keoset! Do you agree, my Queen? Or should Queen Kara go? She has more rank."

"Queen Kara is busy with the Great Festival to Isis, Divine One, as you ordered. I am sorry," she reminded Mo gently. The Festival was only a few weeks away.

"We dare not neglect Isis! Not to mention the details of the festival are in capable hands for the first time since my father's reign. With regret, I must withdraw my wish for Kara to accompany Nehsy. We'll have to send valuable presents instead, along with samples of the trade goods we offer. Perhaps Kara would advise Nehsy instead on what trade goods Queen Hathor would wish to see?"

Hati looked at Keoset, who nodded agreement. "I think Queen Kara would be delighted, my Divine Lord. Perhaps the next time a trip to Punt is needed, Queen Kara will be free to oversee it?" Hati offered this, knowing Kara would be more than "delighted".

"Then let it be so ordered. Will you see to the scribes for me, Keoset? Thank you. Now, have we come up with a plan the generals might agree with?" Mo gestured to the sand table where military formations appeared as small wooden disks on a map of Egypt.

"If we have not, then they can tell us what they think will work that is similar, Divine One," Keoset grinned. Then his eyes fell on Hati and the grin turned sly. "If I may suggest, Serenity, we've the means at our disposal to get the best plan without them fearing to insult you." He turned to Hati and explained, "They are all good men, just intimidated. We need someone they will fear less to anger."

Hati began to laugh, divining the plan just from his sly grin. "So they won't be afraid of the Pharaoh's new bride?"

Mo chuckled. "And they should be!"

"Exactly my plan, Divine Ones," Keoset laughed. He stabbed a finger in Mo's direction. "I am sure it can be arranged to have you called away for a period of time. Your new queen, with her sweet innocent face, can continue to preside from her chair. She can pretend innocent questions until the plan is perfect. You can steer them that way, can't you, Serene Lady?"

"With ease." Hati put on a dewy-eyed look that a baby gazelle would be proud to own. Mo and Keoset laughed until their sides hurt.

"Oh, they will speak very freely with that to fool them!" Keoset exclaimed, wiping his eyes.

"Well then, Keoset. Have we dispensed with this strategy session?" Mo grinned and winked at Keoset.

"Indeed, yes. For once, it did not last well into the night. I cleared our schedules, just in case, but it seems we now have a bit of leisure," Keoset's voice trailed off as he noted that Mo was now stalking Hati, who appeared not to notice.

"Good!" Mo exclaimed as he threw Hati over his shoulder while she squealed in surprise. "I have heirs to father." He pushed open the heavy doors while Hati giggled breathlessly to his back, and her hair brushed the backs of his knees.

* * * * *

Keoset leaned back against the sand table and saluted that remarkable sight with his goblet. "Ah, to be young again. Come to think of it, I wonder what my wife is doing at this time of day." He grinned and strode off toward his own apartments. "If those two keep coloring up the very air with their play, there will be an increase in the births throughout Thebes! What was it that seer said? *Prosperity will return when mind joins mind, though the heart is divided? Death will come in a night of dreams.* Ah, I cannot remember. Seers! Always speaking in riddles."

Chapter Four

Hati awoke to the sounds of Mo moving around in his rooms, getting ready to start his day. Blinking sleepily, she tried desperately to push unhappy dreams away and remove the fog that kept her in bed long after her usual rising time. Today was the day the festival began! While today it would be Kara at Mo's side, Hati would join the festivities with the rest of the royal household. She couldn't help the tiny twinge of envy that Kara would see more of the festival from the lofty position of the sedan chairs, but it was an even trade. Hati and the other royal household would have the opportunity to shop that Kara would not. Kara and Bathomet, as the other wives, did not demand much of Mo's company. All had made sure to tell Hati in their own ways they were grateful she'd freed them from onerous bed duties.

"Awake, are you, then? Good," Mo smiled down at his favorite wife. "I'll need to leave very soon to clear state business before riding in the procession."

"Of course, my love. Kara's worked so hard these past few weeks," Hati began before a wave of nausea had her leap out of bed and rush naked to the pot set aside for her in Mo's apartments. She knelt, retching until she felt her whole body shake.

Mo ran to her apartments, yelling for Bala. A few moments later, as Hati leaned her forehead against the cool wall, she heard Bala's voice soothing Mo. "It's to be expected, Serenity." Bala calmly entered the room bearing a bowl and a cloth draped on her arm.

"Expected?" Mo asked, still agitated.

"Yes, Serenity," Bala said cheerfully, kneeling beside Hati and setting the bowl down. "Expected. As in expecting. Your Divine Lady is pregnant at last. It has taken three moons. I'd hoped it would be sooner." She began to soak the cloth in the herbed water. The scent soothed Hati's stomach, so she stopped panting.

Hati spared a bleary-eyed glance at Mo, who stared at her grinning like an idiot. She managed a weak smile, as Bala bathed her face and wrists with the pleasant-smelling water. "I am pregnant? Is this what it feels like?" Mo just stood there, rooted to the spot and grinning as like one of the palace cats that had a whole rodent carcass to himself.

"There, there, my Lady," Bala soothed, turning her considerable powers of healing empathy on Hati, "Yes, but only temporarily. In an hour or so, and after a bit of bread and milk, you'll be fine. This sort of thing will only last a matter of weeks, if that long. Do you feel like you can sit in a chair now?"

"Only if you bring the pot along just in case," Hati was somewhat chagrined. So, this was what sick of the morning felt like.

Bala got her up and moving shakily to one of Mo's golden chairs. Hati thanked Isis briefly for the furs beneath her, for the golden arms were cold and made her yelp when she touched them. Her naked buttocks wouldn't appreciate the honor of a golden chair. No matter what Egypt's daytime temperatures, the night air cooled metal and stone to uncomfortable temperatures.

Mo chuckled—heartlessly to her mind—and earned himself a glare. “Sorry, my dove. Why do you think I cover them in furs?” To Hati's surprise, the Pharaoh of Egypt carried the pot and set it at her feet, and earned himself a lecture from Bala for his trouble.

“Serenity!” Bala wagged a finger beneath Mo's nose. “We'll have none of that! Your yelling has undoubtedly awakened the palace, and the news will soon be all over that the Queen is pregnant. Your royal physicians are probably even now throwing on clothes and gathering their nasty messes in haste to get to her. We've but minutes to explain the gravity of the situation to you,” Bala chattered hurriedly.

“Gravity?” Mo queried, looking suddenly worried.

“Yes, now hush and do not interrupt,” Bala's voice was urgent. “You must maintain the appearance, while pleased, Hati is of no more value to you than any other of your wives and concubines. She is the first to be pregnant, and quite possibly likeliest to produce your heir. That puts her and the baby at great risk. Your enemies will now seek to end her life in such a way as to look like an accident of pregnancy.”

Hati gasped at the baldness of the statement, but nodded agreement. It was true.

Bala spared a glance at Hati to make sure she understood, sniffed once, and continued, “What is more, you, Divine One, are going to have to move quickly. You must get another of your wives or concubines pregnant as quickly as possible. That one will be treated as the favorite, acting as bait for those who would kill the heir and its mother. Can you do this?”

Mo was so startled, the truth popped out of his mouth without thought, “No, I...”

“Then the God's Wives must move even more swiftly, and another God's Wife must be found. We'll take what we can get, but she doesn't have to be more than a beautiful concubine, fortunately. Only the mind-meld is important for you to manage to perform. Brains and training aren't an issue, thanks be to Isis. I will see who's available as our sacrificial lamb.”

Bala began to pace, with her hands locked behind her back. Hati took the opportunity to take Mo's cold hands in her own warm ones. The nausea was fading, and her mind moved forward at a rapid speed. “It must be one of the herbalists, Bala. That way, we've an excuse to bring her to the palace. She can ostensibly be here to aid me in curing Mo's skin, but her herbal skills might save her own life from poisons. That is the most likely way to try to kill us. I can take care of myself, but I would like to see my shield-sister survive. Besides, if she is carrying a spare heir, she should live as well.”

“Good thinking, good thinking.” Bala sniffed. “Now, who?”

* * * * *

"Do not I get a say in this?" Mo asked petulantly. It was unnerving to hear them discuss so coldly where he'd put his seed and strategies against his enemies. It was horrifying, in a way, that his lovely wife, still pale from nausea, could do this. She was a strategist at the sand table, yes, but to manipulate so intimately frightened him.

"No!" both exclaimed together, and looked stubborn. Bala's eyes immediately softened, and she came over to pat his arm like a mother.

"Never fear, Serenity," she smiled. Mo wondered if all the God's Wives were so charming no matter what their age while they coldly planned the death of this one, the ruin of another or even where a man put his seed. "We'll pick you a beauty who'll be well aware of what she must do and why she is here. She'll know from the beginning that she is nothing more than a shield for the Queen, and a body to carry a second son, if we are lucky. In this way, she serves Egypt. Nothing more, and nothing less."

Hati tugged on Mo's hand to get his attention. "Look at it this way, Mo. My sister is there to help you protect me. By lying with her but once, and showing her public favor, you put another layer of shielding around me, and our babe. By publicly putting me aside for her, at least until after our child is born, you do us a great kindness. What you do in the dead of night is your business. I will be just down the hall if you need me, as always."

Bala sighed and came close to speak softly "While I hate to do this," she offered in a whisper, "we can even increase your fertility and hers for the one night. It's risky but will ensure one night is all that is needed. You only need match minds with her but once. If she isn't to your taste, then she'll live out her life as a neglected concubine until there is another use for her. You'd give her away as a gift to another man, or banish her back to the temple, if we asked it of you, would you not?"

"Assuredly," Mo was bewildered. "But why is it risky to increase our fertility for that one night?"

"Risky more for her than for you, Divine One. Yours will be to abstain from sex for at least three days beforehand. Starting with this very hour, in fact. A simple aphrodisiac will be added to your wine to make you randy enough to perform." Bala grinned wickedly at Mo's blush. "Her potions, however, will be much stronger. As soon as she is chosen, she'll take...well, never mind what is in it. The fact is she'll be at risk for a multiple birth. We do not have time enough to find a God's Wife who is already a twin or more, and a naturally over-fertile soul. We'll have to risk the drug. And whoever we choose will have to be willing to risk losing her life to a multiple birth."

A commotion in the corridor warned them the time for truths and planning was at an end, for now. Mo finally showed some of the quick thinking that made him a ruler. Glancing at Hati's still-naked form, he commanded, "Throw some clothes on her, Bala. I will delay them, send for you later." Squaring his shoulders, he put on his royal hauteur and frowned, thinking of the smell of the pot to get the right air of disgust on his face. Then he threw open the doors. Yes, it was the royal physicians, eagerly standing there,

arguing precedence. Mo's fake disgust became genuine. "Her maid is with her," he commented with an air of nonchalance. "After you examine her to make sure it's pregnancy, remove her to her quarters to throw up in peace and out of my sight." For effect, he curled his lip in a sneer. "More important things await me." He sauntered down the hall without a backward glance, but thought with a purely internal grin, *I cannot wait to tell Keoset!* He picked up his pace. He knew it would be interpreted as hurrying to get away from the stench and fuel the rumors that Hati was now in disfavor.

* * * * *

Hati sat in her new apartments, finally alone. She had submitted with as much grace as she could to the probing fingers of the physicians, and then had been hustled to these slightly smaller rooms at the end of the corridor. These were the rooms of those least in favor with Pharaoh, because of their close proximity to the bathing rooms. "I'll be disturbed all night by those traipsing in and out to get a bath." She was disgruntled, but everything was going according to plan.

As she glared at the open doors, in sauntered a tiny kitten barely old enough to walk. The little fellow looked around the room, then ambled his little round body straight over to Hati's feet, and sat down like he owned that particular spot.

"Aren't you a cute one?" cooed Hati, charmed out of her bad mood. Like most of the palace cats, he was a golden-cream color, with green eyes. Eventually, he'd be sleek and lithe, but right now, he was round and awkward. The engaging little fellow rose up and put both paws on Hati's leg, telling her he wanted a warm lap. Hati obliged before he emphasized his demand with needle-sharp claws.

"I know when to obey, holy one," she laughed. Her dangling necklace provided him with an excellent toy, so she jiggled it for his amusement. "Are you a sign from Bastet to tell me I will not be out of favor for long? If so, I appreciate the message. It is hard to do without Mo for almost a whole year, his visiting me only late in the night when he can escape the watchful eyes. I am already lonely."

The kitten looked at her and mewed, looking serious for a moment before returning to pounce on his new prey, the scarab pendant at the end of her necklace. "I'll call you Miw, if you do not mind," she said, and petted his soft fur.

Miw settled down for a nap. "Message delivered, duty done," Hati murmured to the little ball of fur. "Mistress comforted." A tiny purr was her only answer.

* * * * *

Tutmose II sat back in his golden chair. *Damn things are cold*, he thought for the hundredth time, frowning. As cold as his life was for the next year, before Hati could return to bring warmth back into his life. The idea of his bedding another female and showing favor to her in the meantime! It was enough to sour a joyous day.

“The news of Queen Hatshepsut’s pregnancy will delight the whole kingdom, Divine One.” Keoset was no fool, but his voice quavered. Mo knew what was going through his mind. Why would a pharaoh who skinned his own kills find offence in a woman’s nausea?

Mo roused himself from his bad mood. “There’s still an empire to run, Keoset. I wish my Queen was by my side, for she is most fit to run it should I not be able to do so.” Mo paused to consider a long trip to Punt or anywhere, as long as he did not have to sleep with another woman. In fact, that might be a good idea. “If I go away, let that be a standing royal command. Queen Hatshepsut shall rule in my stead.”

Keoset glanced down at the royal scribe who wrote the command into law. “So it’s ordered, Royal One.”

Smiling for the first time since he had left his apartments, Mo had another thought. “And let this be a second decree. Queen Hatshepsut’s child is first heir, if it is male. Should any other of my wives or concubines bear another son, Hatshepsut’s son will be first among them. If Hatshepsut bears a daughter, and another a son, then Hatshepsut is charged with seeing to it the prince is fit to rule until he is old enough to take the throne in his own right, even above the mother. Let no other supplant her, no matter what, for she is more fit to rule than any other – male or female – in this empire. I charge you and all who follow you to see to this. Let these orders be secret until such time as they are needed.”

As Keoset knelt and swore, and the scribe scribbled furiously, Mo sat back with satisfaction. He had done his part. Even though he was separated from Hati for an entire year, and would do his duty as best he could, Hati was assured of being mother of their child with no interference. No other would take her place, not even the new concubine who would warm his bed for as long as he could stand it. When his tolerance was at an end, he’d find a long journey to go on, and be back in time for the birth. Hati could rule in his place. He could trust her to love and serve Egypt as she would love and serve their son.

“And there is one more order. This need not be secret. Have the Master Builder and his scribe Senmut brought before me. I am much pleased with their progress and artistry and wish to reward them for their services.” In a much better mood, Mo gave a lopsided grin to Keoset. Soon, he’d settle an old debt.

* * * * *

Pythia knelt at the feet of The Mother of the God's Wives and prayed for patience. The Mother droned on and on about her responsibilities and the honor given her, when the essential information was passed on long ago. *So I am to be concubine to Pharaoh*, she mused to herself. Listening with half an ear, just in case The Mother did say something relevant, Pythia made her own plans. Gods, would the old woman ever cease talking?

"Pythia," the old woman rasped, "You must understand this clearly. It's your beauty and herbal skills that buys you this position."

"Yes, Mother," Pythia replied. "I am to work with Queen Hatshepsut in restoring the Pharaoh's skin as my public duty." *And what I do privately is my business*, she thought to herself.

"Good. Your first goal is to use your beauty to entice the Pharaoh into giving you a child. You must begin this very day by taking the strongest potion you can make to increase your fertility. You may only get one night with the Pharaoh, so we must take the opportunity and make the most of it." The Mother was clear in her dislike of the necessity, frowning and yet managing to look apologetic. "I am sorry for the necessity, but I think you might understand."

"Yes, Mother. I do not like the idea of risking more than one child in my womb at a time, myself," Pythia responded. "I am willing to take the chance. How many days do I have to take the potion before I share the Pharaoh's bed? It will make a critical difference in the strength of my risk, if it is more than two weeks. I am on my moon time now."

"Correct. The Festival will end this ten-day. You'll be gifted in a ceremony the following evening in a small court fete." The Mother, whose true name was known only to her, smiled thinly. "A shame not to make an event of it, but that soon after the Festival, no one is interested in feasting."

"I'll be done and cleansed of my moon time by then, Mother," Pythia reassured. "Is it possible to request a delay through the Queen that I not be available to the Pharaoh until a ten-day later? My chance of pregnancy will be greatest then."

"Easily. I will confide in you that the Pharaoh is displeased with this plan, and not anxious to bed any woman, no matter how beautiful. You'll probably have to add aphrodisiacs to his wine, but we may be fortunate and you may not need it," The Mother grated. "I need not compliment you again on your beauty. You're well aware of it, since we've used it before. Do try to exert yourself and entice the Pharaoh. You have another benefit. You're not virginal. That, I understand, is more to the Pharaoh's taste."

Pythia heard the censure in The Mother's tone. Yes, she admitted she preferred not to work too hard at anything. A concubine position would suit her, if she bothered to put a bit more effort into the enticement when she was gifted. Then all she'd have to do is lie on her back and spread her legs for Pharaoh once or twice a year.

For that she would live in luxury all her life. One baby was worth that, especially since it was nursed and cared for by others. After the child, she would ensure she'd

never have that trouble again. Pythia smiled genuinely for The Mother, "I am pleased to serve, Mother, and will do my best to please the Pharaoh."

The Mother's eyes narrowed, Pythia noted. *Whoops, a bit too enthusiastic.* Pythia contrived to look concerned. "And what of this task of guarding Queen Hatshepsut, Mother? Will you elaborate on that duty?"

The Mother smiled coldly, but replied, "That you'll do by existing there in the royal apartments, Pythia. You'll be the titular favorite of the Pharaoh, no matter whether you're pregnant or not. The enemies of Egypt will wish to harm you, rather than Queen Hatshepsut. If you're also pregnant, they will perceive that your child is likely to be made heir if it's male."

The Mother snorted. "Your skill with herbalism will ensure that you cannot be poisoned easily, and that is the most likely avenue they will try. Do take precautions."

The Mother paused, and added, "As far as the knife and garrote methods go, Hatshepsut can take care of herself. You're less skilled in that regard, but the royal guards can handle most assassination attempts. You'll be in little danger if you're reasonably cautious."

Now Pythia's smile thinned. Oh, we are to pretend the former assassin Bala isn't there, hmm? Do not you think I do not know about her? Honorable retirement, my ass. Bala protects Little Miss Perfect, and I make do with the royal guards? "I remember Queen Hatshepsut's skills, Mother. I agree to be her shield." I will not be needed to guard the Queen. I must guard myself. Pythia forced herself not to curl her lip and give her hatred of Hati away.

Dismissed to her stillroom to prepare sufficient quantities of the fertility potion, Pythia seethed all the way back to the dark room below the temple. She banged her mortar and pestle onto the table. "Bait, am I?" A bag of boiled and dried urine crystals followed with a softer plop. It was a most unsatisfying sound to signify annoyance. "I think not!" she exclaimed between gritted teeth.

Snatching up a basket, Pythia stalked outside to the temple gardens. She roughly cut what she needed, regardless of harm to the delicate plants. So what did she care if the temple gardener-priests were in despair later? They had a whole life of dedication to their stupid plants to repair the damage.

"Little Miss Perfect never soiled her hands working in the gardens, did she? Oh, no, she had servants to go cut and grub for roots." She walked back to the stillroom. That tiny dark room was hers and hers alone since Hati had left, and even somewhat before. "Little Miss Perfect had her dancing lessons, her sword dances and her scribing. She did not have time to go get her hands dirty, while I grubbed and ground messes all day and waited for Her Highness to show up." Pythia conveniently ignored she'd been so abysmal at the other lessons that she'd been banished to the stillroom as her one "practical" skill.

It was so wonderful when they had both been little girls, at first. Hati had stood up for Pythia, protecting her from the other children's taunts and cruelty. So, what if she'd

failed miserably at the other studies? The teachers favored the more noble-born than those of lower rank that was obvious.

Pythia's parents had been minor nobles of no great wealth or power. They'd given Pythia to the temple when she was the sixth daughter born, and there hadn't been enough dowries to go around. "Was that my fault? Certainly not!" Pythia dumped the herbs in a pile and began to chop. Halfway through, she realized she'd not removed the stems and was forced to pick out stem pieces with her fingers. "Damn her! Even when she's not here, Her Royal Perfection causes me trouble!" Pythia cursed.

"And I was her little faithful shadow for years," she raged. "Right up until we both had our first moon time. Oh, then she changed her tune, did she not?" Pythia ground her herbs viciously and remembered how Hati had always seemed to know when Pythia was hiding from work or sneaking treats. The Sister Wives had always found Pythia's best refuges, and Pythia was positive Hati had told on her.

* * * * *

Pythia finished grinding the herbs with a carefully measured dose of crystals and set them in a linen bag to soak in hot water. No matter what her feelings, wasting the crystals would cause her more trouble than it was worth. Boiling an entire giant pot of men's urine down to get those few crystals was hot, smelly and long. Once the bag was steeping, she could go to her chair in the room and sulk.

Hati had never given Pythia an even chance to have a bit of fun after that day. It just was not fair. What angered Pythia deep down inside was that Hati had been truthful in most of what she had said, and Pythia had known it even then. So what if she liked her comforts? Not everyone was born to be an ascetic. There was nothing wrong with enjoying the bounty of the gods' favor with good food and drink. It was a way of showing appreciation directly.

Well, it was payback time for all those instances where Hati had told on her when she'd snuck foodstuffs from the kitchens or found a place to hide when extra work was to be done. The teachers and sister-Wives had never said that Hati had told, but they'd always known where to look to find her stash of food or drink, or where she hid. Her Royal Perfection with her superior pharaonic gifts had probably found her out and told.

"Now Hati needs me. How amusing. Hati will be getting fat with pregnancy now, and depending on me to fuck her precious Pharaoh. For a whole year, I will be the titular favorite, showered with gold, beautiful linens and fine foods." Pythia sat back and swigged a small beer she'd hidden in the cool stillroom. "If I am lucky, I will be mother to a prince. If the gods have any grace for me, they'll give Hati a daughter and me, a son. Then I would be set for life as mother of the next Pharaoh. Now, isn't that a delightful thought?" She sat back and took another pull of beer.

“Now, how best to ensure my position? Oh, how simple! Make that ‘titular’ favorite the truth, of course!” She laughed and bounced up from the chair. “I’ll make a potion to give him a night beyond his wildest dreams. They will be his wildest dreams, since I can drug him into believing his dreams are reality! All I will have to do is lay there, and his own mind will provide a night he won’t forget!” Pythia began to yank bottles and bags down from the shelf.

Chapter Five

Tutmose II sat on his golden chair in the audience hall with a benevolent expression on his face. Senmut noticed most of the courtiers were absent, perhaps in their beds this evening, nursing hangovers for one more night after the revelry of the Festival of Isis, so there were no sycophants around. The audience chamber was virtually empty, and only those who were called to appear before Pharaoh were present.

Before the Pharaoh, Senmut knelt with the Master Builder. "Master Builder, you have done very well, and I am much pleased," he began. "The designs for my tomb have been so spectacular that I will live out eternity in comfort when it's time for me to take the journey. Your income is increased by two talents of wheat every year for this alone."

The Master was a burly man who looked as if he could heave great blocks of stone all by himself, and Senmut was aware how ridiculous he looked groveling there with his forehead to the floor. Apparently, so did the Pharaoh. "Rise, Master Builder. You earned the right to kneel upright and look me in the eye. Be not ashamed of who you are and what you have accomplished. But I would ask more of you, if you feel you can bear the weight of more responsibility?"

The Master Builder sat back on his heels with alacrity, with one eyebrow raised. "I serve Egypt in whatever the Living Gods direct, Divine One. How may I serve further?" Senmut kept his forehead on the floor.

"It has been shown to us that this scribe beside you has shown great promise as an architect, and that is due in part to your superb training." When the Master had bowed his head, acknowledging the compliment, the Pharaoh continued, "I would see more scribes learn of your art. I propose to take your present scribe into royal service and make him tutor to any royal heirs that may be forthcoming; because of his perfect training in the knowledge Pharaohs must know to rule well. In his place I will send a suitable number of young scribes for you to train in a like manner."

The Master stammered his thanks at the honor given him. Not since the great Imhotep had a commoner Master been asked to train an elite cadre of scribes whose sole purpose was to learn the art of the mortuary temples and tombs. Since scribes were the ones who knew how to draw the hieroglyphs, it was a small leap to draw buildings. Both arts were exacting in their precision. Senmut was pleased for his friend. It was a well-earned honor.

"Such a great responsibility has equal rewards, Master Builder. I propose to send you five scribes of suitable education and skills, so I think it only fair that you receive five talents of wheat annually to reward you for the gray they shall put in your hair. Go now, and speak to the High Priest that you may choose your students with care and

deliberation. Leave the scribe beside you with me, that I may discuss his new duties with him."

The Master Builder rose and bowed himself out of the room, scrupulously courteous, but anxious to be gone. Senmut suspected that he already planned what to do with his increased wealth.

There was silence for a few moments after the Master Builder's footsteps had receded from hearing, but Senmut did not raise his head.

"Scribe Senmut, I prefer to see your face, not the back of your head. Kneel upright, so we might converse as we've done once before," he commanded. "Since I am again without my royal scribe, I ask that you remember the details of the Master Builder's increase in wealth and record it later."

Senmut raised himself from the floor and assumed a kneeling position back on his heels with considerably more grace than the Master Builder had managed. "It will be as you command, Serenity," he responded.

Tutmose II leaned forward and spoke so softly that only Senmut and perhaps Hor-heb heard. "You look like hell, Senmut. Do I need to turn you over to Captain Hor-heb here to regain your health?"

Senmut's mask of calm serenity slipped away like water to be replaced by open-mouthed surprise. When he realized he looked like a sun-basking crocodile, his mouth shut with an audible snap. A glance at Hor-heb showed that Hor-heb had heard those words, and tried vainly to maintain the neutral gaze of a soldier on guard. Senmut yanked his gaze back to the amused eyes of his Pharaoh, who appeared to wait with perfect patience while Senmut assimilated the circumstances. "I-I..." he began, not knowing exactly what to say. He tried again. "I'll do as you command, Serenity."

"Good. My first command is for you to regain health and vitality. I wish the tutor of my children to be well able to manage them," pronounced Tutmose II. "I can see you have many questions. Speak freely."

"Many, Great One. The first is, why me?" Senmut couldn't believe this was happening.

"An excellent question. First and foremost, you sacrificed much for Egypt," Tutmose sat back with a small smile. His golden eyes twinkled with rare good humor. "You are rewarded for that, above and beyond the usual stipend paid a scribe of your skills. The pay for a tutor of royal children is fifteen talents a year, and includes a grant of nobility."

