



# **BLUE GOLD**

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**ROMANCE**

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IMPRINT: Romance

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E-book ISBN: 1-60601-223-1

First E-book Publication: January 2009

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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**PUBLISHER**

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# **BLUE GOLD**

**LINDSAY TOWNSEND**

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## **Prologue**

As a cat may eat its own kits, so a woman in ancient Egypt was recognized as having the right to kill any new-born infant she did not wish to raise. Yet, to appease the dead, it was the custom that a baby-killer should hold the dead child for three days and nights.

\* \* \* \*

The guards put her with the whores, the drunkards, the killers. They were sent into the courtroom seven at a time. She was the last in the third batch.

“Name?” demanded the court scribe and scraped her answer across the papyrus.

“Why are you here?” asked the mayor of her village, the father of her former lover.

Silently, making the action almost an accusation, the woman held up the bundle in her arms to the four judges. She had not been able to bury it before the village guards had caught her.

“A nine-day-old boy,” noted the scribe. “A baby murdered by its mother.”

The woman said nothing: it was all true.

The judges bent their heads together, although in such cases custom demanded only one punishment. The mayor rose and bowed his head in the direction of the shrine set at the back of the courtroom. Then he spat.

“Take her to the riverbank, along with the other baby-killers. Let them

all sweat outside, where everyone can see what they have done.” He jerked his hand. “Drag her away. She stinks.”

## Chapter 1

The young woman standing with the other child-killers in the shadow of a temple obelisk caught his attention. Prince Ramose, Vizier to Pharaoh Aweserre, bent under the fringed sunshade and stepped from the Nile boat onto the riverbank.

A ragged barefoot couple and a bejeweled courtesan whose naturally blond hair her dead daughter had inherited shrank back at his approach. From his bearing, this powerfully built, black-skinned man was of noble birth. His flowing robes, dazzlingly white, showed that he was also a priest.

At thirty-two, Ramose was the youngest High Priest in Egypt. A man of intelligence and dignity, he was much like the god whom he worshipped: Ptah, an immortal whose special city was Memphis and who, it was believed, could create life by thought.

Aware of his superior status in a society where priests were revered, Ramose walked slowly, motioning to his bodyguards to remain on the ship. This should not take long and the danger was nothing. Any assassins amongst these child-murderers would have to dispose of their dead infants before they could attack him. He stretched out his hand in a blessing.

Again, the other child-killers drew back. His girl—the one who interested him—held her ground. That pleased him. He greeted her and was only mildly disappointed when, upon the young woman raising her head, he saw her eyes were brown.

This close, he noticed other differences: fuller breasts and hips, shorter hair, a wider mouth. Her dead child, a boy, was unmarked.

“Did you smother him?”

“Yes, Lord.” Her cheeks had that pinched, taut look which came through sleeplessness and hunger. Yet she neither sought nor asked for sympathy. “His father did not want him. My father would not keep me.” Her eyes returned to the child cradled in a scrap of cloth against her breast. She

brushed at the flies which had settled on the dark head of curls. "How could I have raised him? Even the village women cast stones at us."

So the woman had been deserted by lover and family. Ramose thought of his child, safe at the palace of Mazghuna in the keeping of his steward. It was regrettable that Neith could no longer be trusted with their son's care.

Wondering at the contrast in fortunes between this woman's murdered child and his own son and heir, Ramose touched a hand of the dead infant. Such smooth, cold fingers. The sweet, cloying smell of corruption hung around mother and son.

"Do you bury him tonight?"

The woman nodded, brushing away more flies. "I killed my son and have held him in my arms for three days and nights, as custom demands." Her clear voice was expressionless. "Why does this concern my Lord?"

The personal form of address was not lost on Ramose. "You remind me of someone, a Keftian girl."

"Did she meet with your favor, Lord?"