He pinned Senmut with a loaded stare that led Senmut to believe that rumor was true, and Pharaoh could really see through to his heart. Senmut was astonished. If rumor was correct, and Pharaoh knew Senmut's heart belonged to Hati, then he should be dead, not rewarded. "I am but a humble scribe, Serenity. I am unworthy."

Tutmose raised one eyebrow. "I think not. A warrior, a priest, scribe and architect of masterpieces of design is well worthy to teach children. From whom else would they learn to win wars, worship the Gods, learn the business of the empire, read what was

done before them so they do not repeat mistakes and appreciate beauty? You're a host of teachers in one body." When Senmut bowed his head in acknowledgement for the compliment, Tutmose continued, "And I will need someone trusted to keep my favorite Queen amused. You play *mehen* and *senet*, do you not?"

Who didn't? The lowest peasant child in the streets played *mehen*, and *senet* was part of the training of every scribe, since scribes often played with their noble masters. Senmut contented himself with a nod before it filtered into his heart that the Pharaoh had just asked—no, ordered—him to amuse Hati. With difficulty, he schooled his face into calm serenity before he shouted for joy.

"Good. You're dismissed. Servants wait to show you to the royal tutor's rooms in the family wing. There are a few young royal cousins for now, but we expect the numbers will increase in time. You'll see them in the morning. Go."

Senmut rose, and started to leave, bowing his way out. Tutmose raised his hand to stop him. "Oh, and will you do me a kindness, Tutor Senmut? Go to Queen Hatshepsut and offer her a game this evening? I will be occupied much the night with a gift from the temple."

Then Tutmose frowned. "She'll know what I mean, and will need the distraction of as many games of *mehen* as you can play."

Senmut stood there, open-mouthed, waiting for dismissal. Tutmose opened his mouth to speak, and then shut it again without uttering a word. He waved his hand in dismissal, and Senmut recovered enough to make the proper courtesies and bow himself out.

He couldn't help wondering what the Pharaoh had wanted to say. He'd looked tortured for a moment there, like a man in pain. No, it was impossible. Senmut shook his head, and went to find the servants to help him move to the family wing from the guest quarters.

Mo sat back on his throne, and covered his eyes with his hands for a moment. "Debt repaid," he whispered, not caring that the newly promoted Guard-Captain Horheb heard every word. "Take good care of my beloved Queen, until I can return to her, Senmut. Then we'll share her for the rest of our days. This I swear. Though she does not know she loves you too, she will someday." He grew up knowing from infancy his would be a life without love, without friends and with only cold duty for a companion. By some miracle of the Gods, Hati cared for him. He, who never expected to feel love, now knew the joy of it. Hati's happiness mattered more to him than life itself. He would share her willingly with the only other man whom she loved, even if she did not yet know it. Someday, he vowed, he would explain it all to Senmut.

Then, he recalled he had one onerous duty left this night. He lowered his hands and took a calming breath. His skin itched horribly, and he knew the signs of the skin disease that plagued him were returning. A nod to his seneschal at the far end of the audience hall signaled that he was ready.

A glittering procession of God's Wives filed in, silently. It still amazed him that every God's Wife was noble, accomplished and many were beautiful. All of them were sorceresses, herbalists, midwives and artisans.

"We do not know all of what they do, my son," his father had told him, "but they are trustworthy. They work for the good of Egypt, even when it seems they work against Our will. Never forget that. They rarely make a mistake. Trust them."

I trust them now, Father, though I hate it, Mo thought. Only the severe self-discipline imposed on him since his birth kept him from shuddering visibly. He'd had a bad feeling about this concubine business all day, but it was probably his own self-doubt. They'd promised him an eager non-virgin who understood and agreed to all of the plans.

The "eager non-virgin" was, in fact, prostrating herself before Mo now. Mo extended his senses, desiring to hear her emotions. Not wishing to read too deeply, he read a cool, business-like emotion and was satisfied. She did understand the true nature of the situation, then. Mo listened with half an ear to the God's Wife giving the new concubine's name as Pythankamon, an herbalist by profession, and listing her many virtues. Everything was according to plan, then, with no surprise deviations. Fair enough. He played his part, no matter how distasteful.

Mo waited for the introduction to wind down, then said, "Arise, Pythankamon, that I might see your beauty for myself. Your other skills we'll discuss later." If he were to act like a he-goat with a whole herd to himself, he'd best pretend not to care about her skills other than in bed. Then, with wry amusement, he realized he was indeed like a he-goat with a whole herd to himself. This was his twelfth concubine. Well, his quick smile, quickly erased, would be attributed to her beauty.

And a beauty she was, if different from his sleek, catlike Hati. While both had the dark hair, this one's eyes were the hard black of the commoners as opposed to Hati's brown-gold of her heritage. Pythankamon knelt on the floor, waiting with respectful attention. Her knees were spread a few finger widths more than necessary, but that was in accordance with her role as a concubine, even down to the short, thin as a hair linen tunic. *Oh, and yes, she was supposed to entice me into her body tonight,* Mo remembered with distaste. Well, it wouldn't be so terrible, he supposed.

"Stand," he ordered, acting if he was pleased so far. Pythankamon rose to her feet with some grace, but obviously did not have Hati's dancer training. *I am sorry to disappoint my court. Another dancer might have at least provided the courtiers with an evening's amusement, but they are all sensibly in their beds,* Mo thought, and suppressed a yawn, wishing he too could sleep. "Turn, Pythankamon. I wish to see if you're as delicious looking from the back as you are from the front."

Pythankamon, turned and faced the small crowd of God's Wives, but Mo could see her eyes glittering and she radiated anger. Oh, so she did not like being a piece of meat in the market? Well enough. He'd given the appearance of a lusty Pharaoh. "Acceptable. You're indeed a beauty, as promised by your sisters. You're dismissed to move your things into the women's wing."

Mo thanked the God's Wives properly in a speech and sent them on their way. Then he fled to his chambers. He'd need a lot of wine to get through this night. Perhaps a whole flagon.

* * * * *

Pythia sustained her shield of calm all the way to her new chamber and threw up in a decorative urn while the maids unpacking her things looked on in horror. Maintaining a business-like attitude had come doubly hard when she'd gotten a good look at the Pharaoh's ravaged face and body. Only by telling herself repeatedly that a life of luxury was worth one night making love with a monster had she gotten through that excuse of an introduction. She retched again at the thought of looking at that face over her and bouncing on her belly. If his body were as ugly as his face, she'd throw up on him! Her stomach emptied finally of all its contents, and she got up.

Horrified maids stood there, holding gowns of fine linen, bedclothes, jewelry and other gifts from the sisterhood. They were all frozen in shock. Spying a flagon and goblet on a table, Pythia was disappointed to find it to be water. Well, it was better than nothing. She downed the whole goblet in front of the staring maids.

"Get out!" she ordered, and they scrambled. "And take that urn out with you! It reeks!" One grabbed the urn on her way out and hefted it out the door.

Pythia strode over and found her covered basket full of herb pouches. Chewing on some bitter leaves settled her stomach while she dug down in the bottom for the aphrodisiac drug flagon. Placing the tiny bottle inconspicuously among her perfumes, she walked over to the pitcher of water and dropped it deliberately on the floor next to the table. It shattered with a satisfying crash.

The guards burst in, no doubt fearing trouble. Pythia turned her most pitiful face to the guards. "I dropped it," she sniffled. "Oh, please, I am so nervous. Could you find a way for me to get wine to serve the Pharaoh? Perhaps two bottles?" She nibbled a knuckle for effect. It worked. They nodded, and left.

Alone again, Pythia threw clothes into the clothes chest and stuffed the jewelry into a carved box. "I'll have to find a way not to look at him. Could I beg to be tied and blindfolded, as if I enjoyed it? Well, I do, but that's beside the point." She continued to mutter to herself as she straightened the bed. "No, he probably doesn't know how to tie a blindfold, and I do not want a knot under my head." She began to pace. "Perhaps I can get him to enter from behind? Yes, that might work, as long as he can find the right hole. Hmm...that is best. I can bury my face in the linens, and wait. A few muffled shrieks for effect, and that will be that."

The wine arrived, carried in by an old harridan with a face that could sour milk, but she was efficient. The two flagons were on the table, the shards picked up, and she was out the door in a few breaths. Now that was service.

Pythia dumped the aphrodisiac into the blue pitcher and hid the bottle in a convenient potted plant. Then she grabbed up the red flagon and plopped down in a chair, tipping it up to drink directly from it. To hell with a goblet. It was going to take the whole bottle just to get through the night, and she'd better be halfway to stinking drunk when Pharaoh arrived. Then she'd share his wine, too. No sense in wasting a good dream trip, since it wouldn't affect the fertility drug now coursing through her system.

* * * * *

Senmut watched the servants put away what little belongings he owned in what was the family wing of the palace. One of the servants, an old woman, showed him the royal nursery next to his room, and the "children's room" for teaching across the hall from the nursery. It was all pleasantly arranged at the end of the hall nearest the bathing room for easy tending of young growing bodies. Senmut nodded approval, earning himself the smile of the old servant.

"Pharaoh has ordered me to amuse the Queen this night. Show me to her apartments." He was anxious to see Hati, and trying not to fret in his eagerness.

"Yes, yes, poor dear," the old servant said as she led the way, "Poor Queen Hatshepsut, pregnant and banished to the smallest apartment in the corridor, with just a maid and one of the palace cats for company, most of the time."

Senmut stopped in his tracks. "The Queen is pregnant?" he choked. Banished? It made no sense. Had not the Pharaoh ordered him to amuse the Queen as if her well-being was precious to him?

"This way, young man. I have no time to stand and chat." The old woman took Senmut's arm and pulled him in the correct direction. "Yes, Queen Hatshepsut is pregnant, and a bit ill with it. Queen Kara spends time with her when she can, but she's busy, too. Queen Bathomet rarely leaves her apartment or the gardens, but she's one who loves plants more than people, I would say." She stopped at the single door of a room at the end of the royal corridor. "Now, you be nice to that poor child inside." With that admonishment, she bustled off.

The guard at the door nodded politely. "Lord Senmut? I was ordered to admit you at any hour by the Pharaoh. Let me announce you."

Too many surprises in one night left Senmut speechless. All he could do was nod and stand there while the guard entered the room, spoke briefly and then returned to open the door wide.

Hati sat in a chair near a table with a little kitten on her lap, smiling and waving Senmut in. Once the door was closed, her grin turned mischievous. "Well, *Lord* Senmut, come in. I am glad to see you. I understand you have a message for me?"

That Hati's mischief had not changed snapped Senmut back to reality. "Indeed, *Queen Hatshepsut*," he shot back with an equally teasing grin. "I have a message from Pharaoh, as well as orders from him for myself." He bowed mockingly. It was good to know she was not "poor" *Queen Hatshepsut*.

Hati leaned forward eagerly, but not enough to disturb the purring kitten. "Well? Tell me!"

Senmut was distracted for a moment by her increased beauty. Not only did her skin seem to glow with health, but also her breasts had enlarged somewhat, and her belly growing round. She still wore that musky perfume. He found the whole package so erotic he hastily sat down and crossed his legs to hide his blooming erection before it became obvious. "The Pharaoh has asked me to play as many games of *mehen* as you can tolerate tonight, while he attends to a gift. He told me you'd understand."

"My sister has arrived! Oh, how marvelous!" Hati exclaimed, clapping her hands. This dislodged the kitten, who woke, yawned, then jumped to Senmut's lap before settling down to continue his interrupted nap.

"Miw, you little traitor," Hati laughed.

"Miw? You named him slang for cat?" Senmut snickered, but he was grateful to the little fur ball for hiding his undiminished erection. However, the kitten was purring, sending vibrations that were pleasant – yet unnerving.

"Well, he mewed at me when he first arrived in this room. I couldn't think of another thing to call him," Hati laughed. Then she set up the *mehen* board, while Senmut poured them both a goblet of juice from a nearby table.

Senmut toasted Hati before tossing his dice. "May the best noble win," he intoned. As Hati laughed merrily, he cast the first throw.

* * * * *

Mo finished the goblet Pythia had handed him when he had come into the eastern royal apartment. This was where Pythia, acting as Pharaoh's favorite would stay until Hati's child was safely born. Then Pythia would move into one of the concubine apartments that faced the courtyard garden. The wine had a bitter aftertaste that warned him of the promised aphrodisiac. His head spun with the effects of more wine than he normally drank in a week. But, that was as he wished it. He did not want to think. All he wanted was this unpleasant business over and done.

Pythia, for that is what she'd begged him to call her, also drained her goblet with a grimace. Crisp and business-like, she gestured toward the bed. "Let us go ahead and at least sit on the edge, Divine One. The drug hits quickly, and you'll not wish to attempt to walk once it takes effect."

With that, she walked as unsteadily as he to the bed, and coolly divested herself of her tunic while he sat gingerly on the edge and pulled off his kilt. His head spun madly,

and he began to feel as if he floated just a hand's breadth above himself. He closed his eyes, and the spinning stopped, but the floating sensation continued. He never noticed when Pythia shoved him down on the bed so his legs remained dangling off the edge and all of his body was available to her busy mouth. She licked and nibbled anywhere that pleased her, occasionally giving a tiny drunken hiccup.

"You're expert at this," Mo conceded. His own voice sounded slurred and Mo vowed to be quiet and let the experienced Pythia take him and his seed.

Pythia's only answer was a hum that sent pleasant vibrations throughout his body. The warm, tight ache in his groin seemed very far away, no matter how pleasant the sensation. It felt so very good, but even with his eyes closed, the room began to fill with color and light. He couldn't keep his attention on how well the girl knew how to pleasure a man with her mouth and hands alone. He floated off, not caring what happened to his body.

Only a few minutes later, it seemed he looked down on what happened in the room. Like a disembodied spirit, he floated in a corner, watching, as Pythia left off her work and climbed on top to ride him like a horse. His body below groaned and thrust upward.

There was no sensation his spirit-self felt, and he was grateful. Who was that man rutting down there? Certainly not him. He never acted like a man interested only in his own pleasure, but his body below made no move to see to Pythia's pleasure and she seemed not to demand it. For a brief moment, Mo regretted that he could get no personal pleasure from Pythia. She really was a finely formed female, with long shapely legs, a sweetly slung bottom and bouncing breasts.

The Mo-body's face below contorted into something between pleasure and pain. Is that what he looked like when he was ready to spill his seed? The hands were clutching Pythia's butt as if to hold on for dear life, and the thrusting deep into her. Then the Mo-body below convulsed in orgasm, without the spirit-Mo involved, and panted for breath. Three thrusts, and the deed was done. Mo was grateful it was over.

But something was wrong. Mo couldn't breathe. What had been a reasonably pleasant dream state now changed to horror. He clutched his spirit-throat, and the body below did likewise. It felt as though he choked on something, yet he had eaten nothing. He snapped back into his body, and felt the agony of not being able to breathe fully, as if he'd swallowed a whole fruit, which now lodged in his throat.

Pythia, who had just clambered drunkenly off, began to scream. The guards burst in and beheld their Pharaoh clutching his throat and turning purple. One ran for the physicians, but the other residents of the wing quickly blocked the door. Someone had the good sense to slap Pythia to silence, and thrust her to a guard's not-so-tender embrace.

Mo began to lose consciousness, and his sight began to fade. His last clear image was Hati, bending over him and shouting orders, he could no longer understand. A peace fell over him, replacing the horror of choking to death. All that was left was regret

he'd never get to see his son born, or know Hati's arms giving him comfort. *I love you, Hati. Never forget that*, he tried to say. But the light closed to a mere pinprick, and then winked out.

* * * * *

Hati's lion pounced on Senmut's last remaining stone energetically. "Hah!" she exclaimed. "I have my revenge for the trouncing you gave me last round. I win!" Triumph was sweet as honey.

"So you do, my Queen," Senmut began, but the piercing shrieks of a woman caused him to jump up, not caring if Miw went flying or not. The kitten yowled his displeasure, but landed on his feet and scuttled under the bed to vent his feelings.

Senmut was out the door, with Hati a mere moment behind him. It was a long run down one corridor, following the shrieks before they stopped abruptly. By then, both Hati and Senmut saw a crowd gathering in front of the western royal apartment. "This must be where they put my sister!" Hati panted.

Roughly shoving people out of the way, Senmut cleared a path for Hati. She ran straight for the bed, where she saw Mo clutching his throat and turning purple. Hati glanced up briefly to see Bala coming running in. "Bala! Get Pythia to tell you what she gave him!"

A few seconds later, Bala's shout came over the cries of the onlookers, "Damn! Useless bitch just fainted."

Two dark hands appeared to help her. Queen Kara wasted no time with words. Mo's eyes were shut, and no breath came. Kara bent over and began to blow air hard back into Mo, giving him her own breath.

Then, over the shouting, Hati heard Mo's voice as if he stood beside her ear. *I love you, Hati. Never forget that*. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a small hawk wing its way out the open balcony, and knew their efforts were in vain.

Mo's body shuddered once and was still. The hands that had been clutching his throat so tightly loosened and fell away, leaving his arms almost in the correct position for his journey to the underworld. Hati finished that, crossing them correctly, before she collapsed into crying hopelessly.

Queen Kara maintained her poise. While Hati wept on the floor beside her, the tall black Queen from Punt took charge. Pointing to the naked unconscious body of Pythia, she ordered in a voice that brooked no argument, "Throw that useless lump into a room and bar all doors and windows. Until she can be awakened, we'll not know if she is a murderer or an innocent."

Hati forced herself to stop her tears. There would be time to mourn later. She got to her feet, and with eyes that were dull and lifeless found Senmut. "Go to the temple and call for the priests," she choked out.

He turned and ran, again shoving his way through the now wailing crowd.

Like someone sent from the Gods, Keoset appeared beside Hati, his face shocked, but in control. He ordered the room cleared, and the guards leapt to obey him. The wailing faded into the distance.

Kara and Hati indulged themselves in one sobbing embrace before turning as one to cover Mo's lifeless, naked body with one of the linen sheets.

It was Bala and Keoset that led them both to chairs and fed them stimulating tea to await the priests. There would be no sleep for them this night.

Chapter Six

Their time was short, but Kara and Hati wept in each other's arms briefly for a time before taking up mugs of tea at Bala's urging. Keoset suddenly jerked upright with a wild look in his eyes, and fled the room. When he returned, he bore the golden Pectoral of Pharaoh in his arms on a cloth, but not the double crown, and behind him trailed a sleepy and shocked-looking young scribe. The scribe was loaded down with three tablets bearing the royal seal. Before Kara and Hati could do more than sob and clutch each other's hands at the sight of the Pectoral, Keoset performed a full obeisance at Hati's feet, putting his forehead on the floor and not rising. The scribe did likewise, nearly knocking himself unconscious to maintain his hold on the tablets and yet make sure his forehead touched the floor.

"Keoset, what is this? Please, look at me." Hati stared at the Pectoral, her heart wrenching.

Keoset rose to kneel, but the scribe remained as he was. "Divine One," Keoset began, giving her the title reserved only for the ruler of the empire, "Tutmose II gave orders that you should rule in his stead if something prevented him from doing so, until such time as his son in your womb is old enough to take the throne himself. The royal scribe beside me bears the tablets. It's written, therefore it is truth." He walked forward, tied the Pectoral around her neck, and returned to kneel while Hati sat there too stunned to move. The heavy gold was like ice on her shoulders.

Kara gasped once, then descended quickly to kneel and put her forehead on the floor. Her shoulders shook with silent sobs. Bala left her position behind Hati's chair to perform the same obeisance, but pressed a square of linen into Kara's fist before she too put her forehead on the floor.

"No!" Hati sobbed, "No! It cannot be!"

A rasping voice from the door answered, "Oh, yes, it can Divine One. Now stop your crying." The Mother of the God's Wives hobbled into the room supported by a little girl of no more than eight summers acting as a living cane.

"Mother!" Hati wept with relief, and started to rise and kneel as she had done all her life before The Mother's raised hand stopped her.

"Do not you dare. Now, I am to kneel to you, daughter. I hope you'll grant an old woman a dispensation and provide me with a chair instead. It's a long walk for old bones. We only got the prophecy an hour ago. I am sorry I couldn't move faster."

"Oh, everyone rise! This is, er, new to me. I am not accustomed to it. Bala, provide Mother with a chair. In fact, everyone needs one."

“Indeed so,” The Mother croaked, then sighed as Bala gave her a chair comfortably near Hati’s, but not beside it. Kara took her former chair and moved it to the other side, forming a short U-shape. “We’ll need a private meeting. I take it all here are trusted allies. Good. Are there any more, Bala?”

“Just the Guard-Captain and Lord Senmut. Captain Hor-heb is home tonight in the city. Lord Senmut has gone to fetch the mortuary priests.” Bala took a chair, assuming the manner and bearing of the nobility to which she was entitled.

Only Kara looked at Bala with surprise. Keoset, who had been in on some secret meetings between Mo and Bala, winked at Bala. Reassured, Kara sat back.

Bala sniffed.

The Mother looked at Hati’s tear-ravaged and shell-shocked face. “Do you mind if I take over for you tonight, dear? I mean, Divine One? See? Even I must get used to one of my daughters on the throne!” At Hati’s nod, she continued, “Drink your tea, dears. Yes, you too Queen Kara. Drink up! In fact, Bala, could you call for one of the *trusted* servants to bring us all a stimulant? I want you here.”

Hati managed a tremulous smile of gratitude. Tonight only, The Mother was giving her a respite to mourn and adjust. Tomorrow, she would begin the regency for her unborn child.

Bala returned and took her seat. A servant appeared with a tray of tea in mugs and bowed herself out after serving everyone. No one spoke until she was gone.

“Now, on to business. Bala, search this room. We’ll need the wine goblet, and the bottle the aphrodisiac was in. Yes, Keoset, an aphrodisiac was used on the Pharaoh this night with his consent and cooperation. We must be sure it was not poisoned. Who was here when he died besides Pythia?” Bala jumped up and soon flourished two goblets, a flagon and a tiny green bottle she fished from a plant.

Kara raised her hand like a child before her tutor. “Hati and I were. He was having trouble breathing, and clutching his throat. He turned purple. Then he died. He never opened his eyes.”

“Ah. I suspect we’ll find our answer in his throat. Bala, check. Is his throat swollen shut? You know the signs of poison. Check for those, too.”

Bala went to the body of Tutmose II, Hati’s beloved Mo. Hati’s eyes filled with tears and she turned her head. She did not want to see what Bala did.

A few moments later, Bala reported, “His throat is swollen shut, just as you predicted, Mother. No other signs of poison, and his mouth smells only of date wine, poppy and some common aphrodisiacs. His nails are blue. I would say he died because he could not breathe around the swelling in his throat. He has all the signs of strangulation, save the marks on the outside of the neck.”

Hati shuddered to hear the death of her beloved Mo reported so harshly.

The Mother sighed in relief. "Then we must assume he was one of those few who react badly to one of the aphrodisiac ingredients or poppy. It was not likely murder except by stupidity."

She held up her hand to stop the murmurs that resulted from that pronouncement. "It does not prevent the public trial that must take place. Until that trial, we must protect Pythia from being torn apart by assassins, much as perhaps our personal hard feelings would wish to do so. There is a possibility that she is pregnant even now with the Pharaoh's child. Bala, is there evidence of his spilling his seed?"

Bala flipped the sheet back once more. "Yes. I will go set trusted eunuch guards on the door."

"Then we must proceed on to the next problem. Lord Vizier? I am sure you're aware that the Pharaoh's wish to make Queen Hatshepsut regent will cause difficulties."

Keoset's tone, once deferential, turned wry. "You understate the matter, Holy Mother. Unless Queen Hatshepsut grasps the reins very firmly, immediately, the enemies of Egypt will take this for a chance to cause disorder, even possibly war. The Nubians certainly will, Hyksos will try, and I am not sure of Punt and Ur." He glanced at Kara. Bala quietly came back and took her seat.

"Punt will remain friendly," stated Kara flatly. "My sister will see no reason to change her policies unless we do so first."

"Should I send you home, Kara," Hati asked politely, "As an ally in her court?"

"No, Hati. I mean, Divine One," Kara smiled wanly. "No. As much as I would love to go home and smell the scented trees of my homeland, it's my duty to remain. You'll need someone familiar with the position to perform Queen's duties. However, I would recommend a royal visit within the next few years to cement a bond you'll need desperately. Hathor will understand how much you have to fight to stay on the throne like no other." She bit her lip, and her large brown eyes filled, but she set her chin so firmly Hati chose not to press her.

Keoset held up his hand. "However, I recommend that Queen Bathomet be sent home as an emissary to her people as soon as it can be arranged. Ur will benefit from stronger ties with us, and act as a barrier to the Hyksos King. He will think twice before having to fight a war on two fronts."

"Agreed!" Hati smiled. It pleased her greatly to bestow the gift of sending the homesick Queen back to Ur. "Kara, can you speak to Bathomet and make arrangements? You're better at it than I." It was untrue, but Hati knew she would have no time for arranging a journey for a widowed queen. They were all widows, now. Hati fought tears back, and sipped her bitter tea. "And I thank you for your personal sacrifice in staying with me. I need you," Hati gulped. Kara rose and pressed the square of linen in her hand. "See? Who else understands a woman's tears?"

The Mother allowed Kara to return to her seat before continuing. "And what of the enemies within, Keoset? Who is most likely to desire the throne among the royal men and high-ranking officials enough to commit treason?"

Keoset stood and began to pace. "I am sorry, I think better on my feet," he apologized. "I can think of only two. General Horuset, and Lord Akenmose. Horuset is merely ambitious, but Akenmose has a weak but legitimate claim. He was one of Tutmose the First's sons by a concubine. There was some question of whether his father really was Tutmose the First, so he was ordered out of the succession. His brother was generous and made him governor of the marshlands of the delta region." Keoset shrugged. "He has not improved it overmuch, but there has been little harm done either."

"Hasn't General Horuset been sent to command the southern forces?" Hati asked.

"Your memory is excellent. Yes, he has," Keoset replied.

"Then perhaps a letter from you, Keoset, asking him to be on special alert for a Nubian attack is wise. Praise him and tell him his name will be carved on a pylon in his honor if he can aid us in keeping the peace," Hati suggested.

"Hmmm. Yes, that might satisfy his ambitions, Divine One. But what of Lord Akenmose?"

"We do not know the key to his heart, yet," Hati mused. "We'll have to wait until he arrives. And arrive he will, I am sure, thinking he will be the only male heir."

The Mother held up her hand to stop all conversation and took on the air of listening. Hati strained her ears and heard the faint sounds of priests chanting. The Mother rasped out hurriedly, "We must get into the obeisance before Hati! The priests must see the vizier, Queens, and God's Wives accept her regency! Quickly! Clear the chairs!"

The Mother groaned her way to the floor with the help of the little girl, who had knelt silently at the side of The Mother all that time. The child removed the chair to a far corner before prostrating herself next to The Mother. The others quickly did the same, getting into position just as the chanting was heard coming down the corridor.