"Very much." Prince Ramose smiled. Sarmatia had saved his son's life. He lifted the Egyptian's chin with his thumb and again examined her face. Nineteen years old at a guess: a mature woman. Deep brown eyes, finely-arched brows, long, slightly hooked nose, mouth as red as a pomegranate seed—yes, she was pleasing. Clever, too; she bore his scrutiny without false modesty. He could install her in one of his estates. His wife need know nothing for the moment. He released the girl's head and stepped back.

"My gardener will bury the child. Come! We must be at Memphis before nightfall." Ramose turned on his heel, strolling back to the boat. After a moment he heard the faltering steps and knew she was following.

\* \* \* \*

Prince Ramose's gardener buried the child in the desert. The young woman stood with him as he piled sand back into the shallow grave. When they left, the jackals were gathering, whooping and scenting each other in excitement.

She felt only relief. There had been a time, before she became pregnant, when she had longed for a son from her lover, but no more. Ubas had turned from her, silent and accusing, and later denied the child was his. Her last

hope had been killed when, four days after her son was born, Ubas married the headman's daughter. Anger and fear had lessened her milk, and her father, unwilling to pay a wet nurse and conscious of his position in the village, had cast her from the house.

The Vizier of Lower Egypt claimed her future issue. As a mark of favor Ramose had allowed her to stand under the fringed sunshade of the boat, close to his divan, and his servants had fed and watered her. Later, after her son was buried and she could unlock her stiffened arms, she was taken to a cool, pleasantly-scented room and allowed to rest.

Left to sleep until sunset of the next day, she awaited a summons to the High Priest, hope and anxiety blending in a wish that she would be acceptable for some time to come. Finally, as she despaired of ever being called, his servants returned. After bathing and preparing their new charge, they brought her to Ramose's rooms in a carrying chair, whispering as they left that she was beautiful. Naked in his bed, painted and perfumed, the woman watched for the master's entrance, eager but fearful.

It was after nightfall when a bobbing light showed his return. Speaking to the guard on the stairs, the vizier walked into his private rooms and set the alabaster lamp on a table by the bed. Too nervous to lie invitingly between the cushions, the woman sat bolt upright. In accordance with his wishes, she was not wearing a wig: her hair was loose and simply dressed. He ran a strand through his fingers, and she quickly turned her head to kiss his hand.

At a sign from the prince she knelt upon the couch and drew off his robes, her touch at first timid and then increasingly possessive. Firm and strong, Ramose's body was warm under her hands and as flawless as a god's. He was tall, deep-chested, with legs and hips shaped for speed, his narrow shaven head tilted slightly forward. His mouth was full, his nose long and broad: a Kushite nose, the woman thought. He was a handsome man.

She brought her hands to his waist to remove the final covering and smelled the male sweat of his skin. Her own flesh felt sweet and hot, the place between her thighs moist as the honeydew. She kept her arms about his middle, feeling at last his hands upon her back, her flanks. He kissed her mouth and then each breast. Still kneeling on the bed, she sensed his manhood rising against her, the inundation rising over Egypt.



“Do not fear,” murmured Ramose, prince of Memphis, High Priest of Ptah, “You are as the goddess Hathor, the giver, the lion-goddess beloved of Ra. You nurture men’s souls.”

Gripping her hips, he entered her, and she gasped. Dark and light, they merged. He told her his name, which she repeated, her voice rising as their bodies quickened.

“Goddess,” whispered the priest, drawing a nipple into his mouth. His tongue flicked over her breasts, and she felt them swelling. He lifted her from the bed and came deep within her. Her milk spurted, and in that moment she became Hathor, suckling mankind, granting life-giving nourishment. He was Ra-Horus, piercing as the sun. They sank onto the bed, two gods at play, and knew nothing but each other until day-break.

## Chapter 2

Dawn found Neith, wife of Ramose, in a distressed state. The sun rose above the palace of Mazghuna, just as it always did, and she winced at the blaze of light flowing through small, high windows into her chamber, flashing up the inlays of her bed and the smooth linen sheets of the second couch.... Empty, just as it always was these days. Soon Mose would come bursting in, chattering and asking, “Is he coming home today? Is he?”