Hati knew her face was still pale, and her eyes red, but she contrived to look regal, even if she felt like a fool. She stuffed the moist linen square under her to hide it from view.

Senmut flung open the door and Hati watched as he stepped aside to let in the mortuary priests. The priests ignored the tableau and chanted their way to the bed, hoisting an ornamental litter between them to carry Mo back to the temple for the long embalming procedures.

But Senmut took in the obeisance made by some of the most powerful people in the kingdom, and his eyes flew open wide. Without a word, he knelt behind Bala and put his head to the floor.

However much it broke her heart, Hati knew he had done the proper thing, and her days of playing *mehen* would now be rare. She turned her eyes back to the priests. Mo's

body had been arranged carefully on the litter, and the linen sheet that had covered him on the bed had been tucked carefully into place over him. No matter that she had seen his *ka* fly away, Hati had trouble convincing herself that it was not still her beloved Mo on the litter. It took all that she had not to sob, and she begged Isis for the strength to see her son raised to adulthood.

The chanting never ceased as Mo's body was hoisted on the shoulders of the priests and carried out the open double doors. Over the chanting, Hati heard the faint wails coming from the royal apartments and family wing. One of the last priests had lit incense and the sweet smell of rare frankincense filled the air, following them out the doors, swung in a golden censer. With gratitude, Hati watched, as the guards closed the doors.

"They are gone," she told her trusted secret council. "You can get up now."

"Thank all the gods!" groaned The Mother. "I'll not be visiting you often, Divine One. My back won't take it." The little girl helped The Mother rise and brought her back her chair.

"Then, Holy Mother, may I suggest you arrive in a litter chair? Even our Regent has the right to give a permanent dispensation to the infirm," Keoset suggested with a wicked smile.

"I just might do that, you old rogue," The Mother replied with a smile.

Hati took in Senmut's open-mouthed surprise. "Welcome to my secret council, Lord Senmut," she pronounced. "Here, those of the council may speak freely without the usual protocols so that the business of the empire may be handled most efficiently."

"So I see, Divine One," Senmut answered in a slow, careful voice. "Forgive me if I take time to adjust."

"Do not take too long, boy," The Mother put in. "If I am not mistaken, you just got elected to run off and tell the Master Builder he's got less than seventy days to finish the Pharaoh's tomb. You'd better go catch the Master Builder and wake him up. Everything just changed."

Senmut used an explicative not normally heard in the councils of Pharaoh and ran for the door without permission.

Keoset sniggered. "Holy Mother, you just said a mouthful."

* * * * *

Pythia knelt in her chains at the very center of the cavernous main hall in the Temple of Amun. The murmur of the crowd was unceasing, like the winds of a sandstorm, and grew louder as she was recognized. Everyone in Thebes who could manage to gain access was here to see her trial. Vile epithets were shouted, so vicious that even her ears burned, and the taste of fear was bitter in her throat.

All she could do was pray to Just and Lawful Horus that he would see justice done, but the gods seemed so very far away in the face of the thousands looking at her with hatred, believing she had poisoned Tutmose II. Her hopes rested with her sisterhood, and the one person who had reason to hate Pythia the most, Queen-Regent Hatshepsut.

Thirty days ago, Hati had called Pythia before her as soon as Pythia had recovered from the effects of the drug that had killed the Pharaoh. To Pythia's horror, the servants who escorted her to the bathing room to wash and prepare herself revealed to her that Tutmose II was dead. What was worse, Pythia was blamed in public opinion. Instead of finding herself in the lowest forms of punishment cells to await a swift execution, Pythia had been clothed as befitted a royal concubine and brought before Hati with dignity, if not honor.

Queen-Regent Hatshepsut, as she had been announced, had dismissed all but a few guards and had spoken to Pythia sister-to-sister. She had explained that the sisterhood believed Pythia had killed the Pharaoh unintentionally and by neglect, but it was not murder. Nevertheless, there must be a public trial, or assassins bent on "justice" would surely end Pythia's life. The public must see that she was innocent of deliberate murder, and believe it. Hati made no promises, and Pythia expected none.

Pythia spent the entire month in that dark, silent room. Her guards or the servants that brought her food and drink would not speak to her unless necessary. She thought of her life in those long, lonely days and had not liked what she saw. If the Soul Eater was to have her *ka* to eat, she had at least faced the truth about herself. It had not been a pretty picture. Pythia hung her head in shame, and prayed with all her might to Lord Horus that she might have a chance to prove herself worthy of walking among men awhile longer.

This trial was no farce, but the real thing. Her very life hung on the words spoken today, and even the Regent-Queen had no say in the way it would go.

Now Pythia knelt before the combined tribunal of priests, God's Wives and Royals, who were the ones who had been "wronged". Pythia chanced a peep as a sister came and knelt next to Pythia. *She'll be my Voice this day*, Pythia realized, and she blessed the wisdom of giving a calm, learned voice to one who might be so terrified they could not speak.

A priest's voice rang out. "Hear then the words that accuse Pythankamon of the murder of our beloved Pharaoh, Tutmose II." He then read the accusation from a scroll. "That Pythankamon did willfully use poison and give it to Pharaoh, that he might die."

The crowd roared, and would have surged forward to rip Pythia to shreds, had it not been for the many guards who beat them back. All Pythia could do was put her face in her hands and tremble so hard her chains clanked together.

A warm, soft hand came to rest on her shoulder. "Be at ease, sister. We know the accusation is false," her Voice murmured in her ear. "You're innocent of all but negligence. I am here to prove it," the Voice added firmly.

With that, the Voice rose to her feet. "And I answer the charge is false!" she announced. "Hear then the words of those who were there, and saw for themselves what took place, that the truth be known to all."

A parade of people followed. The guards who had guarded the door and ordered the wine spoke of how Pythia had been nervous and frightened.

"Did this sound like a woman who contemplated murder?" her Voice asked rhetorically.

The guards further spoke of how Pythia's shrieks had alerted them that something was wrong, and how they had burst in to find Pythia shaking the Pharaoh and trying to aid him while she still cried for help. How they had forcibly removed her so that the Queens Kara and Hatshepsut could try to aid the Pharaoh. How Pythia's breath had smelled of the same substance in the wine as the Pharaoh.

The Voice turned to the crowd. "Would a murderer drink her own poison?"

Bala was called forth, and introduced as maidservant to Queen Hatshepsut, and one skilled in recognizing poisons and the deaths they caused. Pythia would have been amused had she not been so terrified. How very plausible they made it sound to have a maidservant who could recognize poisons to attend one of the royal household.

Bala's voice easily carried throughout the cavernous room, saying, "The Pharaoh did not have signs of any poison I know of when I was permitted to examine his body. In fact, he gave all the signs of one who is that rare individual who takes an herb then chokes upon it when it normally causes no harm."

"Then it was not poison, you think?" asked the Voice.

"I swear it before the gods." Bala's answer was firm and full of assurance. It gave Pythia a small measure of comfort to hear Bala defend her.

"You call this a tragic accident of the Pharaoh as one of those who takes a certain herb and chokes upon it?" pressed the Voice.

"I do!"

The crowd stirred restlessly, and the whispers were again like a sandstorm, hissing in the distance.

Queen Kara rose from the area where the royals sat. "I speak in defense of the concubine!" she cried out. "I myself saw our beloved Pharaoh choked, holding his own throat. No other touched him, and his breath was the same as the concubine Pythankamon's. She did not choke, but he did! I say that the concubine did not do murder!"

The silence was deafening after the whispers to Pythia's ears, and she knelt there, afraid to raise her face from her hands. She was grateful beyond words that others with no reason to love her spoke for her when they could've left her to her fate with the bloodthirsty throng.

A rustle and a clink sounded in the silence. Pythia peeked between her fingers to see Hati rise and stand before her. Pythia put her head on the dirty floor. She felt Hati's

eyes burn on her back, and she swore it was as if the hot sun penetrated this dark sanctuary to scald her. Then it was gone, and the cool of the temple air returned.

"I too believe her innocent," pronounced Queen-Regent Hatshepsut. "Let the people be assured. Call forth a Truthsayer."

Pythia nearly fainted with relief. With a word, Hati could've consigned all the others' words to the underworld, and Pythia's death would have been enacted without further commentary or mercy.

The crowd cheered their approval. To call a Truthsayer to this trial was a rare event, reserved only for cases when doubt remained.

Even Pythia's curiosity was aroused enough for her to put down her hands and stare. The Truthsayer, who always stood ready at trials, appeared like a white spirit from the shadows. Completely enshrouded from head to foot in white gauze, the Truthsayer glided forward as if she had no feet. At least Pythia thought it might be a female. You could never be sure, since no face was seen, but the height was somewhat short for a man.

For the sake of the throng, the Voice instructed Pythia. "Pythankamon, the Truthsayer will touch you. I will ask you questions. You'll speak and tell us what happened. The Truthsayer will only speak if you lie."

Pythia knew all this, but she nodded her understanding.

The Truthsayer stood behind Pythia and touched cool hands to Pythia's temples. The Voice moved to stand in front of Pythia, so that Pythia saw only her, and not the listeners.

"Pythankamon, what was it you gave Pharaoh?"

"An aphrodisiac mixed with a mild juice of poppy."

Silence.

"Pythankamon, why did you give Pharaoh this to drink in his wine?"

"To heighten his pleasure in his time with me, for I feared I would get but one chance to please him."

Silence.

"Pythankamon, did Pharaoh know of this drug and agree to drink it?"

"Yes."

Silence.

"Did you mean to kill Pharaoh by any means?"

"No!"

Silence. The fingers left her temples.

"She speaks only the truth," came the ringing voice of a woman from behind Pythia.

"Are you satisfied, Egypt?" cried the Voice.

The approving roar of the crowd was the last thing Pythia heard before the floor of the temple rose up to meet her, and she knew no more.

* * * * *

Hati waited in the smaller audience room and watched the torchlight play on the walls. Her fingers toyed with the small plate of fruit, but brought none to her lips. It had been a long day that had started before the sun rose. Now, hours after the sun had set and the heat of the day no longer tormented skin and nose, Hati waited on word from the physicians on the health of Pythia. She had dismissed all but the guards, even her royal scribe and Senmut.

Instead of a gaggle of physicians, Pythia herself slipped quietly in the door and knelt in front of Hati.

"What are you doing here, Pythia? You should be in bed." Hati purposely spoke in the tones of a woman-to-woman chat, not Regent-Queen to subject of the empire.

Pythia smiled wryly up at Hati. "I only fainted, Hati," she began. "It was more than stressful today for a woman who has just been informed she is pregnant." Her eyes looked old and sad as she gazed into her old friend's face.

Hati sat back in silence for a few moments. "I see," was her only comment.

"No, Hati, you cannot see," Pythia corrected. She smiled to let her Sister know it was meant well. "There is much more here than the fact we both now bear Pharaoh's child. I had thirty days to sit in a dark room while I awaited my trial. It was a long time to look in the mirror and see one's true self. Knowing you may not live to see the rising sun the next day does something to you."

"What did you see in the mirror, Pythia?" asked Hati in her gentlest tone.

"I saw one who believed herself a victim when she was the one in control. When the hands of the gods ripped control from her, then she found out what it truly was to be a victim.

"Today, I was truly a victim of the whims of others, with no right to decide my fate. It's an ugly truth to learn, Hati."

"So, you learned the power of your choices, then?" Hati was a bit puzzled, but willing to accept this turnaround in her former friend's mind.

"I have learned to accept responsibility for my choices. There is a difference. I will not always choose wisely, but I can learn from my own mistakes. And I will call them my own, now." Pythia favored Hati with a truly glittering smile, borne of peace.

"Today, I was snatched from the soul-eater's jaws, Hati. If I had gone to Horus' judgment, I would have been found wanting, for I had lied to myself more than any other. I have been reborn, and given a chance at a new life full of truth."

Now Hati was truly puzzled. "You have more twists in your mind than the wig of the High Priest, Pythia. You're now a pregnant concubine of a dead Pharaoh. What choices are left you?"

"Thousands!" laughed Pythia. "Every day there are many choices. And here are my first choices." She flung back her hair and put her forehead willingly on Hati's foot. "I choose to rise each day, happy to be alive. I choose to serve Egypt by bearing the Pharaoh's second son. I choose to serve Egypt by fulfilling my duties to the Queen-Regent Hatshepsut, who bears the Pharaoh's first son. I choose now to be a God's Wife, not by the will of my parents who gave me to the temple, but by my own will."

Stunned, Hati whispered the oath of the God's Wives. "For Egypt!"

From down below came a voice that rang with happiness, "For Egypt!"

Chapter Seven

The sun peeked over the horizon as Hati closed the doors to the royal apartments. The guards fell into step behind her. She was slowly getting used to this routine after two months. "Get up, throw up, clean up, get dressed, go to the audience chamber." Hati dared not say that too loudly. She hated the life of a ruler, but even the guards expected her to do her duty without complaint.

As she trudged to the top of the stairs she heard, "Commander!" She looked to the left down the corridor and saw Senmut and Hor-heb with the three young royal cousins filing past.

Senmut held up a hand to Hor-heb. "Children, please wait for me in the audience chamber."

"They may escort me," Hati offered. The three young princes hurried to her side, full of pride at the honor.

"Thank you, Divine One." Senmut smiled and bowed.

"Good Morning, cousin Hati," eleven year old Mentuhotep piped up.

"That's 'Divine One' to you." Fifteen-year-old Ahmose ruled his brother and cousin with an iron fist, as all knew. Ahmose would soon leave to begin his training as one of the Pharaoh's generals.

"Good Morning, Divine One," all three intoned, and bowed.

"Good morning," Hati responded, grinning, "Shall we?" The children trooped down the stairs each carrying their tablets and stylus.

"I think I have a report, Commander," Hati heard Hor-heb say hesitantly to Senmut as they started down the stairs.

I'll query Senmut about that later. Why would Hor-heb sound so uncertain? And what would he report to Senmut and not to the throne? Perhaps he felt better speaking with his old Commander first. Hati mused on what a guard would report on the way down the stairs.

A few moments after Hati had taken her place on the golden throne, Senmut brought Hor-heb before her. It was not yet the hour of court, so no one needed the full formality. Hor-heb however, went immediately into the supplicant's position.

Senmut sat on the dais, near the children. "This isn't to be written, children," he commanded. "But this is a lesson in governance, so pay attention."

"What is it, Captain?" Hati's low, soft voice did not carry.

Hor-heb did his best to imitate that discreet volume. "Divine One, on the night that the Divine One, Tutmose II began his journey to the underworld, I heard what may

have been his final orders. I am unsure. They aren't written, therefore have not the force of law. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to repeat them to you. They are confusing and delicately worded. Perhaps you can make sense of them." He then hesitated, but did not remove his forehead from the floor.

Hati was baffled, and looked at Senmut. He in turn barked, "Captain, report!"

Hor-heb snapped into a kneeling position and saluted with his fist pressed to his heart. "Sir! Divine one, Tutmose II had just given Lord Senmut the duties of royal tutor. As Lord Senmut left the chamber, he said, 'Debt repaid. Take good care of my beloved Queen, until I can return to her, Senmut. Then we'll share her for the rest of our days. This I swear.'"

Ahmore stared at Senmut who stared at his own hands as if he had never seen them before. Hati felt herself turn white. She cleared her throat. It took an effort to calm herself. "You have done well to bring this to me secretly, Captain. The throne requires much of its trusted guards and their long ears. Especially discretion. Continue to listen for me, and bring me what you hear, no matter how trivial it may seem at the time. Dismissed." Hor-heb saluted and retreated.

Hati turned to the children. "Sometimes you do not need to understand what is reported to you, only remember it. It may be useful later. This is the essence of ruling. Always gather information, for it's power." Three princes' locks bobbed in unison.

Hati turned and nodded to the guards at the door. They flung open the doors and the court filed in. Some were gaudily dressed nobles, some generals still wiping dust from their uniforms, a few were priests and then came Queen Kara leading her merchants. Hati nodded serenely at her fellow Queen, pleased to see she continued in her duties as patron of the arts and commerce.

Hati mused on the guard's report while the Court sorted itself. The repeated words sounded as if Mo had intended to share her with Senmut. While that might have been a pleasant plan to have two men in her bed, it had ended with Mo's death. That was assuming Senmut was even party to this notion. Bah! It was ridiculous, probably borne of Mo's continued feelings of inadequacy. Even if Senmut were willing, she had no time for an affair. She had an empire to run, and nobles to pacify.

One of those gaudily dressed nobles arrogantly stepped forth and performed perhaps the sketchiest of bows in Hati's general direction. Without preamble or waiting to be announced, he declared, "I am Lord Akenmose. I am here to claim the throne. I am the Pharaoh Tutmose II's brother."

Keoset leapt forward, but Hati held up her hand to forestall any outburst. Keoset stepped back and whispered to the royal scribe at Hati's right.

Ignoring the scribe now pulling tablets from a stack beside him, Hati smiled winningly at the arrogant Lord Akenmose. "Welcome to my court, Lord Akenmose. Are you then wishing to supplant Tutmose II's decree as to who rules Egypt? It's written." She gestured toward the scribe, now holding three tablets. "You're welcome to read for yourself, if you wish."

Lord Akenmose turned his nose up into the air, and spoke to some point above Hati's head. "My brother was mad. No woman can rule Egypt. All their energies must go to childbearing." He looked pointedly at Hati's round belly.

Hati laughed aloud, startling Akenmose into staring at her, open-mouthed. "Tell that to the women who run their own businesses out there in the marketplace. Tell that to the noble ladies who improve their lands without a husband to tend them." Her chuckles died, and she became sober once more. "But Egypt is more than one business, or a few paltry hectares of land, isn't it? Tell me, Lord Akenmose, why I am incapable of ruling at my husband's command." This could be amusing, as well as an opportunity to let the most important members of her court know how much she valued them.

"You have no knowledge of war, for one thing." His superior tone edged perilously close to insult.

"Do not I? I have run the sand table of war games since I could see over it. But that is unimportant." Hati gestured to the generals, who looked up in surprise. "There are the falcons and lions of Egypt. They know the business of war. I tell them only where there might be a need, and they tell me what sources are available. I do not tell the falcons how to fly, nor the lions how to rend."

The generals threw out their chests and stood proudly.

"I do not tell them how to do their jobs, only there is a job that needs doing. It's my job only to inform the right general that there is a need."

Hati stood, fully the Regent-Queen in her pectoral, and held the crook and flail in her right hand. With those implements, and knowing their symbols as the true might of Egypt as are the shepherds and farmers who worked in the fields, she pointed at the merchants and Queen Kara.

"There, is the other claw on the foot of Egypt. There are those who represent the wealth of Egypt. The art, the food and the trade that makes Egypt the richest land in the world. Our people do not starve and know prosperity because of their work."

The merchants puffed up their chests and stood taller.

"They know the business of Egypt. I only need know where there is a need. Again, all I must do is tell them where the need is. Is there a food shortage in one place and fattening calves in another? They will get it there, for the good of all Egypt."

She gestured again, pointing at the priests, who gave her their full attention. "And there is the third claw of Egypt—the spirit of Egypt. They see to it that all remains in balance and that Maat reigns. They feed the spirit of the people, and see to it that the gods smile upon us. They provide us with hope for our immortal lives."

She turned to face the stunned Lord Akenmose, whose mouth moved, but no sound emerged. "All of these provide peace and prosperity to our people. They are the true strength of Egypt. I am but the one central place they can go to see to it all that must be done is done." She paused and caressed her swollen belly. "I am the mother who sees to Egypt as if it were my children. Do not tell me I cannot make war, for I will defend my children like a lioness defends her cubs. Do not tell me I cannot feed Egypt for I will

work until I die to see to it my children are fed. Do not tell me I cannot provide peace and hope to my children, for like a mother I love them all with the fullness of my being. A woman cannot rule Egypt? Bah!"

Haughtily, Hati returned to her throne. "But tell me, Lord Akenmose. Has Egypt fallen to pieces while you traveled here from your palace on the delta, and a woman ruled? Is there chaos in the streets of Thebes?"

"Of course not. Undoubtedly, my brother had many long-range plans. You could not have caused disorder that quickly no matter what your womanly whims might be." The mild insult only served to amuse her.

"What were my husband's plans, then? Do you know? No? I do. I was there when his advisors sat in council with him. I was there and listened to the generals. I was there when the plans were drawn for the new granaries. Where were you?"

"I was at my palace of course!" Lord Akenmose replied hotly.

"Ah, your lands in the delta. As I recall, your brother asked you to go there and improve the delta. He told me this. What have you done?" Without waiting for an answer, she turned to the vizier. "Keoset? What increase has arrived from the delta district in the past few years?"

Over Lord Akenmose's inarticulate protest, Keoset answered promptly. "None, Divine One. The taxes have remained the same."

Hati turned back to Lord Akenmose and said in a low, dangerous voice, "So, you cannot improve one of the richest farmlands in Egypt, yet you wish to rule over all of the lands? Yet, you wish to overturn Pharaoh's wishes? You must give a better reason than I am a woman. Come! Prove I am less fit to rule than you. I am interested to hear it."

Lord Akenmose stammered, "You...you could die in childbirth. Then who would rule Egypt?" Hati noted he ignored his own brothers sitting on the dais at her feet, who were also sons of Tutmose I. Their births were not in doubt, as his was.

"That is in the hands of the gods. I could live, too, you know. Most women survive the process quite nicely."

"You could birth a daughter."

"This is possible. However, a concubine is pregnant as well. There is twice the possibility of a male child. That, too, is in the hands of the gods," Hati remained complacent. "Stop living in a world of what-if, Lord Akenmose. The gods grant favor where They will. Pharaoh Tutmose II made his wishes clear. That I should rule Egypt until his son was old enough to rule. There are two chances for a son to be born within the year. If both are daughters, then you have until that time to prove you can be a better ruler." *However unlikely that might be*, she added to herself. "If one or both should be a son, then you must wait to see if they survive to adulthood. Again, you have all that time to prove you're a better ruler than I." She paused then smiled wickedly. "Oh, and may I suggest you get issue from your own body as well, Lord Akenmose? I note

you're at least twenty, and you have not even one wife or heir. What better way to show improvement, not only in land-taxes, but also increasing your family?"

Lord Akenmose shuddered delicately, and turned to leave. Hati heard Keoset's intake of breath at the discourtesy. That was quite enough. Her tolerance ended.

"Akenmose!" she barked.

Lord Akenmose stiffened and stopped. He turned slowly around, his face showing his fury because Hati had not used his title.

"You may not have respect for the person on the throne, but you will have respect for the throne itself. *Bow* and show courtesy," she growled. At his hesitation, she added, "Do not force me to humiliate you."

Lord Akenmose bowed stiffly; using the minimal amount of courtesy a noble may show to the throne of Egypt. It was sufficient, barely. Hati's eyes narrowed. He bowed a little lower. Then she nodded dismissal. He fled.

Hati leaned over to whisper to Keoset, "Have him watched. He will not be satisfied to wait." Extending her gift to check the mood of the crowd, she felt waves of approval and respect. Breathing a purely internal sigh of relief, she turned to pay attention to the next petitioner with all the calm dignity of a pharaoh. The princes surrounding Senmut took copious notes with round eyes.

* * * * *

The heat in the Valley of the Kings was oppressive the day Hati filed in with the High Priest ahead of the long procession bearing Mo to his eternal rest. It was early morning, and already the temperatures were soaring. Because of their pregnancies, Pythia and Hati had ridden in a litter instead of a chariot, slowing the procession down to a crawl. Between the heat, the chants of the priests and the wailing, Hati's head ached.

Kara, Bathomet and the concubines trailed after the litter, panting in the heat, but doing their best to signify their loss with the traditional wailing. Hati looked back as the litter bearers set them down gently in time to see acolyte priests run forward with water for the mourners.

Pythia had done her best to comfort Hati, but it was expected that Hati cry, if nothing else. She could not wail with the others because she had to have a voice to perform the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony once Mo's sarcophagus was placed upon the great granite bier. Both Hati and Pythia had finally finished being sick every morning, and Hati was grateful it had taken an extra ten-day to finish all the preparations. Now they could both act with some dignity and not be affected by the swaying of the litter.

Pythia rose from the litter first, as the lower-ranking lady, and helped Hati from the chair to the hard-baked, hot ground. In an amazing show of dexterity, Pythia managed

to press a small square of linen in Hati's left hand without anyone being aware of this small show of kindness. Hati quickly palmed it into her belt with a squeeze of gratitude on Pythia's hand. The slow lowering of a right eyelid acknowledged the thanks.

Pythia had become Hati's favorite Singer since her trial. She always had a kind gesture, a ribald song or a new trick to play on a hapless noble courtier. Lately, she'd begun pulling gems from the ears of the royal children, making them scream with laughter. Even now, her kindness in providing something to snuffle into made Hati's eyes swim.

"Get on with you, Hati." Pythia whispered her words urgently as the High Priest made his stately way toward their divan. "Here comes Himself to see you down. I will have some cool water waiting when you return." She gave a tiny nod to indicate the High Priest and the acolyte bearing the tools for the ceremony below.

"It's bad enough that I have to do this as Mo's successor. I will need the water, thanks."

"Mo would have appreciated you are the one to see him off," Pythia offered. "He was nice to me," and her eyes filled. Crying now, she joined the other concubines while Hati, Kara and Bathomet followed the High Priest into the humid darkness.

It was a long, dark walk with only a few torches held by priests to light the way. Yet, she could not help but admire the beauty of the wall paintings and spells lining the walls in the passages. Side chambers offered glimpses of the treasures already piled up waiting for a pharaoh's needs. The carvings were exquisite in their details, but there was no time for anything more than a quick view before the torches lit a new sight. Hati knew Mo appreciated all the beautiful things wrought for his eternal life. Well, he was the one meant to enjoy them, and he saw them.

Before them, carried on six priests' shoulders, Mo's golden sarcophagus floated and glittered in the torchlight. His mask was exquisitely detailed with gold, lapis and other fine gems. Hati was permitted as Mo's successor to see it and approve before it was laid over his face and the sarcophagus sealed.

Finally, the long corridor opened up into the columned resting chamber, with all the spells in hieroglyphs lining the walls so Mo remembered them when he traveled below to be judged before taking his place among the stars. Hati had no doubt that Mo would join the stars without difficulty, spells or not. He was too good, too kind and an unsurpassed Pharaoh. The priests carrying the canopic jars filed past and placed them on special tables to await Mo's need of them. The glittering gemstone eyes of Horus, Bastet and Anubis winked in the torchlight, as if reassuring her.

Mo's sarcophagus was set upright before her, and the High Priest himself handed Hati the sacred black tool to symbolically open his mouth so his *ka* could escape and fly free to begin the journey. She had memorized the words long ago as a royal child, knowing this might be her duty to set a *ka* free. Still, the words came out of a throat raw with weeping, and rasped harshly. Her hand brought the tool to the golden representation of his mouth, and the words poured out.