Neith groaned and rolled onto her stomach, groping for the jar under her bed. It should be somewhere close to the chamber pot. She leaned over the bedside, striking her head on the floor tiles. Panic followed the pain: where was the *shedeh*? A small fly spiraled up from the pot, and she sneezed. The copper disks on the beaded door hanging chimed like the bells of a sistrum.

“Come no farther!” Neith struck out with her hand, fending off the unseen company. “Get away!” Relieved, she heard the women withdraw, carrying her six-year-old son back to the nursery. How dare they let him wail like that? Mose would sulk all morning, and she had such a headache. Wine would help: a glass or two of *shedeh*.

The curtain writhed before her eyes. Watching it, Neith slipped completely out of bed, hitting an arm on the acacia-wood chest. “Who is it?” she demanded, rubbing her elbow.

“The steward, madam,” came the quiet voice. “I heard your son weeping and wondered if there was anything amiss.”

“A child’s temper, Hori, no more.” Neith thought to cover herself with a sheet, in case the man should enter her room. “Call my women. Oh, and take Mose outside, before it gets hot.”

“I have already instructed his nurse to walk the little lord around the garden. I knew you would not wish to be disturbed.”

Neith could picture the steward when he said that: the thin disapproving lips, the mocking stare down that long nose, complacent fingers smoothing

down the tips of his blue wig. He must have taken the wine—no-one else would have dared.

“Hori?”

“Yes, madam?” He was still standing behind the curtain. She had not dismissed him. It angered Neith that Hori might know when her husband would return, while she was kept in ignorance. Other women were more important to Ramose than his wife.

“Bring me two jars of the best wine from my estates. You have leave to go.”

There was an active silence, then, “Madam, there is no more.”

Neith dug her fingernails into her forehead. She knew the man was lying. “Where is the vessel that was in my room? Have you drunk its contents?”

“Alas, I could not, madam.” His answer was so soft Neith was not sure if he mocked her. “Your cat got into the room and upset the jug under your bed.” Hori sighed deeply. “I was obliged to clean the floor.”

She did not believe him, yet what could she do?

“Go and call my women,” Neith repeated. A happy thought came to her. “Today, after my toilet, I shall look through the kitchen and stores.” She sensed the man’s alarm and was intrigued, although her dry mouth and tender head were the main reasons for her search.

Those reasons grew stronger as three servants combed her short fine hair and painted her face, adding color to define flesh-buried cheekbones and shadow to slim off her chin. She asked for a drink and was given water. Grimacing, Neith cast it aside and slapped the nearest girl.

“Clumsy!” She rubbed a finger along one dark eyebrow. “Attend more closely to what you’re doing!”

The girl’s hand shook as she recovered the tweezers from the tiles. She was another of Ramose’s castoffs, a plump girl called Bakmut, and Neith was apt to bully her.

“You, dawdling by the door. Bring me the tray of perfumes.”

The rose was too sweet, the pomegranate too sharp. Neith selected an oil infused with blue water-lily. As it was applied to her shoulders she thought of a remedy for her thirst.

“Wait.” She prevented her nurse from coloring her lips. “Do you have beer in your quarters, Gemny? Fetch me some.”

It seemed an age before the old woman returned. By then Bakmut was painting her toe-nails. Neith, desperate for a drink, pinched spitefully on the girl's flank and pushed herself out of her chair.

"Give it to me." She snatched the rough earthen crock. The beer was flat and foul, but it drowned the sick emptiness of her stomach. "Give me more," she said, ignoring a sudden high-pitched squeal from the garden. "Do as I say, you old witch, or I'll turn you out!"

Somehow the cosmetics tray was overturned and she slipped. Clutching the beer-jug, Neith collapsed against Gemny who stroked her hair while she called down curses on the steward.

"What has happened here? Lady, why are you not dressed?"

Ramose swung his son down from his shoulders and handed him to his nurse with a command for them to leave the room. Neith was drunk again.

Walking around the smears of powdered kohl and malachite, the broken bottles and puddles of unguents, he came to the kneeling maidservant. She hid her face in the rag she had been using to mop up the mess but, laying a hand upon her shaven head, the priest saw the bruise swelling along her cheekbone. A gentle word, an order for her to have the wound dressed by the steward, sent Bakmut outside where she could cry in private.

Dismissing the remaining servants, Ramose recovered what he could of his wifewife's cosmetics and replaced them in her make-up box. This simple task took away the embarrassment of making Neith a formal greeting.

Glancing up once, Ramose was in time to see his wife scavenging the slops of fermented bread—used as a base for brewing Egyptian beer—and eating them before casting the crock aside. Time and misfortune, he thought, had wrought such changes in her.

Two years ago Neith had been his equal, a beautiful, accomplished consort in whom he had complete trust. Since then, since their second - stillborn - child, his wife had coarsened. The slender, gracious woman he'd married had grown fat and slovenly, a sly, vindictive drunkard. Ramose had often considered removing Mose from her care, except that the child needed a mother.

Might the woman he had named as Hathor make a substitute?

Ramose laughed softly and locked the cosmetics box, conscious of the irony that a woman who had murdered her son should be thought a fit nurse for his. Neith was so jealous these days that he had decided to leave his

current mistress in Memphis and come on alone to Mazghuna. It had been a carefully planned visit, a balancing of risks, ignoring the summons of the Pharaoh Aweserre to lavish time on his own family.

“Mose is growing. He is looking well.” Ramose did not reprove his wife, or express disappointment that she had made no preparations against his arrival even after he had sent on runners to the steward telling them when to expect him. “Are you in good health?” Given Neith’s sensitivities, this was a risky question, yet if he did not ask, she would accuse him of indifference.

Receiving no reply, Ramose brought a clean chair from the corner of the room. “Sit down.” He waited until his wife slumped into it, politely averting his eyes from her sagging breasts and thickened waist, then settled himself on NeithNeith’s bed.

“Mose was pleased to see me.” He tried for conversation.

“Meaning that I am not?”

So quick to seize on the slightest criticism! Sighing, Ramose answered, “You know I do not mean that.” Hiding his distaste, he lifted her hand and kissed the beer-wet fingers.

“Come into the garden and watch Mose play. I have brought him a new toy, a spinning top, which he delights in. Come with me, Neith. These spilt perfumes will give you a headache.”

“I already have a headache, and I’m not dressed.” Neith refused to look at him.

“Then let me be my lady’s servant.”

When they were first married he had delighted in helping Neith dress. Some of that pleasure still remained as Ramose took a light blue gown from the chest and fastened it on his wife. Neith lifted her arms as dutifully as a child, yet he could sense that his actions were nothing but an inconvenience to her. Was she growing so careless through drink that she would soon appear naked before the gardener or steward of the house?

“All done.” He patted her shoulder, and she swayed.

“Kiss me.”

“That will spoil your make-up.” He hated Neith slobbering over him.

“You kissed Bakmut just now. I saw you.”

“The child was crying. Must you hit her so hard?”

“Bakmut is a clumsy fool. You were not here. Do not judge me.”

Neith slipped round from the chair and brought her hands up to his chest. When Ramose flinched slightly, her lower lip curled, and she tottered from him to the door.

“That servant of yours, he tells me there is no more wine. I do not believe him.”

No, he would not be drawn into these ridiculous domestic disputes. For some reason, Neith had recently conceived a violent dislike of the steward, a most trustworthy man, and was always asking to be rid of him. Forestalling that particular demand, Ramose answered, “I have faith in you and Hori. I’m sure you will sift the matter between you.” Privately, the High Priest resolved to speak with Hori himself. Increasingly he relied upon the steward to carry out his instructions concerning the management of the palace. As prince as well as priest, Ramose owned a town house at Memphis and several stretches of land along the Nile and its delta, but Mazghuna was his main estate, and he governed it with the same authority as Pharaoh Aweserre held the rest of Lower Egypt.