*"Blessings be upon you, Tutmose II.
May your heart not betray you
As you speak the sacred words
Of truth to the Gods.
Let your ka fly free
To the skies above,
Returning to the stars
From whence you came."*

Returning the black tool to the High Priest's hands, Hati turned away and sobbed in Kara's arms while Bathomet patted her arm awkwardly. Soon, they were led back into the hot dry sunshine while the mortuary priests finished filling the chamber with treasures and sealing the many entrances. They would be at it for days, but Hati's work was done. She bawled like a baby until Bala fed her a sleeping draught.

* * * * *

Pythia sighed with relief when Bala appeared at her door. "Thank all the gods you're here, Bala!" she exclaimed, gesturing to a chair opposite her tiny table. The morning light filtered in through the open balcony doors, flooding the room with cheerful sunlight.

"What is it, Pythia? Even Hati has noticed your absence this ten-day since the funeral procession." Bala sat down and nodded when Pythia offered her some water. "Are you ill?"

"I am either ill or growing mad, Bala!" Pythia wrung her hands, and got up to pace in an agitated fashion.

"Well, now, considering your usual languid ways, I can see you're upset. Come, tell me what's wrong, child."

"Bala, I am...getting angry or sad or sick when I am around others. It used to be a good thing, to know when others needed cheering, but now they overwhelm me. I cannot bear it!" Pythia wrung her hands and turned to Bala.

"Ah...the evidence is there in your eyes, my dear," Bala came over and took Pythia's chin in her strong hands. "Your eyes are as golden as Hati's."

The fear rose to coil in Pythia's stomach like a snake. "But my parents were barely noble-breed. I'm am nothing like Hati! What has changed?"

Bala looked down significantly at Pythia's round stomach. "That has changed. I hazard a guess that Pharaoh's child has influenced or awakened the pharaonic gifts in you. You must see The Mother, immediately. I will make arrangements for you to visit her, tonight, if possible."

"I would love to visit The Mother, but why?" Pythia begged.

"You'll need lessons on controlling the pharaonic gifts, dear. I would say Hati could teach you, but she has enough to handle. That Lord Akenmose has not left for his palace in the delta." Bala patted Pythia's hand.

"That slimy jackal? He's waiting for Hati and me to die in childbirth! He is as easy to read as a scroll!" Pythia's lip curled in distaste.

Bala's lip twitched, and Pythia slapped playfully at her hand. "And do not make fun of me because I am learning to read. It's bad enough Hati teases me," she pouted at Bala, then laughed, too. She bounced up to pace again, but this time laughing. "I know it's funny. Having to learn to read at my age!"

"Oh, to be sure. An old woman of seventeen summers you are!" Bala exclaimed mockingly.

"I am serious, Bala. I hope that someday Hati or The Mother will give me to a man I can love and who might love me. My beauty dooms me to be a concubine or lower wife, but I can hope for love, can't I?" Pythia pleaded.

"Far be it from me to destroy that hope, Pythia. Who knows? Perhaps some nobleman will catch your eye, and Hati can make a gift of you to him, hmm? It isn't unheard of, you know."

"Have you ever been in love, Bala? I do not dare ask Hati right now. She's too caught up in the freshness of losing Mo to see...well, anyway." Pythia coughed in embarrassment.

Bala fumbled with her goblet for a moment, and actually blushed. "Yes, I was in love once. I foolishly married and had a son. However, the service of the God's Wives called me away. I was gone well over a year, and when I returned I was told my son and husband had died in a plague." Bala's eyes filled with tears. "We were too poor for even a small tomb. They were taken out to the sands. I went to look but never found their bodies. Their *kas* are lost to me."

Pythia was overwhelmed by the feelings of loss from Bala and wept with her. They clung to one another until Bala was purged of her long-held hurt.

Bala finally raised her head and sniffled. "Oh, look at me! Crying over a hurt that happened almost twenty years ago!" She scrubbed at her eyes and continued, "I would be willing to wager that you can enhance emotions as well. I would better get off to The Mother. If you can do that, then you're going to serve Egypt very well indeed."

"What do you mean, Bala?" Pythia rubbed her own face, not caring if she smeared her kohled eyes.

"It may be that you'll be able to soothe a small group, like in the audience chambers. If you can whip a trained God's Wife like me into a crying fit, then you probably can control a few people. Wouldn't it be nice to soothe emotions and make people calm enough to think rationally?"

"Oh. Oh! What an asset for Hati! She feels everyone's emotions, but cannot control them. If I can smooth the sands for her, then she'll not hurt and the business of the whole empire can be done more efficiently! Oh, I must learn this!" Pythia went to scrub her face and reapply her makeup, determined to go to The Mother immediately.

"I'll see to it as quickly as I can," Bala began. A small sound at the door had her whipping around and alerting Pythia.

A timid knock sounded, and at Pythia's answer, the door swung open. A nobleman stood framed by the doorway, dismissing a servant with a flick of his fingers.

Pythia took note of Bala's return to the servile maidservant disguise, and that Bala was radiating an emotion that screamed, "Be careful! Guard yourself!"

Similarly, the nobleman emanated a feeling of frustration and rage, overlaid with an oily slyness. "Here is evil and cruelty," her new gift interpreted for her. With that came recognition, and a plan.

Pythia laid down her kohl brush and stood to bow before Lord Akenmose. "Lord Akenmose, you're most welcome to my rooms," she said in an ingratiating tone. With a flick of her eyes, she looked at Bala. "You're dismissed. See to it my visit to my mother is arranged with due haste," she ordered haughtily. Bala's eyes flashed with humor, and then she bowed her way out.

Good. Bala had a hint of her plan. "Now, Lord Akenmose, how may I serve you?" she purred.

Chapter Eight

Lord Akenmose lounged against the doorframe, as if reluctant to even enter Pythia's bedroom. "You can stop trying to use your womanly wiles on me. I assure you, I am immune. Let us discuss business." His voice dripped with contempt.

"Say what you will, then. Wine?" Pythia chose to ignore his attitude at least for now, and keep her tone brisk. What did he want?

"Yes. Now, I have a proposition for you. I have some small admiration for the way you managed to wriggle your way out of the murder charge. That was a masterful performance, but your reputation at the temple precedes you. How would you like to be the honored mother to the next Pharaoh?" Akenmose intoned.

To buy herself time, Pythia took a sip of wine and pretended to savor it. "My son, if I have one, is second-in-line to the throne," she replied warily. "But you already know that, do not you?"

"It's a position I have some familiarity with," Akenmose answered. "However, at the time of birthing, both the...woman, and the child are very vulnerable. It's quite possible that the Regent-Queen and her son will die. There have been inattentive priests and physicians before."

Pythia noted that he ground out Hati's title with barely-suppressed rage. "Granted. But to answer your question, I hope my child someday rises to power," Pythia stated, sitting back and looking like the languid lay-about she used to be. "But may I point out, my child and I could die just as easily."

"Not with my physicians and priests about. They know well what would happen to them if they allowed such a travesty to occur. Besides, I have a Canaanite physician in my house. They are known to be the best at this sort of thing. You would most likely live, as would your child." Akenmose intimated dark and dire punishments for those who failed him.

"What you say, interests me. I take it you're not fond of our Regent-Queen?"

He frowned in response, "A woman should be revered as a mother, and then she should die. No woman has ever ruled Egypt on her own. Egypt needs a man guiding her, just as a husband guides his wife. Contrary to all that bitch said this morning."

"Well, there was Queen Sobeknefru, but she ended a dynasty and only ruled for a few years. Which only goes to prove your point, Lord Akenmose," Pythia mused. "I assume you want my cooperation. Or is there something else you desire from me?"

"Your cooperation is all I require. Well that's incorrect. I will need your son. I will not require your bed services. Those I take from my Canaanite slave-boys."

"The Canaanite God forbids such things, does he not?" Pythia tried very hard not to sound censorious. Not that she had problems with a man loving another man, what revolted her was that this man forced slaves to be untrue to their god.

Lord Akenmose laughed, "Their 'God' is intangible. My whips aren't. I own them and even their 'God' tells them to obey their masters," He fingered the coiled whip at his hip, lovingly. "Besides, eventually, they all come to kiss my whip."

Pythia latched onto the most pleasant image in Akenmose' statement, "Yes, some of my experiences have shown that as well." She forced from her mind the pity she felt for the slaves forcibly raped. She had never had to do that; all of her partners were willing adults.

"Just remember, woman, no hand but mine holds the whip in my domain," Lord Akenmose rose and strode from the chamber. "I'll contact you when the time is right."

Pythia ruminated over the conversation, in her chair for a few moments. So you think you can just sweep into my chambers, dictate my actions, threaten me, and then just walk out. You did not even offer me the respect due to a royal concubine. I do not demand much but you should have at least nodded in my general direction. Then calling me "woman" at the end, as if I were no more to you than a chair or chariot. Arrogant ass! How dare you? We'll see what the Holy Mother and Hati have to say about that! My job is to protect Hati, and so I shall!

Galvanized into action, she leapt up and banged the small gong near her chair to summon a servant. "Has my message been delivered to the Holy Mother at the Temple of Maat?" she demanded when the servant arrived.

"Yes, Lady. Bala has returned." The girl bowed at the door.

Pythia wandered over to her potted garden and began to snatch flowers muttering to herself, "Poppy for danger, lilies, two of them for a meeting, yellow jasmine for secrecy, and finally a lotus for Maat, sisterhood business." She bound them together with a black cord to symbolize the night sky, signifying the time. "Take this to Bala and ask her to give it to the Regent-Queen with my compliments. Wait for an answer, then return to me." The urgency in her voice made the girl flee down the hall, clutching the flowers to her chest.

By the time Pythia had garbed herself for a visit to the temple, the girl returned, bearing the same lotus, one of the flowers from the royal garden and the black cord. Pythia nodded, dismissed the girl, and stepped out the door. Her guard fell in step behind her.

"We go by chariot to the Temple of Maat to visit my Mother. We must hurry. I amuse the Regent-Queen this evening. You'll drive," she commanded with a smile.

"As you wish, Lady." answered the guard. The guard hitched his sword more comfortably and followed in her wake.

* * * * *

Hati waited anxiously in the garden. She paced back and forth, knowing Pythia was late. To her surprise, when Pythia arrived, she was not alone. With her was The Mother. They entered in the garden furtively, and bowed acknowledgment.

The Mother wasted no time. "Hati, we've no time for protocol. Pythia has brought me news. Lord Akenmose approached Pythia earlier today. He wanted her cooperation in setting her son on the throne above yours. He promised her nothing and she promised nothing. Then she came and reported immediately to me."

Hati nodded coolly. "I am unsurprised. Lord Akenmose did not go to his chariot and return home immediately after he did not win the throne from me. I suspect he thinks that Pythia is my enemy" She grinned at Pythia.

Pythia returned that grin. "I can pretend to be your enemy if necessary. But I won't like it. That man is vile. Hati, he rapes slaves and that is just the beginning."

"The worst of it is, Lord Akenmose expects both of you to die in childbirth and your sons with you. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that he helps things along with poison." The Mother put in. "I suspect he thinks Pythia is as evil as he because of the Pharaoh's manner of death. Through her, he can get control of both babies upon your elimination."

Pythia hung her head. Hati suspected it would be a burden for Pythia all her life to be considered the murderess of the Pharaoh.

"Pythia is proof against poison," reminded Hati. "And I have Bala to protect me." However, she couldn't help a frisson of fear.

The Mother smiled wryly. "We'll have the proof of that in five months by my estimation. In the meantime, I am recommending that Pythia be given permission to play Lord Akenmose like a lyre. However, this means that Pythia will have to act as if she is your enemy. We wanted you to know so that you did not suspect treachery."

Pythia laid her hand on Hati's arm. "I'll forever be your friend, no matter what I seem to do over the next few months. This is the job The Mother sent me to do. I must protect you." Pythia grinned impishly and added, "Consider me a spy in the enemy camp."

Hati gasped in alarm, "Pythia! You're not going to sleep with him, are you?"

Pythia laughed, "No, I am not to his tastes. He prefers boys. For once, my beauty has no effect! I delighted at the challenge. But have no fear, I have a son in my womb to love and protect. I shall not dance with death."

The Mother pinned them both with a regal stare, and admonished, "I fear this man will stop at nothing to gain the throne. Pythia dances with death every time she speaks with him. However, I can think of no better plan now. Until I do, this is the best we can do. You'll not want to know, Hati, what Pythia does. Only know she'll thwart him as she can for as long she can." The Mother turned to go, stopped, and added, "And we can only pray she does it long enough for both your sons to be born."

"Akenmose will not stop until Hati and the princes are all dead, so that he may rule alone. What can we do, Mother?" Pythia wrung her hands.

"Why, make Hati Pharaoh in truth, of course."

Hati gave a small shriek. "That isn't what the Pharaoh asked of me. He only decreed that I be regent until a son of his body was old enough to take the throne."

"I know that, dear. However, until you wield ultimate power, you do not have the full resources of the Empire behind you. You'll need every resource you can get to hold Egypt in good order for your sons. I will speak with the vizier on this matter. Goodnight, my dears. May Osiris watch over your dreams, tonight. I will let you know when I have had words with the vizier."

After The Mother had hobbled her way out, Hati and Pythia wandered about the courtyard garden for a while longer, lingering over the flowers.

"It was clever of you to use flowers to send me that message." Hati couldn't resist complimenting Pythia, quietly. "I did not think you remembered those lessons."

Pythia chuckled. "If it had to do with plants, I remembered. If ever there was something I was good at, it was flowers and herbs. I will never be as good with a sword as you are, but I can kill with the flowers...if need be."

Hati bit her lip, and muttered anxiously in Pythia's ear as they pretended to bend over and examine a lovely night-blooming flower, "I do not want to be Pharaoh, Pythia. That isn't what Mo had in mind. It's bad enough to rule Egypt as regent and be a woman. Never mind that I am also pregnant. I do not want to be the one who wears the double crown. I do not know how Mo did it."

Pythia grinned foolishly, "Pretend I am saying something stupid but funny, Hati. Laugh, or something. I am supposed to be amusing you. I do not know if Keoset will agree to your becoming Pharaoh in truth, if not in power. Whether you realize it or not, you already wield the power of Pharaoh. What difference will a silly ceremony mean? All it will do is make it harder to get you off that throne." Then Pythia capered about, clowning and making faces.

"Do you know how silly you look?" Hati laughed, "You're only four months gone, but your belly is poking out." Had it only been almost four months since Mo's death?

Pythia's grin flashed in the moonlight. "We both will be big as a hippopotamus soon enough! And you have no room to talk. I think your baby will be bigger than mine the way you're growing. But then again, you're taller than I so it should be all right."

Hati stood stock still for a moment in shock. "Oh gods, I just realized something. If The Mother goes through with her plans, then the Pharaoh must marry a woman. I will have to impersonate a man."

"Not only that Hati, but you'll have to shave your head. That's the only way the double crown fits on anyone's head. You'll have to wear beard. A false one, to be sure, but a beard nonetheless. All pharaoh's wear beards. There is probably one in Mo's room somewhere."

"Oh no! Shave my head? I have never cut my hair," Hati exclaimed, aghast.

"It won't be so bad," Pythia consoled. "It will be a lot cooler, and you can always wear wigs. You can grow your hair back as soon as your son's old enough to take the throne." Pythia then snickered, "I cannot wait to see you in a kilt. That's going to be funny. What will you do with your tits? Bind them?"

"That's not funny!" Hati pouted. "I suppose I can dress as a man. The hard part will be marrying another woman." Hati paced around like a caged animal.

"I can see your point. Not only will you have to find a woman willing to go along with the farce, but one willing to sleep with you. Where will you find a man willing to father a child on her, but never acknowledge the child?"

"I'll be that wife," said a voice from the shadows. Both Hati and Pythia jumped and squeaked in surprise. Queen Kara stepped from the shadows.

Hati breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Queen Kara. "It isn't often that anyone can surprise two God's Wives. How did you do that?"

"You forget I am from Punt. We are a warrior people, and one of the first lessons we learned as children is to hunt and stalk. My black skin blends with the darkness, and if I wish I can sneak up on sleeping lions," Queen Kara grinned. If it was possible for a woman to look like a sleepy leopard, Kara was the epitome of that image.

"When and how much have you heard?" asked Pythia cautiously.

"I have been here since Hati shrieked. I can understand why you do not want to pretend to be a man. From an outsider's point of view, it's wise. Egypt thrives on its fertility. The Pharaoh must be as fertile as the land." Kara smiled, and added, "And while Hati has proved she's fertile, the Pharaoh will need to prove it as well. And since the Pharaoh must be a man, the man must get a woman pregnant. I have no trouble sleeping with a woman, and I am already a Queen. Any children I might produce will be down the line of succession sufficiently for me to worry less than I would have otherwise."

Hati began to pace again. Discussing this with her two best friends and arguing out how to go about this was a whole lot better than dealing with this embarrassing issue in front of the whole council. "Let us say that I go through this and pretend to be a man. Let us say that I marry Kara. That still leaves the delicate question of how we'll get Kara pregnant. You're still virgin, Kara, are you not?"

"Not for lack of trying! But yes. Whoever we choose will have to be aware of that and be willing to keep the secret. It should not be known how Mo deceived the people and was never able to perform the act with me." Kara took a worry stone out of her robes and began to rub it. "Since we are sharing secrets, I will confess I have an attraction for a certain Egyptian noble. Perhaps we could convince him to be the father."

"This is all cake or calamity for later," Pythia put in briskly. "In the meantime, let us be thinking about these things. Who knows? We may be worrying for nothing."

"You may be right, Pythia. I have to have this baby before I could begin to impersonate a man. We've five months to plan and prepare." Hati sighed. "There is enough to do between now and then."

"In the meantime," Kara commented, "I'll see if that certain noble could be made interested in me. Either way, I will win. I hope that I will find out what all the fuss is about. It certainly sounds like a good time."

"It is!" cried Hati and Pythia together. They all laughed, and departed.

* * * * *

Hati and Pythia soaked themselves in the deep Royal bathroom pool with sighs of relief. Hati groaned, "I want this baby out, by any means possible. It feels as if it has been years, not a mere nine months."

Pythia moaned agreement, "I am a month behind you, and I want this baby out, too. Look at us! I feel as big as an elephant, and I have one month to go. At least you're due any day now."

Hati nodded. "It's becoming harder and harder every day to get anything done! I am so uncomfortable. I thought it was bad enough when the baby rode higher inside and I couldn't eat a bite. Now I can barely get in and out of the throne without help. How dignified is that?"

Pythia snorted, "I lost my dignity two months ago when I found out I had to sit with my legs spread to be comfortable. Will my tits ever stop hurting?"

"Try doing that while on the throne! Somehow tonight I must look regal and dignified for the Assyrian delegation."

Pythia laughed, "Oh, no, look what you made me do! Now I have to go find the pot again. Stop making me laugh."

"Me, too," Hati chuckled. "At least we got a chance to cool off."

As they both dried off and put on fresh linens, Pythia happened to glance down at the puddle beneath Hati's feet. Pythia now laughed heartily, holding her great belly with her hands. Pointing down, she chortled, "Looks like Keoset will handle the Assyrians and you get your wish."

Hati looked down and saw the blood and fluid beneath her feet. "That's funny, I am not in any pain. Perhaps just twinge now and then, but no worse than my moon time."

"I'll go and alert Bala. You put on comfortable walking sandals, and we'll try to wear a path in the corridor of the palace." Pythia paused at the door and winked, "And just think! Next month you'll get to bully me around and make me walk."

"Revenge will be very sweet, I assure you!" Hati teased back, before the first real pain struck. "That did not feel good. Yes, fetch Bala." She did not add the admonition to hurry she wanted to.

Hati and Pythia had participated in the birthing of any woman in the palace since they had found out they were pregnant. Hati knew that to experience for oneself was a different thing entirely. She understood the process, and knew in her heart that the night would be long.

The slap of two pair of sandals told her Pythia returned with Bala. Neither was in a hurry, but that was as it should be. Bala marched in, with Pythia making her ponderous way more slowly behind. "So, you finally decided to bring our future Pharaoh into the world? Good! Now get you both gone, and start walking. Take a turn around the Royal Garden while you can still navigate the stairs. Soon enough, you'll be confined to the Royal apartments so you may as well enjoy the gardens while you can."

Pythia grabbed Hati's hand. "She's absolutely right. It's late enough in the day that the Garden will be in shadow and relatively cool."

And with that, they began a long night of walking.

Late into the night, Pythia exclaimed, "Oh no! In the darkness, it is hard to tell but I think my water just broke."

"Let's keep walking and if you begin to have labor pains, we'll know for sure." Hati knew Pythia could not see her grin in the low light, but added, "It's possible that you're sympathetic to my pain."

"It's also possible that my new gift has put me into too much sympathy with you, and I am truly in labor," Pythia replied thoughtfully.

"We'll know soon enough," Hati grated out as a new pain struck.

And so it was that both Hati and Pythia ended up in labor together. Proof of true labor in Pythia began as they strolled the Royal apartments endlessly throughout the night. Kara and Bala often accompanied them to keep their spirits up.

"If you're still in labor when daylight comes," Kara offered sympathetically, "We can go peruse the goods in the local market. That is better than endlessly strolling and looking at the same four walls, do not you agree?"

Hati was no longer in a good humor and replied acidly, "I do not think it would be very fun at all, since we would either have to go in disguise or I would have to dress up in full panoply and never get to see a thing. I never get to go shopping anymore."

Panting around a severe cramp, Pythia held on to her good temper with difficulty. "We could always try out that man's disguise you'll soon be wearing when you're crowned."

"And what would I be? A man with a huge paunch?" Hati snarled.

"Ah, that is a wonderful thing to hear!" exclaimed Bala from the door to the Royal apartments. "The time has come for Hati to stop walking and prepare. This is the time, mercifully short, when many women snarl and rage. In this, the Pharaoh is lucky to be among the stars. Many a husband has listened to dire threats to his manhood. The only good of a husband being present is that he's needed to hold a laboring woman upright when she gives birth."

"I'll volunteer to hold the Regent Queen upright when it's time," said a voice from down the hall.

Hati's gaze snapped around to see Senmut leaning casually against the door to his room. He rose from the doorframe and sauntered down the hall, looking entirely too alert and gorgeous for the time of night.

Senmut arrived beside Hati just as the most terrible pain yet struck, and she fell against him as she cried out. When next she had her breath, Senmut offered, "I have been your friend all these years. I can take a little abuse since I know I am not the cause of your pain, merely a convenient male." It was true that she needed the strength of a man to hold her while she gave birth. Normally, this would have been Mo's duty as husband. Her heart wrenched yet again.

Hati was seized by the irrational urge to scream at Senmut, but allowed Bala and Senmut to lead her into the familiar luxury of the Royal apartment.

As Bala closed the door, Hati heard Pythia say plaintively, "I hope such a handsome man is available to hold me upright when my time comes."

"No, you'll be stuck with a eunuch guard," Kara teased.

Bala efficiently placed a chair near the bed and directed Senmut to sit. Hati watched in amazement as Bala spread his legs with no concern for his modesty or hers until she was satisfied with his position. A soft straw mat was laid between Senmut's feet. The next pain had Hati shrieking and clutching her stomach. Senmut jumped up in alarm but was restrained by Bala.

The pains were coming faster and faster and were no longer tolerable. Bala undressed her, then laid Hati on the bed, checked briefly to see if the baby was coming yet, and nodded her satisfaction. "It won't be long now, my pet," Bala soothed. "It's time to get you in position."

While Bala helped Hati to her feet, Senmut couldn't restrain his curiosity any longer. "How do you know so much about this process? Have you done this before?"

Bala chuckled as she positioned Hati in a squatting position between Senmut's legs and facing outward. "Not only did I have to go through this myself, but I have helped with a few births over the years. You cannot work with women without this happening relatively often." Bala reached out, grabbed Senmut's arms, and wrapped them underneath Hati's swollen breasts. "Do not hold her too tightly, she'll need to breathe. That's the way."

Just then, the most vicious pain of all sent Hati writhing in Senmut's arms. She could no longer even shriek, just pant. At the end of it, Hati cried out, "I feel as if I need the pot. This is it, I think!"

Bala knelt, and a moment confirmed, "Yes, I would say so. You know this part, Hati. Push with the pains and breathe in between. It won't be long now if you'll work with me. Hold on, Senmut."

"I am trying, but she's as slippery as an eel."

"You try this, you spawn of Set!" Hati screamed. A stream of nearly unintelligible invective shot from Hati's mouth.

"Stop wasting your breath! Breathe, dammit!" yelled Bala, her hands at the ready.

Senmut held on as Hati gave one long shriek and seemed to nearly rise to a standing position. A bloody, purple mass squirted out into Bala's hands.

"One more, Hati! One more and this will be done!" Bala's attention was taken up with carefully turning the babe.

"What is it?" Senmut begged, holding on to Hati with all his might.

"I have got the wrong end in my hands for that, you idiot!"

Senmut had no chance to reply to the insult. Hati gave one tremendous heave, and collapsed into Senmut's arms. He grunted, and held on to her limp form.

"A son! You have a son!" Bala exclaimed in triumph.

Hati tried to smile, but then complained, "I have got a deep well between my legs. I can feel the passage of the wind, I swear it."

Bala rose, laid the newborn prince on a pallet, and began to towel the protesting infant. "What a loud one, you are, my prince. Yes, yes, you may have your mother's breast in a moment. Such indignity, I know it," she cooed. A maidservant appeared, and knelt serenely by the pallet. Bala nodded, and handed her the swaddling, asking, "Is the wet nurse standing by?"

"Yes, Lady. She is in the third chamber on the family side." The maidservant began to wrap the baby in his swaddling clothes, smiling. "The concubine Pythia is now in her own chamber as well. One of the guards is holding her, and Queen Kara attends. Such language spews from the concubine's mouth!"

"Excuse me," Senmut interrupted. "But is Hati ready to lie down yet?"

"Not quite. Any moment now," Bala laughed as Hati began to pant. "That's what I was waiting to hear. Here comes the afterbirth. You might wish to turn your head, Lord Senmut. It's not pretty." With that, she stuffed a clay bowl beneath Hati, and a distinctive wet plop brought Hati instant relief from the cramps.

Loud cries from down the hall accompanied Hati as she was tenderly laid on the bed to rest and Tutmose III put to her breast. Senmut, ordered by Bala to act as a living support, sat behind her and radiated admiration and awe to Hati's mind.

Bala bustled out, and returned just as Hati started to sleep in Senmut's arms. "Pythia has also given birth to a son," she announced. "She has named him Isian. Kara is a fine midwife. She did it all, alone."

"Two princes, born within minutes of one another. The whole of the empire will celebrate this night." Senmut was surprised to hear his priestly side come out without conscious thought.

Bala smiled triumphantly. "Yes, and surprisingly Prince Isian is healthy for all he is small."

Hati switched breasts so the baby could have his fill and watched with sleepy eyes as the next Pharaoh of Egypt greedily suckled. She was much too busy enjoying her son to think of anything else, much less comment.

Bala's voice cracked with exhaustion, but she commanded, "Senmut, you stay and guard Hati. Kara is lying down with Pythia and the guards have been doubled in the apartments. I need a bit of a rest myself."

"You have more than earned it, Bala," Hati murmured sleepily. She felt Senmut rearrange her so that she was fully lying down. Her son had finished his first meal, so he was collected by Bala to be given to the wet nurse.

Senmut settled in the bed next to Hati and chuckled. "Do you wish to wager that both princes are born at the same time is no accident, but the hands of the gods?"

Hati was asleep before she could answer.

Chapter Nine

“Get up! Hurry!” Bala commanded.

It was not a pleasant wake-up for Hati. She cracked one eye and moaned at the ungodly hour. “Bala! It isn’t yet dawn. Why so early?” she protested.

“Because I must shave your head and pluck all your body hairs before you leave for the temple of Amun. Isis only knows how long it will take to dress you up as a man for your crowning as Pharaoh of the Two Lands.” Bala brandished a large shaving knife, then pointed to the large pile of linens with the false beard on top.

Hati groaned, but threw off the sheet and reluctantly rose from her bed. Stalling, she begged, “Can I feed Moses first?” Anything to delay losing all her hair was a good excuse.

“The wet nurse has already fed both of the princes. Pythia and Kara will be along to hold your hand in a few minutes. Stop delaying the inevitable and come sit down. I do not like this anymore than you do, you know.”

Before Hati could answer, Pythia and Kara burst through the door, chattering like a pair of monkeys. Pythia took one look at Hati’s stricken face and ran over to grab her hand. The sympathy in Pythia’s eyes did much to overcome Hati’s reluctance.

“Let’s get this over with,” Hati sighed, and sat down with ill grace.

“It won’t be so bad,” Kara consoled. “Look at me!” She rubbed her short nap of hair. “It really is much cooler, I swear it.” Kara had worn her hair short since arriving in Egypt, Hati knew. It was a protection against the heat.

Pythia put her hands on her hips, and declared, “Your hair is perfect to be so short. It’s very soft and curly.”

Kara grinned and replied good-naturedly, “And well it should be! We of Punt do not wear wigs or other head coverings. The gods have granted us with hair that protects us from the sun, and skin that does not burn quite as easily as yours. We are truly blessed.”

Bala ignored this exchange and bundled Hati’s hair in her left-hand. Hati winced at the flash of the sharp knife on the wall before she felt the tug that signaled her hair was gone. Tears pricked her eyes but she swallowed the sobs.

Pythia put out a hand to forestall Bala from dumping it into the basket. “May I have a handful of that?” she pleaded.

Bala smiled and a look passed between them. “Hati do you care?” “No, its just hair. Do with it what you wish, Pythia. Are you planning on selling it in the marketplace today since this is my crowning?” Hati teased.

Pythia grabbed a large hank from Bala's proffered hand, and laughed, "I wish I had thought of that! I would make enough gold to fill my tomb with treasures. No, I have a private use for this." With a secret smile, she stuffed it in a small bag she kept at her belt.

Hati trusted Pythia enough now to not question further but instead teased, "You'll give it to an admirer and say it's your own hair so you do not need to cut any off!"

Pythia chuckled, but refused to answer further.

Bala was rubbing Hati's hair and scalp with a thick oil. Hati winced again at the first scrape of the razor knife against her scalp and was perversely grateful that there was no mirror to look in. A wet, oily lock of hair fell into Hati's lap, but Hati did not dare move her head.

Kara took it all in stride. "You might feel a little lightheaded for a day or two. That's a lot of weight to lose all at once."

"The double crown will more than compensate for all that hair. Did not Mo ever let you touch it? Hati let me hold it yesterday. It weighs as much as a pyramid block!" Pythia commented.

Kara frowned. "What were you doing with the double crown? I thought it was in the treasury."

"I had to be fitted for it yesterday. It must fit exactly, and my head is smaller than Mo's. They had to put a band made of leather on the inside, or else it slips down on to my forehead." Hati tried not to open her mouth too much for fear of oily hair falling in.

The last greasy lock hit the floor with a sickening plop. Bala patted Hati's shoulder. "There, my pet, that was not so bad was it? Now, let's get you plucked. After that..."

"We can put you in the pot like a plucked chicken, and then you do not have to be crowned!" Pythia teased.

That earned her a swat on the buttocks from Bala's hand, eliciting a squeal. Kara and Hati laughed aloud, and from Pythia's satisfied smirk, Hati deduced that had been her plan all along.

They all stood in line and were plucked. Bala cheerfully did them all without complaint. After a shared bath to ease aching skin, Bala got Hati dressed in the kilt and linen shirt of a pharaoh. It did not soothe Hati's ego when Pythia and Kara went into gales of laughter as Hati's breasts were bound uncomfortably tight to her chest. The linen shirt that followed felt hot and ridiculous. Pythia, as ribald as ever, joked, "We can always strap on a large dildo to make the effect complete!" That earned her a hail of kohl brushes, cosmetic pots, pillows and shrieks of dismay.

"It's bad enough that Lord Akenmose spreads rumors and innuendo that Hati is a lover of women because she'll be crowned and immediately marry me," commented Kara. "He forgets the law that the Pharaoh must marry within one year of his ascension to the throne, no matter what his age or preferences. He would do well to fulfill that duty himself." She dabbed on a bit of Hati's perfumed oil, and passed the bottle to Pythia with a cheeky grin at Hati.

"I suspect Lord Akenmose is one of those men who hates women so completely that he may not be able to function with them." Pythia touched up her lips with red stain. "A shame really. Most lovers of men are wonderful friends to women. After all they share the same interests."

"Well, Lord Akenmose can say what he pleases about me. I keep checking the crowd for approval, and so far have had nothing but good come back to me. If I were doing a bad job, that might be different. There! How do I look?" Hati smoothed the linen kilt and pectoral down self-consciously. She forced herself not to touch her bald head.

Pythia walked around Hati, assessing carefully. "Well, I would say from a distance you'll pass as Pharaoh. You look a little delicate to be a man, but there have been child pharaohs before."

"Then let's get this pomp over with. I want to play with the boys," Hati sighed wistfully.

"Aw! You do not want to marry me?" Kara teased as they filed out. Both Kara and Pythia clinked and rustled with their jeweled headdresses, bracelets and ankle beads to chime out a rhythmic tinkle.

"Leave the door open, will you, Bala? Miw got trapped in my rooms the other day until a thoughtful guard let him out," Hati asked over her shoulder.

"Appalling! I suppose he has returned to sleeping with you now that your great belly no longer disturbs His Holiness?" Pythia laughed, sauntering behind Kara and obedient to rank-order.

"Mostly. Though he has been absent today. I cannot imagine where he's gotten to," Hati replied.

"Out hunting mice, no doubt. He's been faithful to you all this time, so I cannot imagine his leaving you forever," Bala commented.

All conversation ceased as they passed through the great audience hall and made their way out to where the litter bearers and nobles milled about, waiting for the procession to the Temple of Amun to begin. Hati caught a glimpse of Lord Akenmose, already lounging in his covered litter and acting the haughty royal prince.

Kara's muttered, "Git!" was followed by a string of mild insults in his direction, but she made her stately way to her own litter with all appearance of dignity.

Pythia, as the only royal concubine still left, walked alone behind Kara's litter, by her own request. "If I show humility and walk, even the short distance to the temple, the people will think better of me. I am still the negligent concubine, and that perception won't go away. Walking will be seen as a mild punishment for my crime." Hati had agreed, but doubled the guard near the royal litters. Pythia was still the mother of a royal prince, and deserved guardianship.

The procession had a mercifully short walk to the Temple of Amun, though progress was slow because of the cheering crowds. A holiday was declared for the next three days, and all of Thebes took part wherever possible. Palm fronds and fragrant

bouquets were thrown in the path of Hati's litter, as well as waved by the throng. It made her feel just a little less silly in her kilt and false beard to hear a child call out, "Pharaoh! Pharaoh!" as they passed the market.

Finally, they arrived, with the priests lining the stairs in welcome. The litter bearers put Hati's litter down and she made her way up to where the High Priest awaited.

The ceremony itself was shorter than the walk had been. Tutmose II's decree was read to the crowd, the High Priest confirmed her right, and the long list of her antecedents as a child of the royal line was declared. The double crown was ceremonially brought forth and the High Priest placed it on her head with a holy blessing. The Royal crook and flail were passed to her with just as much pomp, as if she had not been using them as a symbol of her authority for months. Hati assumed the traditional crossed-arm position to the roars of approval from those lucky enough to get inside. Outside, there was an echo of noise as the commoners took up the cheering.

Without warning, the crowd within the temple grew silent. Directly in front of Hati, the nobles parted to form a passageway. Three cats padded their way up the aisle, Miw in front with his tail up like a banner. The other two cats were white, and clearly from the temple of Bastet.

As the aisle closed behind them, all the nobles murmured in awe. Never before had a holy representative of the gods graced a coronation in all history, much less three.

Even Hati prevented her mouth from falling open with difficulty as Miw jumped into her lap and made himself at home. The two temple cats also showed favor, one rubbing its face over a stunned Keoset's ankles, and the other lovingly proceeding to sit on Sennut's tablets as he tried to act as royal scribe on the lowest stair of the dais. Sennut put down his stylus and stroked his holy visitor, eliciting such a loud purr that everyone on the dais gasped.

The High Priest, with his fantastic ceremonial wig, visibly shut his jaw with an audible snap, and declared in his loudest voice, "The Gods are pleased! Let all Egypt rejoice!"

With a cheer that shook the rafters, the nobles gave vent to their joy. Hati put up her protections hurriedly, for fear of being overwhelmed. Other nobles of royal descent, Lord Akenmose excluded, were less quick, and staggered. Some fell back into the arms of their peers, and one woman fainted. Lord Akenmose, his face red with fury, stood there visibly shaking in his outrage.

As news of the holy event filtered outside to the masses, Thebes shook with cheering. However, Hati had no time to reflect. Miw remained purring in her lap as Kara's hand was placed in her own, and Kara was declared First Wife of Pharaoh Hatshepsut.

* * * * *

Bala came running in brandishing a note just as Hati stepped from her morning bath. To receive a note on precious papyrus usually meant something of vast importance but not necessarily secret. Hati barely prevented herself from snatching the paper from Bala's hands.

"An urgent note from The Mother, concerning a prophecy!" Bala's whisper was urgent enough to tell Hati she'd already read it.

Hati unfolded the note carefully, and gasped in horror. The note read, The Prophetess has foretold that the princes may be poisoned. This is the first attempt of many on their lives. She recommends removing the boys to Malgatta Palace, even before their naming ceremony. It isn't a perfect solution, she says, but the danger is reduced.

"Bala! Run to the nursery! There is danger of poison." Her last few words were said to Bala's back. Hati grabbed up a linen sheet and wrapped herself with no regard to form or fashion. Barefoot, she ran for the door, for once blessing her baldness. There was no wet hair to flop in her face and obscure vision.

Heart racing, Hati burst through the double doors of the Royal apartment, and into the corridor. Before her guards reacted, a crash and a scream echoed from the family section. She pounded to a halt at the end of the family corridor at the door of the Royal nursery.

The scattered remains of a tray just outside the door and young maidservant with her fist stuffed in her mouth told Hati in an instant where the scream had come from. The girl blocked the door so completely that Hati was forced to yank her back into the arms of the guards by her neck.

Inside, Bala knelt beside the body of the nurse who attended to the boys during daylight hours. On a tray next to the rug where the body lay, were the remains of a sumptuous breakfast not normally served to servants. Bread crumbs, fruit cores and cheese rinds lay next to a tipped over goblet of what appeared to be wine.

Hati ran to where the babies had their sleeping pads. She needed no reassurance that they were alive. The maidservant's scream had obviously startled the babies awake. Both boys were letting their displeasure be known at top volume.

At that moment, Hati heard Pythia's demands, "Let me in! My son is in there!" Hati glanced over her shoulder in time to see a guard step aside before his back was pummeled to death. Pythia shouldered him aside and ran to pick up Isian with frantic look on her face. Hati did the same to Moses. The cries of both babies changed to the normal demands of the hungry infant.

Both Hati and Pythia simultaneously put their sons to breast and patted damp bottoms. "She had no time to feed them or change their swaddling clothes. The nurse must have eaten first before awakening them. They are safe," Hati sighed with relief. She sent a silent prayer of thanks to Isis that she and Pythia had not yet given care of the babies completely over to nurses, and still had milk.

"What in the name of Set happened here?" Pythia demanded. "Oh, and by the way, lovely fashion statement, my Pharaoh."

"Poison is what happened my lady," stated Bala. The former assassin rose from the floor with the wine goblet in her hand. She offered it to Pythia saying, "I would like a second opinion. Take a sniff."

It only took one sniff for Pythia to clearly identify the poison. With wide eyes she exclaimed, "Datura flower! Why something so exotic?" Then she paused and added, "Oh, wait. I see. Whoever did this wanted just enough datura in the nurse's milk to poison the boys, but was inexperienced enough to make it too strong. It killed the nurse rather horribly before she fed them."

Bala folded her arms and whispered to Pythia and Hati. "It will soon be all over the Palace. Whoever did this will know they failed. I have some suggestions, but I prefer to do it in secret. I will clear the room and have the guards take the nurse for honorable services. I will also try to hunt up a replacement. We will need one and the night nurse cannot serve a double duty. I suggest you call in your Privy Council to the small audience chamber, Hati. Cancel the morning audience."

"Anyone who doesn't understand can piss up a rope," Hati said pithily.

Pythia merely nodded agreement and clutched her son close. "Let's get them changed and comfortable. They can come with us to the Privy Council." She snatched up two sets of swaddling clothes and marched out the door toward the Royal apartment.

Hati lingered for just a moment to whisper to Bala, "See if the litter can be sent for The Mother. I have a feeling we'll need the words of the sisterhood." At Bala's nod, Hati turned and followed Pythia.

* * * * *

Days, later, Hati and Pythia wept silent tears as their sons were taken in a huge, well-guarded caravan to the luxurious Malgatta Palace. It was decided to follow ancient tradition a little early, and send all the royal children to Malgatta until they reached an age to begin learning statecraft. There, in a small, isolated palace, they were guarded more effectively.

"Tell me again about Malgatta," sobbed Pythia.

Hati sniffed back tears and took a deep breath. Taking Pythia's hand, she tugged until Pythia turned her eyes from the receding caravan and began to lead her back inside. "It's really very lovely there," she began. "I remember visiting on holy days even after I became a God's Wife. It's right on the banks of the Nile, with fountains and gardens meant for children's play. My ancestors built it as the family compound. The tiles and wall paintings are stunning in their beauty. Isian and Moses will fish and hunt

when they get older. There is even a small arena to learn weapons play, and ride small toy chariots using dogs to pull them.”

Pythia laughed weakly, “I can almost see that. What a come down for those fine hunting dogs! To pull toy chariots!”

Hand-in-hand, they made their way back to the Royal apartments. Pythia made her excuses, and fled back to her room, sniffing. Hati stepped inside the east Queen’s apartment, intending to take a shortcut, but turned to ask Pythia to join her for lunch. She stopped when she saw a scar-faced but still young guard stuff flowers behind his back before he followed Pythia into her quarters.

Hati was touched. “How sweet,” she murmured.

One of her guards made bold to speak, “That’s Lieutenant Sheshi, Divine One. He can do no harm to Lady Pythia. He was eunuched in battle, same as Captain Hor-heb. He has favored Lady Pythia since he aided her in birthing Prince Isian.” He hesitated, and Hati read the reluctance in him to suggest it, but he added, “Should we stop him, Serenity?”

Hati pondered for a moment. Pythia had done her duty to the gods and Egypt by producing her son. She was under no obligation to produce more. “Definitely not,” Hati replied firmly. “In fact, let him know discreetly that he has my permission to pay court to Lady Pythia. He’s a distant cousin of mine, is he not?” If he was noble, then all was well.

“Extremely distant, Divine One, but worthy in rank to her.” The guard’s tone was relieved.

“Very well.” Shutting herself in her own apartment, Hati tried very hard not to be envious of Pythia’s comfort in the arms of a noble guard.

Miw rose from his place on her bed, and gave a luxurious stretch. Sitting on the golden chairs that Mo had once teased her about Hati was consumed by loneliness. Even Miw was no help when he jumped in her lap to demand a stroking.

“Oh, Miw, I am so lonely.” It was pitiful that all she had for companionship was a cat that rarely spoke. “Oh, let’s face it, I am eaten up with envy. Pythia has someone to comfort her when she cries for her son. I do not have anyone, only people who want something from me. Golden chairs, fine furs and rich foods are nothing compared to someone who cares about me. I mean me, not Pharaoh. Now I understand completely why Mo was so unhappy. I wish there was someone who could love plain old Hati.”

Miw, who purred contentedly in her lap, stood and jumped on to the gaming table next to her chair. He swatted at the blue lion of her old *mehen* set, then sat down to look significantly at her with the lion between his paws.

“Senmut would be annoyed if you played with his lion,” she admonished. Then, like a sword blow to the gut, it hit her. Miw suggested she turn to Senmut for comfort.

“But, Senmut is always taking Mentuhotep, Ahmose and Dedumose out for sword lessons, hunting, fishing or scholarly pursuits. I think he’s avoiding me,” she told the

cat. She would give much for Senmut's attentions right now. But his recent actions showed to her that he wanted nothing to do with his old friend.

Miw pawed at the lion once more, then stalked to the door. Intrigued, Hati opened the door. Miw shot out the door, startling her guards.

Hati shrugged at the guards. "I am going to see what Lord Senmut is teaching his students these days."

The guards fell in step behind her as she followed Miw down the corridor to the Children's Room where all indoor tutoring was done. Miw waited for her at the doorway, and stalked inside when she opened the door.

Surprisingly, the classroom was empty of students. The tables were littered with the oddments and detritus of teaching. A box of styluses lay opened next to a large pile of scrolls and clay tablets. The guards quietly shut the door behind her.

In the corner sat Senmut. He looked so thin and worn that Hati was alarmed. Yes, he'd been edgy and absentminded, but she hadn't realized he'd been ill. Obviously, he needed a break from tutoring, and perhaps a little pampering. Well, she was just the woman to supply both!

Hati padded over, her feet making no sound on the tile floor. "Whatever you're doing must be terribly engrossing not to notice when someone comes in the room. What is that?"

Senmut, who sat behind a typical scribe's low table, started violently. Papyrus drawings scattered. Miw took the opportunity to make a stylus a toy, and proceeded to bat it onto the balcony. One drawing landed directly on Hati's feet and she bent down to pick it up. Before Senmut could reach to take it from her, Hati unrolled the large drawing of a beautiful temple.

Senmut stammered, "Uh, Divine One..."

"Senmut! This is the most beautiful temple I have ever seen!" Hati interrupted. "Did you draw this?"

Senmut turned beet red, but smiled manfully. "Yes. Do you like it?"

"I remember you used to draw beautiful things when we were children at the temple. But this exceeds anything I have ever seen. This is the front, is it? Is that a long walk lined with sphinxes?" She spread the drawing on the table, heedless of all the other work littering the table.

"It is indeed. The walk leads to this stairway, see?" He pointed, sliding his finger along the walk to where a very wide staircase led to a columned façade of immense width.

"It's so unique! It's a mortuary temple, is it not?" Hati breathed. "Do you have drawings of the inside?"

Senmut shifted in his seat and flushed again. "No, not yet. I just finished that one yesterday. But if you wish, I will draw something for you."

“Oh, yes, please! I must really see your vision for this incredible mortuary temple.” Hati sat down next to Senmut and assumed the same scribe’s position. “Budge over, you table hog! I was going to invite you to a game of *mehen*, but this is vastly more interesting.”

Senmut ran his fingers over his temple before scooting over enough to give Hati some space. He reached for the next drawing but his fingers closed over Hati’s hand instead as she reached for the same document. Senmut snatched his hand back as if he had been burned.

Hati’s heart broke. “Surely you do not believe that I am an untouchable living god, do you?”

Senmut stared at her for a moment and then began to laugh, “No, on the contrary, you’re very touchable.” He hesitated, and then grinned, “And one should be more respectful of Pharaoh.”

Oh, but that line of thinking wouldn’t do! If he wanted nothing more from her, she demanded at least their old friendship back. Hati slapped him playfully on the arm. “You were not so respectful when you dipped my hair in your ink in class back at the temple.”

“You weren’t Pharaoh then, may I point out? I shall miss your long hair, even though I understand the necessity.” Senmut’s eyes lingered on her bald pate, and then he hesitantly reached up and rubbed it with a teasing grin.

Hati cleared her throat to cover the immense feeling of pleasure that being touched like a real human brought her. “Hmph! That’s better. I thought for a moment there I would be forced to find myself another *mehen* partner.”

“You would only become bored, since you can beat everyone but me handily,” Senmut replied.

“Such ego!” Hati exclaimed. “I shall have to win plenty of games from you to squash it.”

“You’re welcome to try.” Senmut teased her with a cheeky grin. “That is, if you’re no longer interested in my drawings.”

“I think not! You’ll have your game, only after I have seen everything on this table. Then I will trounce you. Challenge accepted?”

Senmut only laughed and pulled the next drawing in front of them both.

Chapter Ten

Senmut rubbed his head to ease the ache. For three days now, Hati had sought him out for games and general company at every opportunity. He did not know how much longer he could keep up his friendly, even brotherly, attitude in her presence.

It was just his luck that his students were on a trip to learn hunting and survival skills to the north of Thebes. He had no ready excuses anymore. When they came back, all four of them would journey to Malgatta Palace and join the two Royal princes in luxurious exile. Only then, would he relax.

Pythia peeked around the corner of the door, and chirped, "Good morning! Do you have a minute before our illustrious Pharaoh needs you again?"

"And good morning to you, Lady Pythia. How may I serve?" Senmut did his best to keep the weariness out of his voice. Normally, Pythia was a clowning balm to his aching heart. She was often there to amuse them both during games or minor court functions.

"Oh, so very formal! We are of equal rank, Lord Senmut. I have brought you a present," she teased, and brandished a large carved box. Prancing cheerfully into the room, she laid it on the table, shoving aside his teaching materials. A scar-faced guard stood just inside the door.

"Thank you Lady Pythia," Senmut began. His words died away as he looked down at a beautiful torque and matching set of inlaid cuffs of gold. The torque was as fine as the one now worn by Hati, but instead of inlays of lapis and other fine stone, the inlay was of water-clear quartz crystal from the eastern desert. Instead of great rectangles of quartz, the cuffs had round cabochons of the same.

"Aren't they exquisite?" Pythia stated proudly. "I was lucky to find that goldsmith. Hold the crystal inlay up to light."

Senmut obeyed with a cuff, and then asked, "What is that black thing in the crystal?" Even the bright sunlight coming in from the balcony only gave him a glimmer of the hidden thing beneath. Like a small black crack, the mysterious item wound its way under every crystal.

Pythia looked smug and leaned in to whisper, "Hati's hair."

Senmut was chilled to the bone by Pythia's knowing smile, and contrived to put on his blandest expression. "Why do you do this?" His voice shook and he did not bother to hide it.

"You're just down the hall from my room, and I can hear your pain and love for her." She patted his arm to reassure him and continued, "Hati will not be able to wear her own hair until her son takes the throne. It's only fitting that one who loves her

keeps it for her until then." She smiled for a moment, and became serious. "Besides, your lust for my sister is keeping me awake at night."

"Oh, gods! You can hear me?"

Pythia nodded. "You've been fortunate that Hati is so preoccupied with affairs of state that she ignores the affairs of her heart. If not, your love and lust would be like the shouts of the marketplace in her ears."

Senmut sat there, looking at the torque and bracelets. They contained Hati's treasured hair she'd given up for her son's sake. "I do not know that I have the right."

"Who better? You love her and understand the value of that secret treasure inside. You're noble, and own the right to fine jewelry," Pythia reminded him.

"I may be ennobled, but I still feel common-born. But I mean I do not know her feelings for me," he murmured.

"That, my dear Senmut, you must discover for yourself. Even I cannot read Hati. Even so, you ease her loneliness. And you'll guard her secret treasure, will you not?" With that, Pythia got up and left Senmut alone to put on the torque and bracelets with reverence.

* * * * *

In the dank, dark and long-forgotten storeroom in the temple of Maat, Lord Akenmose removed himself from the body of his latest toy. The young priest of only sixteen summers moaned softly and pulled against his light bonds, lifting his body for more.

Slapping the boy on the ass to keep him still, Lord Akenmose watched his seed slowly trickle down the boy's leg, mixed with blood and other bodily fluids.

Turning away, he sauntered over to wash himself clean in a bowl of warm water left on a small brazier by one of his quivering and frightened slave boys. It was so delicious to let them quake in fright, thinking one of them was to be tonight's plaything.

Taking up a goblet of wine, he toasted, "Ah, fresh meat. How delightful you are, Kawa." Sipping delicately, he wandered back over with a wet rag to wash some of the stench away. "I might just use you again, shortly, if you're agreeable."

"Yes, Prince Akenmose," came the soft and eager reply.

Akenmose retaliated with a hard slap to the buttocks so conveniently placed over a stored bale of goods. The soft cry of pain that followed wouldn't be overheard, deep in the lowest level of the temple as they were. "You forgot, did not you?" Akenmose purred.

"Yes, Master!" came the quick and servile reply. "I forgot! Forgive me, I beg!"

"I'll have to reinforce the lesson, won't I?" he laughed. He knew Kawa loved this game of pretending to be a slave to a prince, as long as it remained only a game.

"Oh, gods, Master. Please forgive me!"

Akenmose picked up his short chariot whip, and fingered it in front of the squirming boy. Gloriously naked, he purposely made the boy see his body that had so used the young priest and had ruthlessly given the boy the concept of both pleasure and pain combined. His prince's lock, which fell nearly to his waist, glinted in the torchlight with its many golden bands holding it. "But, you like being lover to a prince, don't you, Kawa? That's part of my appeal to you. My wealth and my estates, of course, are included." Akenmose stroked his prince's lock, and the symbology was clear to the boy. "To say nothing of what I can do to your body. You love that, do you not?"

Kawa moaned, "Yes, Master."

Akenmose smiled at the proper servility in his new toy, and reached for a pot of scented oil sitting on the bale next to Kawa's shoulder. He began to rub the oil all over himself, first his legs, then his arms, neck and finally his torso. All the while, he talked quietly and softly to the boy, pausing now and then to linger over certain portions of his body until the boy's eyes glazed with lust. Kawa was no fool. He knew what the oil meant.

"There is the need for secrecy, as you well know, Kawa. We wouldn't want the priesthood of Amun to take you away from me, would we?" Akenmose took his time slathering scented oil over his pectorals, lingering on each brown nipple. He happened to know from experience the oil was tasty as well. Perhaps if the boy was good, he might be allowed a nibble.