Ramose leaned forward on the bed, trying to establish intimacy with his wife. “I saw Takhaet in Memphis. She told me the wig is completely out of favour. Ladies show their hair, dressed with jewels and flowers.” Ramose was pleased to remember this. Such detailed gossip had once pleased Neith.

His wife threw back the door hanging, blinking at the clashing metal and the increased sunlight. “Don’t trouble yourself, Ramose, trying to think of things to say. Fashion is not important, is it? You no longer take me to court. I suppose you’re afraid I’ll show you up before our baboon-faced Pharaoh.”

She looked back. “I’m going to the stores. I know you will hear no word against him, but I’m convinced that Hori is stealing from us.”

Stumbling once, Neith swept away, leaving Ramose out of temper. He had expected to stay a full day and night at Mazghuna, yet after such an interview he was tempted to leave at once. Frowning, he turned and stalked into the great hall.

There, sitting on the shaded stairway, spinning top beside him, was his son. Mose had raked his knee on a rose-bush and was staring fixedly at the wound.

“Don’t tell my nurse, father, she’ll only fuss.” Mose raised his head, the child’s love-lock bobbing on his shoulder. “I’m getting used to the sight of

blood. When I'm a man, and must take my leopard and skin it, I shouldn't flinch."

"I did." Ramose sat down on the step.

Mose returned his attention to the cut. "Mother's shouting at the servants. She does that a lot when you're away."

"Next time I leave, I'll take both of you along. Your mother can shout at me for a change."

A promise stung from him by guilt, yet Ramose did try to keep his word. That evening he broached the idea to Neith, who refused to leave the house. Lying on the couch opposite hers—for tonight his wife was also steadfast in refusing him her bed—the priest asked if she had any objection to his taking Mose to court. Aweserre would be there in Memphis on a state progress, and Mose would see him.

"If he will desert his mother and go with you, then why not?" Neith was suffering the after-effects of her morning beer and neither considered nor appreciated her husband's offer. By the time she was fit enough to do so, it was too late. Other more dangerous matters demanded her attention. For now, though, she slept.

Ramose did not wake her when he left before dawn on the following morning.

## Chapter 3

Leaving Mose safe in the royal palace at Memphis, Ramose sought the mortal god Aweserre at the city's new temple to the immortal god Set.

To Ramose, temples were a part of heaven on earth, a direct link between mankind and the forces of nature, sacred, secret places for the many deities of Egypt. Whether dedicated to Ptah, the creator god, Ra the sun god, Set the god of storms or Hathor the goddess of love, temples were always the same design. In a country where princes lived in mud-brick palaces, temples were made of eternal stone. Surrounded by high walls, fronted by massive gates—built not to keep people out but to hold the magic and power in—these sacred buildings were where the gods received worship.

The chief worshipper was Pharaoh, the living god-king, intermediary between the gods and men. It was he who offered to each divinity food, water, flowers and incense at sunrise, noon and sunset.

Not even Pharaoh could worship at every temple throughout Egypt at once, and where the god-king was not, the chief priests took his place.

Men like Ramose thus stood as near-equals to Pharaoh. They, too, faced the gods. If a priest was a natural leader, imposing in his own right, the relationship between Pharaoh and priest was not that of king and courtier but often much closer.

As High Priest, and moreover a prince with extensive lands in his own right, Ramose considered himself inferior to no Pharaoh. He demanded and received respect even from god-kings.

Now, in the outer courtyard of the temple of Set, Ramose underwent the rituals of purification before venturing further into immortal territory. First he was bathed and shaved of all body hair. Then he chewed the bitter salt natron to cleanse his mouth. Inhaling sweet incense to quieten his thoughts and open his mind, Ramose next put on his white priest robes and lastly the



golden breast pectoral dedicated to his own particular deity, Ptah.

Purified, Ramose walked through the temple halls and past the sacred lake to the holy of holies, the small windowless chamber at the heart of the temple. No one except Pharaoh or the chief priests could venture inside it, open the doors to the wooden shrine within and gaze on the sacred statue of the god.