"No, Master. I want to stay with you."

"Oh? Are you sure? After all, you're technically too young. But you know your own mind, don't you Kawa?"

"Yes, Master!"

A little too sharp on that reply, but Akenmose decided to forgive it. He was, after all, playing on the adolescent pride of a young ambitious priest.

"Then you understand the need for secrecy of course. That meddling Queen Hatshepsut wants to pass an edict declaring seventeen the age of consent for sexual activity. How ridiculous. Legally a man at sixteen, and only now able to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh? Preposterous!"

"Yes, Master," the boy moaned, watching Akenmose's hands liberally coat his belly with oil. The soft scent of myrrh began to fill the room, replacing the stench given off by their previous play. Akenmose made a mental note to order large supplies of incense stolen from the ample stores of the temple. This tiny room kept the smell within, unlike his spacious palace on the delta. Ah, well, one must adjust.

"We must not let the God's Wives pass their ridiculously liberal views into law. You'll help me, won't you, Kawa? After all, you want to be the youngest High Priest ever in the temple of Amun, don't you? I can make that happen, once I am in control."

"It must not happen, Master."

"We must have our goals in perfect agreement, then. I am sure you'll agree I am older and wiser in the ways of court intrigue. You'll let me lead you in this, of course?" Akenmose began to rub the oil on himself, enjoying the sensation of awakening it to action again, like a soldier is called to attention.

Kawa could not keep his eyes off the motion of Akenmose's hand. "Of course, Master," echoed.

"Agreed then," Akenmose said silkily. "Our secondary goal is to enact the end of the God's Wives' power over the throne and the priesthood. They grow rich, taking money and goods from the gods and their priests. Especially that so-called Pharaoh Hatshepsut. It's an affront to the gods for her to act and dress like a man. The gods will help us strike her down. Listen and spy upon The Mother of the God's Wives. The gods will provide us with the information to destroy the heretic women."

Kawa squirmed in anticipation. "Yes, Master," he moaned softly.

Akenmose took a handful of oil and stood behind Kawa's now-writhing body. Oiling the still-pink buttocks from his earlier slap, he chatted on, unconcerned about Kawa's desires. "Our primary goal must be the control of my two nephews. The heirs to the throne must be taught by men, don't you agree?"

"Agreed, Master," and the boy's pitiful moans took on a note of pleading, "Please, Master...use me. I beg it."

"Really, dear boy. You're insatiable. Fortunately, so am I," Akenmose said. He savored the moment the tip of his manhood poised and teased the tiny anal opening.

Akenmose thrust home without regard to the boy's ability to take him all in at once. His fantasies were filled with images of his nephews performing this same service as Kawa now provided. He got into his rhythm, enjoying the boy's sounds of mingled pleasure and pain, and envisioned it was one of his nephews below him, impaled. Oh, yes, say about twelve summers old. He preferred that age. Not technically twins, but close enough. Yes, while the other watched in fear, knowing his turn was next. He could wait for that.

After all, Kawa was definitely too old, no matter how sweet and pretty. Akenmose was hard on his toys. No matter, the boy would be dead in a year. And by then, Akenmose would have the world at his fingertips.

* * * * *

"Hello, my fierce warrior!" Hati exclaimed as she burst into the strategy room where Senmut awaited her.

"Fierce warrior? I think not, my Pharaoh. I am retired from battle and am now but a humble scribe," Senmut gave his Pharaoh a mocking bow.

Hati muttered something that sounded remarkably like, "Bullshit!" causing Senmut to grin. "If that is so, my poor humble scribe, then why are those muscles still so well-defined and delicious-looking?"

Senmut laughed aloud before answering, "I would be a fool if I were to waste my training by allowing myself to get flabby. No knowledge is ever wasted unless you allow it. There may come a day when even a humble scribe may be forced to take up arms to defend Egypt." He paused, and added, "I try to join the guards several times a ten-day in their sword practice." Senmut was rather proud that he'd found a way to stay in shape.

"Well, I have need of some of the rest of your training, if you would be so kind." Hati walked to the sand table and gestured to the counters laid out in the sand. "I do not like to appear an idiot, so before my generals see this, come take a look and see if you can find any errors in my strategy, please."

Reluctantly, Senmut stepped forward. He did not want to be any closer to Hati than necessary. Ever since his conversation with Pythia, he had worn the torque and bracelets, but avoided standing too close to Hati for fear that she would hear the lust and love in his mind. To cover his growing unease, he joked, "So this is why you asked to meet me here instead of over the *mehen* table? And here I thought that was all I was good for!"

Hati looked at him from across the sand table with a very serious expression and replied, "Actually I had two reasons. The first is as I stated. It's true that I have played war games on the sand table since I was little. However, it grieves me to know that now I play with the lives of men not little wooden disks. I get nervous."

Senmut did not move to comfort her the way he wanted to, but held himself rigidly still. "It gladdens my heart to hear my Pharaoh treat those counters as the men they are, with lives and loved one's instead of mere numbers. It means you have a good heart, Hati, and you're a good Pharaoh."

"Well, I hope you'll think your Pharaoh has a good heart, and isn't just a meddler, but I feel I must speak." Hati took the deep breath and plunged in, "Senmut, you're broadcasting such lust and sexual frustration that you're disturbing my sleep. I do not know whom the lust is for, and I do not want to know, but I have called for a priestess of Qadesh to visit your room this evening. I hope you'll forgive my intrusion." Hati turned her large golden eyes up to his and wrung her hands.

Stunned, Senmut stood there in silence for a moment. He could not and would not tell her she herself was the object of his lust. "I am sorry to disturb you and Pythia's sleep," he choked out, then regretted his words instantly.

"Oh? So, you disturbed Pythia as well, and she spoke with you? Why did you ignore her advice? It isn't good for your health to not enjoy sexual contact," she admonished, shaking a finger at him. "If you will not pay for a common whore, then all you had to do was visit the temple of Qadesh on any holiday to get relief! That is what they are there for, to see to the health of the people! You know that!"

Stung, Senmut replied, "Of course I know it. I just – haven't been – interested."

"Not interested my foot! Your not-interest colors my dreams every night, though I cannot see whom it is you long for! If it's a case of unrequited lust, that explains why you are so distracted and snappish of late. Now, you'll empty your balls tonight!" Hati grinned, and added, "Pharaoh's orders."

Senmut knew when to give in gracefully. If he argued further, Hati might discover more than she bargained for learning. He gave a mocking bow of servitude and ground out, "Very well. I will do as you command. Who knows? Perhaps I will at least no longer be so ill tempered, hmm? I am sorry about that, truly."

Mollified, Hati smiled winningly at him. "Oh, good! You're not angry with me. I, too, have stuck my nose in your private affairs."

Senmut couldn't help it. He tugged at a braid on the wig she wore to cover her baldness until it tipped back and she was forced to snatch at it with a cry. "You always were a meddlesome brat. By the way, why are you bothering with a hot, smelly wig? You're not out in the sun like a common laborer, so you do not need a head covering."

Hati sniffled and flushed with embarrassment. "I feel so naked without my hair. I look stupid and ugly bald. My ears stick out," she said in small voice.

Senmut rolled his eyes skyward and prayed to Amun for patience and strength. Here again was that thin line between a friend and a lover. Gripping the table edge firmly, he shook his head. "You're wrong, Hati. You're beautiful even without your long black hair. Isis blessed you with cheekbones that could carve stone, skin that is flawless, red lips that are full and lush, and golden eyes that cause others to stare in wonder. Your hair was only covering that beauty. Now it's there for all the world to see."

"I still have to dress as a man. I feel so silly with a false beard," she whimpered.

Senmut laughed aloud, startling the guards into opening the doors and checking that all was well. Only after the guards had reassured themselves and closed the door did he say, "Do you think a tunic and kilt disguise your curves? I assure you they do not. Moreover, your hips sway like the palms that line the Nile.

"No one truly believes you have become a man. But they accept that you must dress like one and act like one to be Pharaoh, since the enemies of Egypt must believe it's a man who rules Egypt." Senmut laughed. "I truly believe that the people of Egypt consider it a grand joke."

Hati's hands flew to her bound breasts beneath her tunic. "It's so painful. I fear they will become as flat as empty pouches to be mashed so day after day."

Senmut clenched his hands tightly around the table edge to keep from offering to massage them back to roundness. "Do they not spring back to fullness every night? I think you have little to fear."

"Oh, dear, now I have made you lusty again. The object of your desire must be truly blessed to make you clench the table until your knuckles turn white!" She grabbed the box of counters and waved it. "Here! We'll distract you with strategy until the priestess

visits you tonight. Look here! You see that this is lower Nubia, between the first cataract and the oasis of Kurkur. You know it well, since you commanded forces at the first cataract for so long. We've a trade route being attacked by raiders. How is it best to send men to defend the trade route and the oasis without depleting our guardians at the southern gate?"

* * * * *

Senmut slipped into Hati's apartment, and softly closed the door. Hati had heard the sounds of the guards talking to someone, and had turned in anticipation of more trouble needing the Pharaoh's attention. Despite the late hour, it was a very common occurrence.

Hati was fighting her own envy of the priestess of Qadesh all evening. She wanted to be the one in Senmut's bed, and no one else. She was praying for a distraction to keep her mind off her envy, and trying to laugh at herself for weaving this web.

She'd been forced to do something. Senmut's nightly intrusions upon her dreams had been such she'd been forced to invoke the disciplines of the God's Wives to block out all emotions for many weeks. It was wearying, and her attempts to shield herself were failing fast. She couldn't keep out strong emotions anymore, and so had done the distasteful act of intruding on Senmut's privacy. It was galling.

It was not until Senmut stepped into the light provided by the one lamp on the table, that Hati saw he was bathed in sweat. Her pleased greeting changed to a cry of alarm. "Senmut! What has happened?"

She jumped up from where she sat at the table, and ran to him. The first thing she noticed beside the beads of sweat, was that he was shaking. The fear poured off him in waves.

"I...uh," Senmut stuttered.

"Did the priestess visit you? What happened?" Hati queried anxiously.

"Yes, she came," Senmut began. The fear was stronger now.

Hati took his hand, but he snatched it back and began to pace. Hati marveled that calm, serene Senmut was so agitated.

"Calm yourself, Senmut. Here, drink some wine." Without waiting for his assent, she poured a large goblet. Senmut took the goblet and drained it within a nod of thanks.

"Thank you Hati. That does help."

"Now for the third time, what happened? The priestess came. Did you get relief?"

"No, I didn't."

Gods, it was like getting her hair plucked. One-by-one, painfully and carefully extracting what was needed. "What went wrong?"

Now Senmut gave Hati a tortured look, and turned away. The fear he was emanating now combined with embarrassment. This only puzzled Hati more.

Facing the wall, Senmut muttered, "I couldn't."

"You couldn't? But, was she not beautiful?"

"Yes." Senmut put his hands behind his back and studied the wall as if it contained the spells from *The Book of the Dead*.

"Was she not skilled?"

"Yes. She tried her best. But I couldn't."

"Well? Why not?"

An uncomfortable silence fell for three heartbeats. "She was not you."

The fear magnified, and Hati realized that Senmut feared she would reject him. Here was a man who wanted her for herself, and nothing more.

One who found her more beautiful, even with her bald head, than the lovely and skilled priestesses of Qadesh. "I am not trained in the sensual arts as a priestess of Qadesh, nor as beautiful."

Senmut came over and took her hand. "You're more beautiful than they, to me. Skill without love is drier than the desert. I would much rather an open, honest love than the skilled performance of one who cares nothing for me."

"Oh," was all Hati could say. She was so confused by this turn of events that she was speechless.

"And, I must confess. I have loved you since that night you danced for Pharaoh, Hati. You were so beautiful, and a temptation the gods themselves could not ignore. When the Pharaoh chose you, I tried to be jealous and angry. I couldn't. He was too good and kind, and I felt like his friend. My arms ached to hold you while I fled deep into the desert and tried to work off my love. I did not succeed."

"Mo said he'd share me with you," Hati said in an awed voice. "He must have known your feelings. I have been afraid to speak of my love for you, for fear of betraying Mo's memory. And all along, he knew."

"I am common-born, Hati. I cannot marry you. I would have taken what crumbs the Pharaoh and you threw me, with joy. I will never understand how he contemplated sharing you." He pulled her hand up to kiss her fingers, one-by-one.

"You're noble now. Mo saw to that. You act more noble than some born to it, I might add."

"I am still common in my heart. It is wrong. I am just a common scribe, no matter what my title." His wry smile matched the irony in his voice.

Hati got an impish look on her face. "But you would be the lover to your Pharaoh, now? Without gifts or further titles?" Hope flared, and she ruthlessly squashed it.

"Titles and riches are nothing to me, Hati. Other women are like the cold statues of gold that are scattered throughout the palace. They do not tempt me. It's you, or no one."

"No one? Well, I did order you to make love tonight, did I not?" That feline smile of anticipation Senmut remembered from the dance was back on her face. "If no one else will do, then it must be me who sees to your health." She wound her arms around his neck. "We must obey Pharaoh's orders," she smiled. Then she put her face up for a kiss.

"And I must see to yours. You, too, have been long without. It's not good for you, either," Senmut teased. The joy and anticipation radiated off him. Then he bent down and gave her what she desired.

Chapter Eleven

Senmut lingered over the kiss, much to Hati's delight. She tasted the wine on his tongue as it plunged in to tangle with hers. A deep, aching need she had not known she possessed settled in the pit of her stomach, and a small ball of heat bloomed lower. The pleasant male aroma of Senmut's skin teased her senses, a scent she'd not realized she'd missed. Keeping her eyes shut to better enjoy the essential maleness of him, she allowed her hands to roam from his neck and down his arms to the hard muscles that could hold a sword as easily as he held a stylus.

She was crushed up against Senmut's body. His need for her pounded against her mind in time with her heartbeats, and she lost the small doubt that being with Senmut would be a lesser experience for her without the mind-meld. He would never miss what he did not know could exist, but she would get the full experience of what he could offer.

A distant tugging was followed by the loss of her kilt to the floor, and she put one hand between them to perform the same service for Senmut. His kilt fluttered down to pool at their feet.

"Bala will be angered at the piles on the floor," Hati admonished softly.

"We'll pick them up later. I promise," was the reply, as his tongue left a damp trail from her shoulder to her breast. "I assure you, they have not diminished in size since you have had to flatten them down every day," he murmured. One hand cupped the breast he was not attending to.

She never noticed the arm snake behind her thighs until she found herself in the air and carried to the large bed.

"A platform for lovemaking, this is. I have fantasized every time we played *mehen* in here about putting you on it, naked and warm." He put her carefully down on the platform, and knelt on the other side, his hands stroking her while he admired. She saw herself through his eyes and mind, this graceful and naked woman more beautiful than any other, to him.

It was true that the bed was indeed a large platform with a thick pallet stuffed with soft materials to lie upon. Hati had covered it with silken fabrics of blue, green and gold. "The Pharaoh is expected to make love every night, my darling. Are you up to the challenge?"

"I must do as my Pharaoh commands, beloved. If she commands me to her bed every night, I will do my best to please her."

"Then remove the rest of your clothes and come here," she replied throatily, touching his torque as if to remove it for him. He pulled back until she couldn't touch it.

"No, my Pharaoh who is also the love of my life. These will not come off by my own vow for the next fifteen years. They contain a treasure so priceless I dare not let them off my body except to bathe."

"My curiosity eats me. What treasure do they contain?" What treasure would a man who professed to be a lowly scribe possess?

"Your hair."

"My what?" Hati sat up and stared at the torque in the lamplight. It was gold, with inlaid crystals as clear as water in huge rectangles.

Senmut fingered his torque. "Beneath each crystal is a strand or two of your hair you lost to become Pharaoh for your son's sake. I will wear your hair for you until the time you can grow your own again. It's a secret treasure I guard for you."

"I will not ask how you got them. I can well guess. It's a gift beyond price that you do this for me. You save my hair for me," Hati breathed in wonder, her eyes filling with tears. "You really do love me."

"Yes, I really do love you, Hati. Let me show you how much." He picked up one of her feet, and kissed each toe. "I love the ground you walk upon, and worship these ridiculously small feet." Hati was forced to lie back down as he lifted her leg and nibbled his way to the back of her knee. "I love these knees, which kneel before the gods with the same reverence I do."

Hati stuffed her fist into her mouth to still her cries. This was not the time to bring the guards barreling into the room. It was her last conscious thought before her world exploded.

"Oh, gods. You're even better at this when you're not drugged," Hati panted when her mind and body slowed. "But I thought you only needed a woman—any woman—that night."

Senmut's head snapped up, with his eyes wide. "It was really you that night? My dream wraith was you?"

Hati's smile was slow and secretive. "Mo ordered it. He wanted you to take my maidenhead and save him the pain of it. He told me after we were wed he'd hoped I would take advantage of his hint that no man should see me. You did not seem to mind that you could not see me. I was afraid you might be angry it was I, instead of some servant or paid whore. That has been my secret." It was a lie. She had been afraid he wouldn't want to make love with his childhood friend.

Senmut cleared his throat. "It seems we both held a secret. The night isn't yet done. Perhaps more secrets will be revealed."

Hati held out her arms. "Only if you get up here and do your best to split me like a melon. You have not yet obeyed Pharaoh's orders. And do not stop, or I will have you flogged."

There was a distinctly masculine chuckle, and Senmut moved with alacrity. "I hear and obey, my beloved. Let's see if I can indeed split you in two."

To her great surprise, her mind melded with Senmut's, and she felt every thrust as if it were her own. What was more, she felt he too had melded, and cried out at the doubled ecstasy, as he shot his seed deep within her. The joining was easily as powerful as what she had experienced with Mo, but the shock did not stop the waves of pleasure coursing through her. From both perspectives, the Hati/Senmut meld continued the physical and mental joining until both were satiated.

* * * * *

Senmut closed the door softly, and hoped the guards ignored him.

"Thank you, Commander," came a soft whisper from the one on the left.

Senmut stopped and turned to see the two guards both smiling in the lamplight. "I'll assume you both approve?" He didn't need the guard's disapproving glances. That led to gossip.

The one on the right laughed so softly it was barely audible. "Approve? Set's Black Balls, Commander! I am envious," he said with the easy manner all soldiers had with one another.

"Ignore him, Sir. Anyone is envious when you tangle with a woman and can make her happy like that," the left guard grinned. "Just because we cannot, doesn't mean we do not know a few things."

"We say, good for you, Sir," the right guard put in. "We'll keep your secret, and pass it on to the other guards so they know to let you in without question, at any time."

"Um, well, thank you," Senmut replied. The two guards saluted with fists to their hearts, and Senmut went to bed smiling in wonderment.

* * * * *

The stars were already twinkling in the sky when Pythia stepped from the chariot with the aid of her lover and guard, Lt. Sheshi. Though he was a eunuch, Sheshi had kindled something in her heart that had very little to do with sex. He did not care for his own non-existent needs, but was tender and giving toward her in a way that no other man had shown. Pythia couldn't resist a tiny show of affection for this tall soldier, and slid her hand up his forearm before she stepped circumspectly away.

Sheshi waited until the chariot was led away by an acolyte of the temple of Maat.

"Do you have to go in immediately, my love?"

"I have a few moments, I think. Why?" She wished she could give him hours.

"May we speak freely in the gardens here?" He nodded toward a small path leading to a fountain.

"What is it that cannot be said in my rooms at the palace tonight?" she asked, laughing.

"I cannot wait another moment, that's why. Something compels me to speak."

"Say it then, and have done. What burdens you so?" Pythia skipped a happy step forward to pluck a fragrant blossom. Never before had she been so in love as she was with this man.

Sheshi took a deep breath, "Pythia, I want to ask the Pharaoh to give you to me. Would you accept this?" He hesitated when she stood upright with wide eyes and open mouth. "I know I cannot give you children, but..."

He never got to finish that sentence before Pythia's mouth covered his. "Yes, yes, yes. A thousand times, yes!" she murmured against his lips when the kiss ended.

Suddenly proper and formal, he put her aside. "Then I shall ask the Pharaoh tomorrow. If she gives you to me, then we'll make plans. I will take you to The Mother now for your lessons and wait for you, as usual."

Pouting only for show, Pythia's eyes gleamed with happiness. Here was a man who loved her for herself, and nothing more. She could still serve in the palace as Hati's guard, but tend Sheshi's relatively small home at night. Well, small for a noble. Like her, he preferred simplicity, with a few small comforts.

Her mind was still full of happy dreams when she walked sedately through the doors to The Mother's sanctum. Instead of The Mother waiting, as usual, in her chair, the room was dark and seemingly empty.

Feeling her way in the dark, Pythia went to light the lamp next to the chair and wait. Before she reached it, she stumbled over something large in the dark and heard a small, breathless moan.

"Sheshi! Sheshi!" she shouted. "Bring a lamp! Hurry!"

A moment later, the room flooded with light. Pythia already knelt on the floor, cradling The Mother's head in her lap. With Sheshi was a young priest of Amun. The priest held the lamp while Sheshi expertly examined The Mother for wounds.

"Pythia? Is that you, dearling?" The Mother wheezed.

"Yes, Mother. What has happened?" Pythia bent closer to hear The Mother's barely audible reply.

"I fear my journey to the underworld begins this very night. My chest pains me. I must name my successor as Bala before I go, and give her a secret. You'll tell her, won't you?"

"Yes, Mother," Pythia sobbed. "Please do not go! You are the only mother I have ever known, and I treated you so badly! I have not made it up to you!"

Sheshi stood and took the lamp from the boy, who stood there looking so impassive it was offensive. "The least we can do is leave them and go find help. Put the lamp down and come on!"

The boy reluctantly put down the lamp, and only after Sheshi pulled him out of the room did the boy give him a filthy look. "They might say something important!" the boy snarled.

"If they do, it's God's Wife business. Run! Go find the physicians. I will stand guard. I cannot disobey my orders to stay with Lady Pythia, and you can find the physicians faster. What are you waiting for? Run, you imbecile!" Sheshi swatted the boy with the flat of his blade before the boy ran. Sheshi muttered about the arrogance of adolescents who think they rule the world, and shut the door.

Now that silence once again fell, Pythia strained her ears to hear The Mother's words. She took a corner of her robes to wipe the sweat filming The Mother's skin. "Someone will come soon, Mother. Please stay with me."

A ghost of a smile flitted briefly across The Mother's face. "For the moment. I have a secret you must pass on to Bala, no matter if I live or die this night. Bala must know, for it's the one lie I must rectify before I face Horus and the soul-eater."

"You, Mother? Lie? I do not believe it!" Pythia teased slyly, for it was well known the God's Wives lied, traded gold or their bodies, or even used the rare sorcery to do what was needed for Egypt.

"Hush, my child, and listen. I told but one lie that I regret, even though it was for Egypt at the time. I destroyed three innocent lives with a lie, and now I can make it up to two of them. Bala told me she spoke to you of her husband and son." The Mother stopped to pant, and visibly fought for life.

"Yes, Mother. Do you know where they are buried in the sands?" Pythia well remembered the spate of tears Bala had shed over her dead family. It was possibly the only time Bala had ever cried. Bala's self-control was near absolute.

"I lied, Pythia. I lied to Bala so she might stay in service through a long and difficult assignment only she could do. I told her they were dead, when they were very much alive at the time. I told the husband she was dead, when she lived. I did not think him worthy of her, common man of the sword that he was. I was wrong."

Pythia gasped, while The Mother gathered a little more strength. Where were the physicians? "What was his name, Mother?"

"That worthy common soldier was Hal-Ra, and the son was Senmut, now the Royal Tutor. Will you reunite mother and son, for me? I will have to beg Hal-Ra's forgiveness when I see him, I am afraid."

"No, Mother!! You must live! You must! Please do not die!" But Pythia's gift felt her slipping through her fingers like fine sand. "Sheshi!" But received no answer from the door.

Pythia, in desperation, did the unthinkable. She melded with The Mother, hoping her own life would give strength to the dying woman. Instead, she found herself sucked down into the same black pool that coalesced around The Mother's mind, pulling them both down into darkness.

The lamplight stabbed her like knives when Pythia regained consciousness. "I really must stop finding myself on the floor with a knot on my forehead," she muttered, disoriented.

Something heavy hindered her movement. Pythia sat up and found herself looking into the peaceful face of The Mother's cooling body. Weeping, she tried to arrange The Mother's body in the traditional crossed arms, but the arms were stiff and did not move easily. Shoving at the heavy weight, Pythia managed to get herself out from under The Mother. She barely saw through her tears, and her eyes wouldn't focus.

"A mission. I have a mission. What is it?" Memory returned, slowly. "Bala! I must tell Bala." She had to get home to the palace. "Where is Sheshi?"

"Here," came a masculine voice from the darkness. It was not Sheshi's tenor, but the oily tones she knew and hated.

Lamplight flared more strongly, and Pythia found herself looking where Lord Akenmose pointed. There, on the floor, in a pool of blood from a slashed throat, was her beloved Sheshi. His eyes stared blankly at the ceiling. Pythia sobbed in shock. First The Mother, and now Sheshi. Her world shattered.

"You females are so weak. So, what if your lover is dead? You can find another. Kawa was quick, considering your guard did not suspect treachery from such a sweet-faced boy. You interrupted my plans tonight, but Kawa here tells me you know the secrets The Mother intended to pass on tonight. You'll tell me, won't you?"

"No! That is for the new Mother to hear, and no other," Pythia snarled.

Akenmose sighed, "I knew you'd be troublesome. Very well. We'll move to more—comfortable—surroundings to discuss this. Take her."

The boy priest, who had been with Sheshi earlier stepped from the shadows, wiping his bloody knife on a rag. Pythia readied herself for a fight, but was too weak to do more than struggle. She attempted a mindcall, but her head hurt to try. The boy trussed her up and stuffed a rag in her mouth to stifle any cries she now thought to make. "What of the guard's body, Master?" Kawa asked.

"He is unimportant to us. Leave him. He will be found in the morning and cause a distraction. You were clever to get behind him and slice his throat so he could not sound an alarm."

Slung like a sack of grain over the boy's shoulders, Pythia did not have a good view of the route they took, but knew the area where she was taken. Had she herself not hid among the sacks and bundles in the storerooms as a child?

It was not until she was flung down roughly on a bale of un-carded cotton that she got a better look at her surroundings. Lord Akenmose took her jaw in his hands and forced her to look at him. "And now, I think we can begin to put you in a more tractable mood to speak." Briefly, his eyes flicked to Kawa, who ran around lighting incense and lamps in the room. "After you have finished that, you may go to the palace as we originally planned, Kawa. Return to me when you have administered the potion."

“Yes, Master,” the boy grinned. “But I do not understand, Master. Why not poison the Royal Tutor outright and be done?”

“Idiot! You have requested to learn scribing and begged to be assigned to the Royal Tutor for one reason. If the Royal Tutor is ill, they will send him to the Palace of Malgatta to recover and await his students there. You’ll then be in a position to kill the so-called Royal Twins when I give the order.” Lord Akenmose released a stunned and horrified Pythia to fall backward on the bale.