Retreating from the sanctuary of the divine Set, sweeping away his footprints before the golden doors were closed and the god's statue sealed in for the night, was a small, quick man with sharp, neat features, red cheeks and a head full of black, springy curls. Priests were required to shave themselves, but the hair of a god-king was different.

Aweserre, Pharaoh of Lower Egypt, capered round, shaking the broom at Ramose. "Hollo, my father: the priest who is always late!" He addressed the jewelled statue of the god in its sanctuary. "Four days I've waited in vain. Look well at this man, my father!"

Aweserre feigned a lunge at his vizier's stomach, then slapped the broom back on the floor and churned at the dust. A few motes floated upwards, yellow in the flickering torchlight.

"Serre, you're a fraud," said Ramose calmly, as the god-king left the sanctuary and fastened its doors with a blob of melted wax. "You're no more Set's child than I am. You were born outside Egypt."

"My lord Sutekh ignores such trifles," replied Aweserre, "as I overlook the fact that your grandfather was a Kushite who came into Egypt from the southern borders of Nubia." His lean face widened in a grin. "Spear-carrier to fan-bearer in two generations," he said, naming the lowest rank of the Egyptian army and then the highest official in the land except for Pharaoh. He wrapped his narrow arms around his friend's tall frame. Strong and sinewy as a viper, Aweserre gave a rib-crushing embrace. "Welcome back! It fills my heart to see you. Abu said you were coming. But listen, it's time we were leaving. These priest-robcs make me itch."

Head and shoulders shorter than Ramose, the Pharaoh of Lower Egypt was still faster. He and Ramose, both aliens, had been brought up together since the age of ten. They were close friends, but Aweserre had usually taken the lead. Everything about him was quick except his rage.

Like most men, Aweserre had his flashes of anger, but when he did lose his temper completely, 'Serre could hate for years.

No bad thing in a ruler, thought Ramose, nonetheless relieved that his own tardiness in obeying a royal command had been noted yet excused. Yes, they were equal, and yet despite their friendship there was a gap between himself and Aweserre, the absolute monarch of Lower Egypt. Like his god, Set, whom he called Sutekh and venerated over all other deities, Aweserre was full of contradictions.

“Abu told you?” Ramose picked up on that foreign phrase as the two men strolled through the temple. He wondered at the non-Egyptian word, a childish term for “father”.

“The lord Sutekh.” Aweserre was stripping off as he walked away from the sanctuary. “I’m going for a swim.”

Naked, he tossed his clothes at a group of priestesses who happened to be crossing their path and dived into the sacred lake. The oldest priestess’s mouth gaped in horror and Ramose smothered a laugh.

“Remain here,” he commanded the group as Aweserre surfaced and then disappeared. He beckoned the two youngest and prettiest priestesses to the edge of the manmade lake. “Be ready to hand Pharaoh his robes.”

“Come in!” shouted Aweserre from the middle of the golden waters, dangling blue water-lilies from between his fingers. “My father does not mind a Kushite in his pool.”

Ramose shook his head, marveling at how Aweserre had taken Set so much into his heart. Of all the many Egyptian gods, Set was surely the strangest and most foul. A liar, a cheat, the killer of his own brother Osiris.

“What is appropriate in the Great House of Egypt is not fitting for ordinary mortals,” Ramose answered, giving Aweserre the honorific title Per Aa, “Great House”, from which the word Pharaoh was derived. “The lord Sutekh, as you insist on calling him, is not my god.”

“Quite right, too,” said Aweserre, not in the least put out by the black priest’s refusal. “Only kings should worship Sutekh, for they alone amongst men must dispose of their brothers. My father, as you know, murdered his.”

Ramose felt it wisest to let that remark pass in silence.

Aweserre swam back to the red, sunset-lit shallows. “Other men’s families are delightful. I shall be glad to see your son and either of your women.”

Of course he already knew of the new concubine, Hathor. The air itself gossiped for Aweserre.