“You see, Kawa, I have plans I choose not to disclose in front of this bitch, but be assured that all will soon be revealed. It will be a busy night for us both. Now go! You have delayed long enough.”

Kawa’s rebellious mutters were just audible. “I do not see where she matters. She’ll be dead by morning.” But he wisely fled when Akenmose stepped forward with an annoyed look on his face.

Once they were alone, Pythia gave Lord Akenmose a fulminating gaze of pure hatred. Akenmose just chuckled. “A flawed tool, but the best I have under the circumstances. His impetuosity and love of killing will be his undoing, eventually. But, for the moment he is useful.” His gaze lifted and drew her attention to an odd configuration of a wooden structure leaning against one wall. It looked like a giant X. “Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Convincing you to tell me all you know. I do hope you’re stubborn. It will be at least an hour before Kawa can return, and I do not want to get bored.”

The beating commenced.

Chapter Twelve

Senmut rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the clay tablets before him. "This leading a double life as Royal Tutor and Pharaoh's lover will be my undoing." He glanced at the open doors to the balcony of his room. "It must be late. Where is that boy?"

A few minutes later, his new apprentice scribe burst into the room with a pot and a mug. "I am sorry it took so long, Lord Senmut," Kawa apologized. "The temple supplies were well-hidden in the stillroom and I couldn't find the herbalist brother."

The kid was so earnest, Senmut smiled. "It's all right, Kawa. I suppose the brother retired early. He's three days older than creation. I swear it. It was good of you to suggest this memory potion and offer to go get it for me. Does it need to steep? It looks very hot."

"No, Lord Senmut. It's ready now. Soon, you'll be wide awake and able to focus on your lesson plans." The boy smiled, as eager to please as a puppy.

"Ah, good. I am having trouble deciding how best to present strategy lessons to the royal princes. They aren't likely to see battle, but it's good to know." Senmut reached for the tea, and sniffed. "What is it? It smells like flowers!" Something twanged in his head, but he ignored the unexplainable twinge of fear.

"Eyebright, Lord Senmut. I had commerce once with some Canaanite physicians. They told me of this memory aid. When I found it in the storeroom of the Amun brothers, I could not believe my luck."

"Canaanites, huh? Impressive. Perhaps the brothers traded for a plant for the gardens. Let's see how well it works. I think my head is muddier than the Nile at flood." With that, he toasted his bright new apprentice and chugged down the brew. "Ugh! Could you not sweeten it with honey, Kawa? It's worse than bad wine!"

Kawa rubbed his eyes sleepily before answering, "I am sorry, Lord Senmut. It's made with vinegared wine I am told, and honey lessens the result. Forgive me." Then he yawned behind his hand.

"Ah, here I am making you run errands in the dead of night. Go back to the temple to sleep, Kawa. But be here in the morning with the sun's rising. We must finish our lesson plans and be prepared to ride to Malgatta with the setting sun."

Kawa blinked owlishly. "Yes, Lord Senmut. Shall I leave the pot?"

"Yes, do. I will see if I can finish it before I take my rest. Go on." He gave the boy a kindly push. "Get some sleep. Just because I choose to work through the night does not mean you must." Senmut poured himself another mug while the boy bowed himself out of the room and shut the doors.

It was not long before Senmut noticed the first effects of the draught, before he had finished the second mug of the foul brew. The lamplight seemed brighter, and the paper edges sharper. "Perhaps there is something to this stuff," he grinned. However, when he reached for the pot, his hand could not close around the handle. He had reached to the left of it, and missed the vessel entirely. *How strange.* Senmut decided he would wait until the potion took more effect, if he was having trouble finding a pot on the table in front of him.

But, the problem grew worse. The lamplight became too bright to look at, so he snuffed a few out. Soon, he was working with only one lamp, and even then, it seemed too bright and even painful. Yes, his mind was sharp again, but now he could barely see. Something was wrong. A headache blossomed between his eyes when he looked anywhere near the light. "How ironic that a priest of the sun god Amun cannot bear the light. This isn't funny. I'd better call for Bala or Pythia. They know herbs. Perhaps one is still awake."

Senmut tried to stand, intending to go to the door and ask one of the guards to fetch Bala or Pythia. But, when he was almost erect, his balance shifted and he fell awkwardly down on his table. Lying there with one elbow in wet clay was undignified. He slid back down into the scribe's traditional seat. "Guards! Guards!" he called.

The door opened immediately, and even the faint light from the hall stabbed him like a hot pick in each eye. With an involuntary cry of pain, he covered his eyes to block the light. "Sir?" he heard. "What is it?"

"Fetch Bala or Lady Pythia, Lieutenant. Something is wrong with the memory tea I was given," he ordered. "And close the door. The light is painful."

Footsteps and the sound of the door closing signaled the guard left. Breathing and the scent of onions told him another guard remained. "Lady Pythia and Lieutenant Sheshi have not returned from the temple of Maat, Sir. It may be that Lady Pythia has chosen to remain overnight. Lieutenant Huni must find Bala, Sir."

"Good. For some reason I trust Bala more. Help me to my bed, Sergeant. I am also unable to get my balance, but I would imagine Bala will wish to have a look at me."

They had no more arranged Senmut on the bed when a bang of the door signified that Bala had arrived. Senmut dared not open his eyes to check, and the slam of the door made his head ache to the point that he considered briefly cutting off his own head. He clutched his head with one hand, and kept the other over his eyes.

A cool, soft hand touched his forehead. "Head ache?" It was a relief to hear Bala's voice.

"Gods, yes!" Senmut moaned. "And I cannot bear the light."

"Anything else?"

"Dizzy when I try to stand. Noise is too loud. But it's mainly the light."

"Hati, find a dark cloth and cover his eyes. Senmut, where is the potion the guard says you drank?" Bala's voice was soft, but brisk.

"It's on the table, in a clay pot. I drank two mugs. My apprentice said it was eyebright."

A cool, wet cloth lay gently on the hand covering his eyes. "It's my red scarf," Hati said gently. "You can remove your hand now."

Blessed relief came with the cool cloth. Senmut sighed, and let both hands fall to his side. "Have you found it, Bala?"

"Yes. It's as I suspected. The boy made it with vinegared wine that hadn't been boiled first. He probably boiled them together. It's a common mistake. Do not blame the child."

"I won't, then. How long will I suffer with this inability to tolerate light?"

"A few days, probably. No more."

"Damn! I need to meet the royal princes at Malgatta. I planned to leave on the morrow. I won't be able to bear the light to drive now."

"You should still go to Malgatta. It will be a good place to recover, and you can still teach, once the headache fades. I will send Lieutenant Huni to drive you. Tonight, while there is no sun to cause you pain. You can be there long before the sun rises, if we hurry." Hati rearranged the cloth on his forehead to her liking.

"A good idea. He will be able to stand in an hour, if we give him lots of water to piss out as much of the tea as possible," Bala put in.

"I'll prepare a chariot, Serenity," Lieutenant Huni's voice offered.

"Make it happen, Lieutenant," Hati commanded. "Sergeant, pack Lord Senmut's things for him."

"It's already done, Divine One. Other than his tablets here on the table, all is in readiness."

"And what of my apprentice, Kawa? I sent him to the temple to sleep. He was to return in the morning." Senmut wasn't happy about leaving his bright, young apprentice behind.

"I'll send him with the baggage caravan that was leaving with the royal princes' things tomorrow. He can ride on one of the camels. I will bet he's never done that before," Hati chuckled softly.

Pounding footsteps signaled the return of Lt. Huni. "Divine One," he panted, "It seems that Chancellor Nehsy also planned to leave for Malgatta in the morning. He'd already ordered a chariot, and was still supervising the arrangement of his packs. He and his guards will ride with Lord Senmut, if you wish it. They will be ready within the hour." Senmut assumed she nodded, because his footsteps again pounded out of sight.

Bala sniffed, and commented, "Well, well! Nehsy' fussy need for details under his personal control has once again proved useful." Her strong arm lifted Senmut's dizzy head from the bed. "Drink this, Senmut. It will make you piss worse than any stallion in the stable, but should allow you to stand with dignity in the chariot instead of riding like baggage on a horse."

* * * * *

Akenmose threw down the bloody whip he'd used with expertise on Pythia. She heard it hit the floor, but it offered her no relief. Her back and lower body screamed, there was a rivulet of blood perilously close to the one eye not swollen shut, and her nose was broken, she was sure. She could barely breathe.

"You're indeed stubborn," Akenmose laughed. "I must compliment you for that. But then again, I am just warming up."

He moved to her left, out of sight of her one remaining eye. The smell of hot metal told her what was in store, and she closed her eye briefly to pray for strength.

The door to the storeroom burst open, and Pythia guessed that Kawa had returned from the sound of a new harsh panting. "Master!" Kawa's voice cried exultantly, "He took it! I stayed long enough to hear the guard calling for the sorceress Bala, or this bitch-sorceress. Then I ran."

Sorceress. Something filtered through her pain, with that word. If she focused through the pain, she'd think of it.

"Excellent, Kawa. Now, close the door. We wouldn't want anyone to hear Lady Pythia's screams, now would we?"

"Oh, Master! You're going to use the blades?" Kawa's voice dripped with pleasure and awe. "Master, may I help?"

"Of course, dear boy. We'll soon get her little secrets out. You may hold the salt for me. In fact, why do not you start rubbing it on her wounds?"

A shuffling of feet was the only warning Pythia received. Her screams echoed and bounced in the tiny chamber as the salt burned inside the wounds left by the whip.

The hot knives followed. Burning and cauterizing her flesh all at once, tiny pieces of her skin were cut away, and then salt rubbed harshly into the open wounds. There was no darkness to swallow her this time. She told all she knew.

Akenmose cut her limp body down and threw her down on the bale. Kawa re-tied her swollen and bloody wrists back together, but she only whimpered.

"All has fallen out even better than I'd hoped, Kawa!" Akenmose crowed. "The gods are certainly with me in this. Whereas Lord Senmut was just a pawn, now he is a wonderful target for revenge. By killing him along with the princes, I can strike a deep blow in both the God's Wives' new Mother, and the bitch-queen Hatshepsut." Pacing around, he fingered his prince's lock. "Ah, yes, I can make this happen all at once."

Pythia strained to hear around the roaring in her ears. "I have failed my sisters," she whimpered to herself.

"Make what happen, Master?"

How dare that little bastard act so servile? He was more sadistic than even Lord Akenmose, reveling in her pain in a way she sensed even while in agony. *Wait. My control of my gift is returning. The pain is calming. I can feel it.* Pythia instituted her long-

ago lessons in calm and meditation. They came hard while her skin burned, and every breath was agony.

Only now, when she was no longer engrossed in the pain from her beating and torture, could Pythia think again. Before, she was too dazed from sharing The Mother's mind meld. She'd had no time to think of lies and false information to lead Akenmose astray. The only thing her gift had done while she was under torture was enhance the joy and sexual pleasure Akenmose and Kawa had derived from her screams. It had made the torture a thousand times worse to know how much they had enjoyed her pain. Kawa, even now, was near bursting with the need for release, and she could not shut it out.

"Never mind that now," Akenmose laughed. "I'll explain later. This is what you'll do, Kawa. Make Lady Pythia write a note telling Bala she'll spend the night with The Mother, since it's so late. Throw some water on this bitch; smear her back with honey, whatever it takes. Do not deliver it yourself. Have some little urchin apprentice here in the temple take it. Here's a coin to see to it he hurries. I have decided to keep Pythia for a hostage as a back up. Do what you will, but keep her alive."

Lord Akenmose came over and caressed Pythia's head. "You'll write that note for me, won't you?" he purred.

Pythia pretended more pain than she truly felt, now that she'd invoked the discipline of the God's Wives. She moaned, "Yes. Please do not hurt me anymore."

"Good. As long as she obeys, do not torture her, Kawa."

Akenmose swept over and threw on a cloak. "I am going to Malgatta. I will be back in the morning, and you'll be able to worship me as the new heir." He strode to the door. His footsteps echoed down the hall.

Kawa brought Pythia a clay tablet, probably stolen from the scribes. Pythia wrote slowly and painfully in hieratic, exactly as requested, adding only a few lines.

My Sister, I am staying with The Mother. I will stay in the same rooms I used to play in as a child, isn't that nice? Would you be kind enough to water my iris, marigolds, and dianthus for me until I return? Pythia

Kawa read the note aloud. "Oh, how touching. She's a prisoner, and she worries about her stupid flowers. You females are weird," he stated.

Pythia stayed precisely where she was, pretending to moan in agony. When Kawa came back, he announced, "Okay, messenger is on his way. It will be delivered soon."

Yes, message delivered. Dianthus for treachery, Iris for a message that cannot be written, and marigolds for cruelty and imprisonment. Even my location, for these rooms were where I played as a child.

Kawa's soft chuckle caught her attention. He had a pot of oil in his hand. "I am ordered not to torture you, but we can still have some fun. You're not the beauty with golden eyes you once were, but I can make do."

Oh, sisters, do hurry.

* * * * *

Bala, Kara and Hati watched the chariots pull out of the courtyard and disappear into the night. In the end, Senmut had managed to walk upright as planned, but only after a full blindfold had completely covered his eyes. Word had come from Nehsy that the three royal students of Senmut, Ahmose, Dedumose and Mentuhotep, had returned from their hunting in Deshret a few days early, and awaited their tutor at Malgatta.

Kara, always a pre-dawn riser, had awakened in time to help purge Senmut and see the men off. She was the one who noted the small boy run in the courtyard, clutching a tablet. Taking the message into the small audience chamber, Hati read the note, gasped, and handed it to Bala. Both of their faces were grim. Bala sped off up the stairs.

“Kara,” Hati ground out between clenched teeth, “Pythia has been captured and likely tortured. We know where she is. Can you find Captain Hor-heb and organize a squad of men to meet us in the storerooms of the temple of Maat?”

Hati smiled without humor when Kara’s face began to resemble a black panther’s. “I can,” she snarled.

“This is God’s Wife and royal business. Tell them to enter the lower level with as much stealth as they possibly can. We do not want Pythia harmed any further.” Hati spared Bala only a glance as she came running in with a sword and sheath on a belt, as well as a few other unidentifiable oddments.

With all the appearance of a well-rehearsed dance, Hati and Bala arrayed themselves in weaponry, while Kara strode purposely from the room and ran for the guards’ barracks in the western portion of the palace grounds. They hitched up a chariot themselves and rode at breakneck speed through the darkened streets of Thebes.

“We start with the most isolated ones in the northern quadrant,” Bala whispered as they made their way past the always-darkened temple sanctuaries to Maat.

It was easy enough to find the right storeroom. Careful listening at the doors had them at the smallest of the storeroom doors, trying not to be hasty when they heard the wet slapping sounds and the small cries of distress.

“I cannot stand it, Bala. I cannot!” Hati hissed frantically. “We cannot wait for the guards.”

“Hush then, and let me handle it.” Bala whipped out a small dagger and scratched at the door, softly at first, then louder and louder. The sounds within stopped.

The door was unbarred, and creaked slowly open. Hati threw her shoulder against the door, sending Kawa slamming against the wall. Bala stood guard over his stunned form while Hati rushed to Pythia.

Pythia struggled to her knees beside the bale where Kawa had been raping her. Smiling around her swollen lips, she exclaimed, “Welcome, sisters! I have news and little time to give it to you.”

Hati, appalled at the amount of damage done to Pythia's naked body, slit her wrist bonds and found the bowl of water to wash what she could.

"Thank you, Hati, but leave off for now. You and I have an obeisance to perform to the new Mother." Pythia knelt in Bala's direction while Bala stood there open-mouthed.

Without further ado, Pythia rose and took the washcloth from Hati's nerveless hand. Pythia washed herself at the bowl. "Listen carefully, you two. The Mother is already in the underworld. Before she died, she named Bala her successor and gave me a secret to pass on. Unfortunately, Akenmose has learned the secret and is even now on his way to Malgatta to kill our sons." She paused and looked at Bala. "All our sons, including yours, Bala."

"My son is dead." Bala's voice may have been flat with pain, but her eyes flared with hope.

"Your son by Hal-Ra lives, Bala. Hal-Ra gave him to the temple of Amun when they were told you were dead. Your son was renamed, as is common for children gifted to the temple. His new name was Senmut."

"Oh, gods, I had forgotten. We were both renamed. I do not remember my birth name. Senmut remembered his. It was..."

"Ramses. His name was Ramses," Bala said in a faraway voice.

"I'll give you the rest of the details later. For now, you must ride to Malgatta. I am in no shape to ride a chariot. I will await the guards." Pythia finished her wash and presented her back to Hati with a wink. "Wash gently, would you? They used salt. Somewhere in this room, there's a pot of honey for my burns."

"Pythia, your back looks like raw meat and he *raped* you. Do not you want a physician?"

Pythia gave a snort. "My body will heal, and you cannot harm the mind through rape when the mind is trained. He only annoyed me with his attentions. I am vengeful for another reason. Kawa killed Lt. Sheshi, Hati. He was going to ask you to give me to him. I would have agreed, if you had asked me for my opinion. For that, there is no forgiveness." She hissed as Hati began to smear honey on her burns.

"Pythia is right. We must ride to Malgatta as quickly as we can. We cannot wait for the guard." Bala used what was left of Pythia's clothing to tie Kawa's hands together. "Can you take care of this little traitor until the guards arrive?" Bala's foot nudged the boy's semi-conscious form. He moaned and rolled over, facing the wall.

"Easily," Pythia's voice was breezy and light. "I have something in mind. Do not worry about me. Go save our sons."

Bala and Hati were out the door a moment later.

* * * * *

Pythia sat down on the cotton bale, and blew out a breath of relief. She rubbed her forehead carefully to avoid the bruises that marred her face. It was hard to hide her pain from her sisters. True, the honey eased the sting of the burns, but could not take it away completely. "I'll be many days recovering from this," she commented to herself.

"You'll not recover at all if I have my way!" Kawa exploded from his position on the floor to an upright stance. In his hand, he held a small knife. "I am smarter than our dear prince gives me credit for," he laughed wickedly. "I did not trust you sorceresses, or him, and hid this little knife in my belt."

Pythia stayed comfortably seated on the bale. Raising one eyebrow, she looked mockingly at the little knife. "Sorceress, am I? True!" She laughed.

This only served to enrage Kawa. His face darkened, but he snarled, "Not that I have ever seen any magic out of the God's Wives. Most of you are charlatans, trading on sex and information with little else to offer."

Pythia laughed again, and rose from her seated position to stand in the loose-limbed fashion she had been taught for unarmed combat. "So you think that because you have never seen it, it does not exist? Sex and information are easy to acquire, and therefore our most common coin. We hoard our secrets as much as we hoard our gold." Without moving a muscle, Pythia gathered her resources.

"I do not believe you bitches have half of what you're rumored to possess. You cracked like a pomegranate under the Master's whip, same as any other!"

"Of course I did. Everyone has their limits, foolish boy." Pythia swept her hair back in what seemed a casual gesture made by any woman, but in truth, was a way to ensure her hair remained out of her line of sight. "But, like a pomegranate, there were many kernels of truth in there. You only got the one."

Kawa stumbled backward when Pythia reached deeply into his mind without warning and pulled his greatest fear to the fore.

"Oh, so you fear the soul-eater, do you? A wise fear, since you'll be meeting him shortly. Can you imagine it? I am sure Hati will come up with a suitable end for your life. Perhaps being thrown into a pit of scorpions will be her choice? On the other hand, perhaps she'll just cut you and leave you for the scarabs? I cannot say." Pythia crossed her arms loosely, giving the appearance of a woman holding a casual conversation with a recalcitrant youngster.

"Holy Set, you can do magic!" Kawa backed away, trying to head for the door.

Pythia whipped out a hand, and the door refused to open under his hand, no matter how hard he tugged. "I think not, Kawa. You see I am going to disagree with my Pharaoh. You do not deserve the fame of a public execution. That's what you desire most—fame. I am not going to allow that." She put all her anger and hatred into her voice.

Kawa backed away from the door, the knife trembling in his hand. "You cannot kill me. I won't let you!"

"Do not be stupid. I am not going to lay a hand on you. You're going to kill yourself. It's going to be the only way you'll escape. Enjoy the journey. Give my regards to Lord Horus. He might appreciate my sense of justice." With that, Pythia joined minds with Kawa, pouring all her pain and sorrow into him, from the pain of childbirth all the way through to her last few hours of torture. Her despair at losing Sheshi, and the hopelessness of her life before her now that her last chance at love was dead with him. Every pain, great and small.

Impassively, Pythia watched Kawa fall to the ground, writhing in the agony, even as she herself fell to her knees. Everything that was Pythia drained out of her like water on the desert sands, evaporating as it spread. Kawa began to cut himself with his knife, trying to cut out those parts of himself that burned or echoed Pythia's agony. Only when he had sliced his belly open with the shared pain of childbirth did she release him. In one last desperate act, he threw the knife. It buried to the hilt just below her ribs. Then he screamed from the pain that movement had cost him.

Pythia smiled from her position on the floor. She fell over, and lay there, drained down to the dregs. "Nice throw, Kawa. Pity it's wasted." The sound of many footsteps beating on the floor distracted her for a moment. She released her hold on the door.

It was not the palace guard who slammed the door open, but the ever-faithful Captain Hor-heb and a very fiercely dressed Queen Kara. Pythia studied the leopard pelt scantily covering Kara's loins, the teeth encircling the neck, bare breasts and weapons everywhere with delight. "My, Kara, that spear looks sharp," she commented around her difficulty breathing.

Kara knelt on the floor while Hor-heb stood over Kawa, sword at the ready. "Pythia! Where are Bala and Hati?"

"Malgatta," was all Pythia managed. Her breathing became more than difficult.

"What is at Malgatta? Can you tell me? Guards! Fetch the physicians!" Kara yelled.

"Akenmose." Every word was an effort now. Pythia managed a smile when she heard Kara curse. "S'all right. I want to go. Nothing left...for me."

"Hang on, Pythia! Do not go. Who will laugh for us when we cannot if you go?" Kara frantically tried to staunch the bubbling blood from Pythia's wound, but sensibly did not pull out the knife.

"The gods laugh." Pythia's world grayed out, and she spoke no more. The last thing she heard was, "Kill that miserable little traitor. Then we ride to Malgatta!" With her strength gone, and no will to live, Pythia relaxed into death.

Chapter Thirteen

Bala whipped the horses into a full gallop as they passed the gates of Thebes. "Let's see if I can still win chariot races!" Bala shouted over the sounds of the lowing cattle a farmer herded past them.

Hati nodded, and gripped the chariot tighter. "How far ahead of us do you think Akenmose is?" She prayed they could reach Malgatta in time.

"Not as far as he thinks he is. According to his men, he's ham-handed with the reins. We've a chance to catch up, or at least be moments behind." Bala flicked the short whip with expertise.

"Then let us think of a good plan. He can sweep right past the guards, as royal family. He might even dismiss them, and they'd obey. We'll not be able to depend upon backup."

"He is cowardly enough to go for Senmut first. Senmut's blind and therefore less of a threat. The babies are still useful, and a bargaining chip. Where would Senmut's rooms be? I have never been to Malgatta."

Hati thought for a moment. "In the far room at the end of the children's wing." She yelped for moment as the chariot hit a bump they could not see. The wind was cold on her bald head, but she ignored the discomfort.

"As much as I dislike it, you'll have to go first. You'll need to lead the way." Bala frowned thoughtfully.

"We can turn that to an advantage. Listen to my plan..."

* * * * *

Senmut was surprised to hear the voices of the older princes when Nehsy' chariot pulled to a stop. "There he is!" cried Dedumose's voice.

"I see him crocodile brain," came the calm voice of Ahmose.

"Good morning, Lord Tutor," came the friendly voice of Mentuhotep, near his right elbow. "And good morning Lord Chancellor. Thank you for bringing our tutor. We can take care of him now." A small hand grasped Senmut's elbow, and gently tugged more to the right.

"Good morning, Mentuhotep," replied Senmut as he obeyed the gentle but persistent tug. "But how did you know I was coming? And how did you know I wouldn't be able to see?"

"That is my fault, Lord Tutor," answered the voice of Ahmose, now coming from his left side.

From behind, and apparently following them as they entered the windless entrance to Malgatta, came the voice of fourteen-year-old Dedumose. "Ahmose has the gift of a seer, Lord Tutor. It does not always work, but when it works, it works well. He woke us all, saying there is danger and you would arrive in the chariot but blind."

A new and larger hand grasped Senmut's left elbow. "Let me tell the rest. This way, Lord Tutor." That was Ahmose.

Senmut turned obediently to the left. "A seer, huh? Well, You're full of surprises Ahmose. Why did you not say anything before?" Danger, his mind screamed. Yes, he could almost smell it, especially danger to the children.

"Why tell about a gift I have no intention of using except in battle? I will tell you the whole of it once you are safely installed in a chair. We've time." Ahmose tugged slightly.

It seemed a long walk, but a tug on his right elbow had him turning again. "Where are we?" Senmut smelled the distinctive odor of babies.

"We are at the end of the children's wing, in what is normally the nursery." That was Dedumose. "The baby princes are here. Their nurse was here attending them when we came out to greet you, so they are well fed and contented, for now."

A hand on his chest stopped Senmut. "Turn around, please, Lord Tutor. We'll push a chair behind you, but you'll sit facing the door. You're directly in front of the babies' pallet." Senmut turned around carefully, and felt the edge of a chair against his calves. He sat gingerly.

The sound of scraping told Senmut the boys brought other chairs closer. Ahmose spoke from his left. "Now. Here is the rest of my vision. I awoke seeing you arrive in a chariot with a bandage over your eyes. That was the first vision. Then I saw my eldest brother Akenmose arrive alone." At Senmut's dropped jaw, he chuckled without mirth. "Yes, that foul piece of—ouch, Dedumose!—is my brother. Well, Mentuhotep's and mine. Did you forget we are all sons of Tutmose the First?"

"Shamed as we are to admit relation to Akenmose, it's true," came the voice of Mentuhotep to Senmut's right. Senmut deduced that Dedumose had the middle chair directly in front of him.

"Anyway, I saw in my vision that Akenmose came into this room, wanting to kill our nephews," continued Ahmose. "Then the dream ended."

"We've been given warning by the gods," intoned solemn Dedumose.

"And now we look to you, Lord Tutor. What can we do to protect our nephews?" Mentuhotep finished.

"This can be a lesson in strategy, Lord Tutor. One with a life and death reason to do well," Ahmose added.

Senmut thought fast. "How much time do we have, Ahmose? You mentioned we had time."

A rustle, and some footsteps. "An hour, I would say. The sun had just risen when I saw Akenmose arrive in the dream. It's false dawn now."

"Good. Okay, boys, I am depending on you. You have had at least a day here with no tutor to stop you from exploring. Where are the best hiding spots where soldiers cannot go?"

Dedumose squeaked first. His voice was changing, and Senmut winced in sympathy. "The sanctuary in the royal shrine! Under the altar!"

Trust Dedumose to explore the holy spots first. "Good for you, Dedumose. Go find the nurse and get her and the babies under the altar." A scrape and running feet told him Dedumose was gone.

"Mentuhotep, if I know you, you have explored every room in this corridor," Senmut began. A boyish giggle was answer enough. "Were there any dolls that were about the size of a real baby? Or ones we can wrap in cloth to make appear full-sized?"

"Yeah, bunches" Mentuhotep used the disgusted voice only an eleven-year-old boy managed for girlish frippery. "Oh, I get it! Two dolls coming up!" A bang told Senmut Mentuhotep had knocked over a chair in his haste. "Ooops! Sorry!" Then the sound of running feet.

"I assume you have a task for me?" Ahmose said anxiously.

Ah, the pride of a boy on the verge of manhood. "I have two, Ahmose. First, bring me one of your swords. Take one for yourself. Give knives to Mentuhotep and Dedumose. You'll guard the hiding place of the babies inside the sanctuary. Return with the sword, now."

Mentuhotep was the first to return. Under Senmut's direction, both dolls were wrapped befitting royal babies. When the nurse returned with Dedumose, she tut-tutted over the sloppy wrapping, re-wrapped one, and covered each with a blanket. All three boys then escorted her and the babies to the sanctuary. Both Moses and Isian never so much as cried, not even when their nap was disturbed.

Ahmose had provided Senmut with a fine, well-weighted sword. Senmut laid the blade casually across his lap. He lifted his improvised blindfold. The lamplight still was painful, but he saw dimly. "All the better," he chuckled, and extinguished the light. "Now who has the advantage, Lord Akenmose? Neither of us will see well. You'll have only the dim light of dawn, and I will have only a dim view of you."

Still chuckling, Senmut returned to his chair, removed his blindfold, and sat down to wait.

* * * * *

Now that they were out of the city, the road became rougher for Hati and Bala. Hati focused on the barely-maintained road ahead, but her stomach grew gradually sicker. Finally, it rebelled entirely. "Stop! Stop!" she gagged.

Bala stopped the chariot just in time. Hati ran for a nearby rock and heaved. At least the rock was cool to lean against, from the desert night.

Stroking her hair, Bala waited patiently. When Hati's stomach was empty, Bala said gently, "You're pregnant again, aren't you?" Hati could only nod.

"Are you able to ride now that your stomach is empty?" Bala pointed up the road toward Malgatta. "We've a dust cloud to follow," she grinned.

Hati moved so fast, Bala was left standing there, holding her whip. "Damn right I can ride! We've caught up with that son of Set!" Hati cried as she leapt back up into the chariot. "This time isn't so bad. I throw up once, then I am fine."

"Well, then, I guess my grandchild is treating you more kindly than Moses did," Bala laughed and joined her.

* * * * *

Akenmose threw the reins of his lathered horses to a groom. "Rub them down, but do not unhitch them. I do not intend to be long," he ordered imperiously.

Other than servants, the halls of Malgatta were deserted. "Well and good," he congratulated himself. He sauntered down the hall leading to the children's quarters with the long familiarity of one who had played there as a child.

Spying only two guards outside the Royal nursery, he walked up to them with casual arrogance. "You're dismissed. I have business with my brothers that aren't for commoner ears. I will send for you when we are finished." The guards saluted and left.

Lord Akenmose permitted himself a tiny smile of triumph. "This has been the most delightful day already. All I have to do is kill two worthless infants and one blind scribe. Simple. It is a shame to kill my nephews when they would have been such delightful pawns," he said to his image in a bronze mirror, while he checked his appearance.

Akenmose sighed. "Ah well, one cannot have everything when an empire is at stake. Besides, I shall find many such boys to give me pleasure once I am crowned." With visions of his coronation filling his head, it gave him fresh energy after going without sleep. "Perhaps, after I return to Thebes, I shall sleep for a full day. I am sure Kawa will be happy to verify I was in my bed the entire time, if he shares it." Humming a happy tune, he opened the door.

The Royal Tutor, the blind Senmut, sat in the darkened room with no lamplight. A sword gleamed in the dim light of dawn on his lap. Akenmose barely made out the two

tiny lumps on the pallet behind Senmut. He laughed softly. "So, you think to guard my nephews, Tutor? It's quite unnecessary. You're dismissed. I will deal with you shortly."

"I refuse your kind offer of rest, Lord Akenmose," Senmut replied wryly.

"You refuse a direct order from one of the royal family? The penalty for that is a swift death, you know." Akenmose relished a good excuse to kill this handsome cousin. He was too old to be interesting as a bedmate, but Akenmose appreciated a pretty body no matter what its age.

"Lord Akenmose. I know you're here to kill the heirs." Senmut rose and grasped the sword with an ease Akenmose had not expected.

"Very well, then," Akenmose laughed. "You're blind, this I know. It will be hard for you to kill me that way. But you're welcome to try."

"So I shall," replied Senmut softly. "But think on this. I have fought for my life with a sword. You have done nothing but play with sword masters when it suited you and learned pretty sword dances to impress your bedmates and cronies. I think we are even."

"We shall see," growled Akenmose. He pulled out his blade and rushed forward.

* * * * *

Senmut noticed just moments before his sword clashed with Lord Akenmose's blade, he knew in advance exactly what Akenmose would do seconds before it actually happened. Even though he could not clearly see, he knew precisely what parry and thrust to do, just as he needed it. Senmut did not stop to question this knowledge, but sent a prayer of thankfulness to Amun. With this foreknowledge, and his own skill with a blade, he was able to give as well as he got.

Akenmose, on the other hand, suffered numerous cuts from barely being able to parry Senmut's blade. He was panting harshly when he disengaged and stepped back after only a few exchanges. "Either you're better than I thought, or your blindness isn't nearly as severe as I was led to believe," he commented. "Yet I tested that eyebright potion on one of my slaves. He could not bear the light for several days, and had no more than dim vision."

Senmut did not answer, but instead he smiled and thrust forward, forcing Akenmose to counter.

"Ah, but the fact that you stare straight ahead, not really looking at me tells me you cannot see. I must attribute it to luck that you have survived this long," Akenmose observed, as he tried an overhand shot that should have cleaved Senmut's skull in two. Senmut blocked it easily, and followed up with a swing that Akenmose only partially stopped. A set of deadly exchanges followed at lightning speed.

A glance toward the balcony told Akenmose the sun was brightening the sky. "So, I shall assume as well that you cannot bear light, just as my slave couldn't." He laughed and added, "All I have to do is wait until the sun has risen more fully. You'll be in agony since you wear no blindfold to protect your eyes." Another low swing toward Senmut's thigh failed. "I shall enjoy listening to you scream," he added.

"You talk too much. Can you afford to wait that long, Akenmose?" Senmut taunted, managing a cut to Akenmose's side that bled profusely.

"That's Lord Akenmose to you, peasant. I have all the time I need. I have dismissed the guards. Do you think the servants will dare come, knowing that a Royal Prince has ordered that I be undisturbed while I visit with my brothers? Where are they, by the way? I have plans for them as well." He rained blows down, now fighting wildly and without style.

"Where you cannot find them," Senmut smiled, as Akenmose became winded. His new gift told him it would end soon, but not how.

"So you believe. Once I have disposed of you and those infants behind you, I shall take the time to search for them," Akenmose sighed. "Delays, delays. However, this time I will ensure that there are no other claimants to the throne beside myself. Even that bitch-Queen Hatshepsut has no claim to the throne once my brother's sons are dead. Not that she shall long outlive them. She should be here soon enough." Akenmose then backed up slightly, putting himself against the wall and near the open doorway, forcing Senmut to disengage for fear of breaking his sword on the open door.

Senmut stiffened. "Hati is on her way here? Why?" He sought with his new gift for a way to continue the fight, but it remained quiescent. Senmut snarled to himself in frustration.

Akenmose chuckled. "Why? Simple. I ordered the concubine Pythia to write a note telling her sisters she'd stay overnight in the temple. Pythia is in no shape to greet her sisters after I enjoyed extracting information from her, but she is still a God's Wife. I am sure she managed to include information on the danger to those stinking infants over there." He motioned with his sword, and then returned to the ready position. "What God's Wife wouldn't?"

Akenmose laughed evilly. "It was the simplest way to gather all my victims in one place. Hatshepsut, and probably that ugly old woman servant of hers, will ride out here alone, not waiting for any guards or soldiers. I have heard Hatshepsut fancies herself a swordswoman. But she cannot be the equal of a larger, stronger man who has learned swordplay since he was an infant, like me." Akenmose took a moment to study Senmut, who stood there, guard at the ready even now, and holding the sword effortlessly. "Women just do not have our strength."

"You obviously never saw the female soldiers under my command," Senmut laughed. "They'd slice you to ribbons for the sheer joy of it." If it were not for the deadly seriousness of the situation, Senmut might have laughed at the irony of this seemingly casual morning conversation.

"The only thing females are useful for is breeding babies. Everything else should be handled by men." Akenmose's voice took on a sarcastic tone. "Do you think I depend only on my swordsmanship? I think not. Hatshepsut is still a woman. She'll rush in here, hoping to save her baby, like the mother she is. *Awww!*" His tone resumed its normal imperious arrogance. "Rest assured, she'll die. And then you'll be next, as soon as I have had the delight in hearing your cries as the sun blinds you completely."

* * * * *

Hati listened to Akenmose's bragging from her position near the door, flattened against the wall. She nodded; giving credit to Akenmose for a layered plan that took in contingencies.

It had taken her several minutes to edge her way carefully up the long corridor while she waited for Bala to get in position. *Keep him talking, Senmut. You're my backup in all this.*

"And how will you cover up the murders of two infants, the older three boys, Hati, and myself?" Senmut's casual voice floated out into the corridor.

"Simple, again. You killed them. You went quite mad with the pain or perhaps the potion made you do it. I found you, killed you, but by then it was too late to save my family." He sighed lugubriously. "Tragic survivor that I am, I shall be forced to take the throne. I might even consent to marry Queen Kara. She has sense enough to be quiet and consume her life with good works. I am sure I can find someone to substitute for me in her bed to ensure an heir."

You do not know Kara well, do you? She would have made a fine God's Wife. Kara would have ended up ruling you, you fatuitous oaf, Hati thought. Bala signaled from further down the hall. She was ready. Hati backed up slowly and carefully until she could make her grand entrance. Taking out her knife, but leaving her sword in its sheath, she pounded down the hall, breathing as if she'd run all the way from the courtyard.

As she expected, Akenmose grabbed her by the throat, and yanked her back so that she was entrapped in the crook of his elbow. For drama, she dropped the knife. While it clattered to the floor, she slid another from a wrist sheath under her red shirt.

It was too bad Senmut could not see her wink reassurance at him, but it was better that he couldn't. He reacted perfectly, yelling, "Hati!" and trying to stop her capture, only to be halted by Akenmose's blade. She squirmed for effect.

Akenmose laughed, "You see, Senmut? Just like a useless female. Rushing in to protect her child with no plan, no backup and only a little knife against my sword." He chuckled in her ear, "You stupid cow. Let's just move you a little further in the room, shall we? It must look like Senmut here killed you, of course." He dragged Hati, struggling, into the center of the room. His blade kept trained on Senmut.

When he was exactly where she wanted him, Hati laughed softly. "What makes you think I did not have a plan?" and she rammed her elbow hard into his stomach, freeing herself. Hati danced away to stand in front of Senmut, and drew her own sword.

Akenmose stepped back, wheezing. "For that alone, you must die, bitch. Do you really think I fear your blade?"

"Perhaps not." Hati paused. "But you should fear hers." She looked significantly over his shoulder.

Akenmose spun around, and found himself gutted by Bala's swift blade. It was too bad his back was to Hati. She would have loved to see the look on his face.

Bala, the former assassin, knew many different ways to kill, both slowly and quickly. She had chosen to slice across his belly, causing a slow painful death that would take hours. When Akenmose turned around, cursing, he was holding his insides with one hand and bleeding profusely. His sword fell to the floor as the other hand followed the first. "And you have threatened our sons, long enough, traitor," Bala had the gall to calmly wipe her knife on his sleeve.

"So, you know, Mother-Bitch," he gasped.

"Yes, we know it all. You see, you miscalculated, Nameless One. You expected Pythia's note to send us here immediately. However, Pythia knows the first weapon of war is information. Instead of sending us directly here, she told us she had a message and where to find her. We rescued her from your little minion. Pythia told us your plan." Hati's voice was as harsh and cold as the desert night.

Akenmose turned swiftly to her when she called him Nameless One. "You wouldn't dare wipe my name from Egypt! I am a son of Pharaoh!" Then he grunted as the sudden movement brought him immeasurable pain. He hit his knees, hard, on the floor, and bent over, clutching uselessly as his insides spilled out around his hands.

"I more than dare, Nameless One. You do not deserve the stars. You do not deserve even the right to be weighed and judged before Horus. Your heart will not be the Soul-Eater's meal." Hati ticked off his crimes one by one. "You take slave boys against their will and the decree of their god. You threatened the life of two royal heirs. You killed a guard of noble heritage who did you no harm. You tortured and beat a royal concubine who was not your own..."

"I am sorry to report that Pythia is dead," growled Kara's harsh voice from the door. Kara stalked into the room with all the grace of the cat whose pelt barely covered her hips. Behind her followed Captain Hor-heb and ten of his guards. "Therefore I add the charge of the death of that royal concubine to the long list of his traitorous acts, since the murderer was this foul piece of offal's minion. She died, but not before she told us where to find you." Her spear point leveled itself at Akenmose's heart, and there was no mercy on her face.

Hati nodded. There would be time to mourn Pythia later. "Kara, would you do me the kindness of finding Chancellor Nehsy? I would imagine he's in the other wing, sleeping off his long journey."

“No need, Divine One,” came a sleepy voice from the door. “I am here.” Nehsy pushed his way past the guards, but stopped short and gaped at Kara as if he’d never seen her before. His gaze traveled from the lion’s teeth encircling Kara’s neck, lingered the bare brown breasts as if he’d never seen tits before, and finally to the leopard pelt covering only Kara’s groin. His mouth fell open.

“Nehsy. Nehsy!” Hati was amused at her Lord Chancellor’s inability to stop staring at Kara. When Nehsy’s eyes reluctantly focused on Hati, she continued, “Nehsy, this is a royal decree. The one formerly known as Lord Akenmose is now to be the Nameless One. Let his name be removed from every text, scroll, pylon, fresco and citadel. Let him be erased from history, and his line will end with his father.”

The Nameless One fell forward on the floor, panting in agony. His one full breath to scream had been painful enough to turn him white. His tiny pants of “No, no!” were not even enough to interrupt her.

“If I may, Divine One?” Senmut asked politely.

“Yes, Lord Tutor?”

“Divine One, may I suggest that the Lord Chancellor consult with the Master Builder? The Nameless One had a small shrine built on the delta, and his name would exist there. As well, the Lord Chancellor will no doubt arrange to have the Nameless One’s former tomb defaced. That too, can be arranged through the Master Builder, to save trouble.”

Hati spared the dying Nameless One a pitiless glance. “Captain Hor-heb. Take this miserable excuse for humanity outside and stake him in the desert. Post a guard that he does not die too quickly at the jaws of jackals. When the night beasts are done with him and he is truly dead, divide his body up, and see to it that it’s scattered to the four corners of the empire. Let no piece larger than my hand remain in one place.”

“No! No! I am a Prince and a son of Pharaoh! I have a right to be among the stars!” the Nameless One panted.

“You do not deserve any such honor. A place among the stars is earned by serving the people and empire of Egypt well, not by who your parents were. Never for one who lies, schemes, rapes children and murders. The Soul-Eater would have spat your heart back out, so full of poisonous hate it is. Go feed the night creatures. It’s the only service you can provide the world at this point.”

Captain Hor-heb and his men lifted the Nameless One in none-too-gentle hands and carried him outside, oblivious to his screams of agony at being moved. The silence that followed was a blessed relief.

Kara looked down at the trail of blood and worse leading out the door. “If you do not mind, I am going to get the servants to start cleaning up this mess. Then I will help Nehsy organize the removal of the Nameless One from the world of men.” At Hati’s nod, she walked carelessly to the door, daintily avoiding stepping in the mess.

At the door, Kara paused and looked back over her shoulder at the Lord Chancellor. “Coming, Nehsy?” Her glance so provocative, her meaning was clear. As

Nehsy stumbled toward her, his eyes glazed, she winked at Hati and strolled from the room. Nehsy was out the door in a flash behind her.

Hati couldn't contain herself a moment longer, and laughed aloud. "And now we know the identity of the 'noble' who caught her eye. Looks like she finally found the bait that attracted him."

"Yeah, tits, teeth and a leopard pelt," Bala muttered.

Chapter Fourteen

Desperate to reach her son, Hati turned to rush behind Senmut, but he stopped her with an outstretched hand. "I am glad you're wearing red, Hati. Makes it easy to see you. Do not bother with those dolls behind me. The heirs are safe with their nurse, with my students to guard them. Would you help me find my blindfold? It's getting painful."

There was silence for a moment, and then Hati laughed heartily. "Dolls? You used dolls for decoys?" She started rummaging around on the floor, judging by the sounds he heard.

"Truly the son of a God's Wife," drawled Bala.

Senmut turned quickly in Bala's direction. "My mother was a God's Wife?"

"Your mother is a God's Wife, Senmut." A pause. "I am your mother," replied Bala. For the first time in her life, her voice trembled.

"But I was told you were dead!" Senmut rushed forward to grasp Bala's arms, unsure of his reception, but wanting to touch the woman he barely remembered.

His doubts were removed when the woman who had just sliced a man open dropped her knife and hugged him tightly. "And I was told you were dead, Ramses," she said against his chest.

"Well, that clinches it. Only my mother would know my birth name," he said in wonderment. He put his chin down on top of her head, then chuckled, "You're littler than I remember." With his sigh, he breathed in an almost-forgotten scent of the perfume his mother had worn. Of course, Bala had never let him get close enough to smell her perfume before. It was another small verification that the woman he held was indeed his mother.

A small snuffle sounded at his chest, and a weak laugh. "And you're a lot bigger than I remember."

Hati cleared her throat at his side. "I hate to interrupt, but I have Senmut's blindfold."

Reluctantly, Senmut released Bala and turned to Hati. Bending down where she could cover his eyes again, he grinned. "I am glad to know this is temporary. I will want to look on my mother's face as soon as possible."

"You won't have much opportunity, but something can be arranged. Bala is the new Mother of the God's Wives. You just gained several hundred adopted sisters, my love." Hati finished tying the blindfold in place. "There! Reasonably tidy!"

"The new Mother! I am both disappointed and happy for you, Bala. I would have hoped to take you to Father's tomb." Senmut put one arm around Hati, and reached out in hopes of keeping in physical contact with Bala as well.

His hand he reached with still contained Ahmose's sword. It was taken from him, and then a warm soft hand replaced it. "I'll make time," Bala sniffed.

"Oh, you got a sniff. The ultimate accolade," Hati laughed.

"I'll do more than sniff when I have time. I may have a good cry later, in private. However, right now I need to remain old hard-hearted Bala. We've other things to reveal to my son. Such as the fact he's going to be a father." Bala's voice was back to its usual brisk, no-nonsense tones.

Senmut's mind went totally blank, and his jaw opened. A small, perfumed finger poked under his chin until he shut it. "H...Hati?" he choked.

Laughter from both women rang softly. "Bala is a spoilsport. I wanted to tell you! Yes, my love, I am pregnant again. You won't mind being secret concubine to a Pharaoh, will you?"

The absurdity of being a male concubine struck Senmut, and he laughed, "I suppose not, since I cannot marry you."

Bala's hard finger poked him in the bicep. "You can, you great oaf, but not until Moses is on the throne. Hati must still appear to be male. Remember that I am noble. Therefore, you're noble-born. Wrap your mind around that! In the meantime, you'll have to help Hati raise all three children, and any more that may happen, without the blessings of the gods."

Senmut stood stock still again as a thought struck him. "It appears the gods already blessed me, Mother. Put on your official wig, crown or whatever The Mother of the God's Wives wears to show her office for a moment."

Bala was quicker than Hati to grasp his meaning. "So, you have shown a gift? I do not have a sign of office, unless I am in ceremonial garb."

Hati merely gasped.

"It does my heart good to surprise you both, since you dealt me such blows this morning. I think so, Mother. When I fought Ak...er, the Nameless One, I knew in my heart which way to counter his attacks and which way to thrust, even though I could not see. It was as if I knew, seconds before he did, what he would do next."

Senmut felt Bala's hand leave his, and heard her footsteps as she paced. He smiled wryly, knowing he'd gotten his habit of pacing while thinking from her. He hugged Hati tightly to him.

"Hmm..." Bala hummed. "Have you had any more possible manifestations of your gift?"

"I do not know. When Ahmose told me of his vision, it was as if I knew immediately he was right. I smelled the danger, and I clearly imagined what he saw."

Hati snuggled in his arms. "Then I would say you have a touch of the seer in you. No wonder you were such a good Commander in the south. You probably knew, without knowing how you knew, the strategy you would need to keep the Nubians at bay."

"Um," Senmut faltered. "Perhaps. I just did what needed to be done."

Before anyone could continue, a small shriek was heard across the courtyard through the open balcony. All three rushed in that direction out on to the balcony, with Hati leading Senmut by the hand. Senmut's ears, enhanced by his inability to see, heard the sound of a low, masculine moan.

Apparently, Hati heard it too. She gave a small muffled giggle. "I would say Kara has won her man. Looks like you won't be alone in masculine concubinage.

"That reminds me. Speaking of concubines, we shall inter Pythia with honor in Mo's tomb. Her guard in the afterlife shall be Lt. Sheshi. Pythia deserves her own male concubine. The gods, if they have any sense of justice, will restore Sheshi to full health and masculinity."

"It will be done before you leave. Kara can act as your decoy, as well as Regent while you're gone," Bala snickered.

"Leave? Gone?" Senmut asked.

"Of course. Did you think Pharaoh, especially a supposedly male Pharaoh, should be pregnant? That would never fool the enemies of Egypt. Hati must go into seclusion or make a state visit to Punt."

"Punt, I think. I would like to meet Queen Hathor. I think she might be sympathetic to my need to have my baby while out-kingdom," Hati mused. With her hand still in Senmut's, she squeezed to get his attention. "You wouldn't mind traveling to Punt with me, would you? Pharaoh is always able to take his favorite concubine along with him on state visits," she teased.

Senmut laughed, "I suppose I shall bear the strain of it. I will need an official reason to go with you. I will have no children to teach on a state visit."

Bala once more interjected. "That's easy enough, Hati. You're Pharaoh, not just Tutmose II's consort. You cannot be interred with him. You'll need the designs for your own mortuary temple and tomb. Senmut is a Royal scribe and architect as well as Royal tutor. His genius will be needed. You only have about fifteen years before Moses will be ready to take the throne."

"I am not a genius," Senmut muttered. He got another poke in the arm from his mother's hard finger for that.

"But I already have his designs. Oh! How stupid of me. Yes." Senmut felt her turn to face him. She cleared her throat, and tried to take on a royal air, but he heard her laughter in her voice. "Lord Tutor, I have another task for you. I wish you to design my mortuary temple and tomb. I will have to take you from your charges and force you to escort me on my state visit to Punt. I will wish to discuss the designs with you at length. I suggest you begin to train your replacement immediately."

Senmut released her hand and bowed, for the first time using the bow of a noble before his Pharaoh. "It will be as you command, my Pharaoh. May I suggest, Divine One, that we negotiate for fragrant trees and other Puntian goods to fill your tomb with treasures while we are there?"

Laughter from his mother and his future wife answered him. "A wonderful idea! Moreover, do not you dare call me 'Divine One' and other such foolish titles when we are alone. It would serve you right if I bought you a pet ape to fill your days with mischief!" Hati exclaimed around her chortles.

"As if I will not have enough trouble between you and all the children you wish me to teach and father!" A thought struck him. "I wonder what you'll have this time? Another son or daughter? Not that it matters. Healthy and happy would be well enough for me."

He got another poke in the bicep for that, signifying his mother now stood beside him. "Why don't you look, Seer? You're the one who can see into the future! We cannot. I am but a lowly one who senses emotions. Hati can sense both emotion and thought, but cannot do more than send and receive them."

Senmut reached for Hati, and she came willingly into his arms. "I'll have to touch my Pharaoh to attempt this. At least until I am trained in how to use this gift."

"Delay his training, will you, Bala?" Hati murmured into his chest.

"Not on your life," Bala laughed. "You're going to need that gift. So, I will train my son as if he were a God's Wife, and work him just as hard." Hati could hear her relishing the "my son", and chuckled to herself. Perhaps a new era in the history of the God's Wives was coming, when sons were trained as well as daughters. It would be interesting. Senmut distracted her by cupping a breast, stopping her contemplation.

Senmut took his time to caress Hati all the way down, from breast to her belly. Grinning at his excuse to fondle Hati, he enjoyed feeling Hati gasp and squirm.

Bala just chuckled, "You can act the lover later. Get to it, son. We need to go get the children."

Senmut rested his hand lightly on Hati's belly. Images did come to him. He saw Tutmose III take the throne, holding the hand of Senmut's daughter as Queen. Isian was on the other side as vizier, with his own wife. He saw the temple at Deir-el-Bahri, just as he had designed it. He saw more, much more. Some gladdened his heart, and others made him so sad he wished to weep in mourning.

The lives and fates of his children and grandchildren paraded before him. A grandson spurred an army to victory. A great-granddaughter raced a chariot, screaming with laughter. Another granddaughter held the hand of a pharaoh and ruled as an equal. A Pharaoh grandson died at the hands of an assassin. A young woman many generations later poised her hand above an asp. With the instinctive self-preservation of a seer, he knew what he should not reveal.

Senmut cleared his throat, and removed his hand. "I think we shall have another God's Wife on our hands in seven months' time."

About the author

Lena Austin is a “fallen” society wench with a checkered past. She has been a licensed minister, hairdresser, and realtor, radio DJ, exotic dancer, telephone service tech, live-steel medievalist swordswoman, BDSM Mistress, and investment property manager. Not necessarily in that order. She never finished that degree in archaeology, but did learn to scuba. After a life like that, writing about it is pretty restful. Of herself, Lena writes, “I’m tall, and I look like an unholy mating between an Amazon and a librarian. Everything else is subject to change on a whim.”

Lena welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora’s Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Avenue, Akron, OH 44310-3502.



Cerridwen, the Celtic goddess of wisdom, was the muse who brought inspiration to storytellers and those in the creative arts. Cerridwen Press encompasses the best and most innovative stories in all genres of today's fiction. Visit our site and discover the newest titles by talented authors who still get inspired—much like the ancient storytellers did, *once upon a time*.

www.cerridwenpress.com