Now he swung himself easily out of the water using the palms of his hands—‘Serre never had to haul himself out of anything—and, smiling, took sandals and loincloth from the two girls. Robes rustled as the priestesses jostled for a closer look at Pharaoh’s famous pale skin, so different from native Egyptian coloring.

“Did I ever tell you that my father came into Egypt from the desert, just like Lord Sutekh?” continued the object of their interest, shaking water from his springy black hair.

“Many times.” Ramose’s answer earned him reproachful glances from the women. “Your mother, I believe, was from the city of Sodom in Canaan.”

“Ah, the place of a thousand bath-houses.” Aweserre ignored the jibe. “A very beautiful, high-walled citadel, as I understand.” His roving blue eyes, mysterious as a bird’s, blessed the plainest of the priestesses.

Ramose could not understand why Aweserre troubled to be kind. Such a female would be of no use in bed. “I doubt if this city of Sodom is as beautiful as Memphis. Or as important,” he added, reminding Aweserre of his own urgent summons to court.

“Later. Later we must talk over the good and bad.” Aweserre wrapped and knotted the rest of his clothes around his waist and moved on, drawing the priestesses with him. “You must leave us now, Ramose, and go to the temple of your god. There is a priest there whose re-acquaintance I wish you to make. He has volunteered to make a journey for me but needs your permission to leave the house of Ptah.”

Very pleasantly said, thought Ramose, yet there was no mistaking the royal command. He inclined his head. “I will go at once. What is the man’s name?”

“Duauf.”

Ramose nodded and was dismissed from Pharaoh’s presence with a grin.

## Chapter 4

Duauf watched the imposing figure strolling through the pillared hall of the temple of Ptah. He touched his fellow priest on the arm. “Pardon if my act offends your ka, brother,” he said formally, “But see who comes so boldly into the god’s house after many weeks’ absence from Memphis.”

“The black scourge,” muttered the second priest, adding quickly, “Yet Ramose is one of the prophets, high in Ptah’s favor. He need not serve in the temple as we do.” Ramose was influential at court, and the second priest hoped that Duauf would be careful.

Duauf’s hands sketched an obscene gesture. “No, we know that Ramose serves other masters, and how he must ‘service’ them.” A purebred Egyptian of the delta, Duauf despised all foreigners, including Hyksos from the east and Kushites from the south—even third generation Hyksos and Kushites. Yet, watching Ramose draw near, he experienced another feeling: one can desire what one detests.

“Life, prosperity and health!” Greeting the priests, Ramose came between them and placed his hands on their shoulders. From another man, such a gesture might have been familiar. For Ramose it emphasized a fatherly authority. “I have just come from Pharaoh. So tell me, Duauf, has there been any more news from our people in Upper Egypt?”

The slightly-built priest jerked his shaven head, the Adam’s apple in his thin throat wobbling as he spoke. “There has been no word, my lord. And the time of inundation approaches.”

“Indeed.” Ramose frowned.

Duauf had stiffened when Ramose touched him, although some part of him did not wish to throw off that long dark hand. He stared at the gold rings on Ramose’s fingers. “That is why I thought someone—myself—should travel south to Elephantine.” He felt the hand on his shoulder tighten. A spark of mingled fear and desire dried his mouth to a cinder.

“Little brother,” answered Ramose quietly. “It will be a dangerous trip. Several of Aweserre’s own spies have already been captured and killed.”

Gold flashed as Ramose released Duauf’s shoulder. “Neither I nor Aweserre will hold it against you if you change your mind and stay,” he said, even more softly.

“Someone must go.” Duauf clenched both hands into fists.

Removing his hand from the shoulder of the second priest, Ramose sighed. “Yes, I regret to say that you are right. It is vital that we find out about this year’s inundation as soon as possible. I see the grain reserves in the temples and cities declining more and more each day.”

The High Priest felt uneasy. Duauf was not telling him everything. Always when dealing with this slightly-built man, Ramose was aware of undercurrents between them. It was not that Duauf disliked him...quite the reverse.

Disquieted, Ramose cleared his throat. “I will be delighted to see you succeed against Sekenenre and that upstart god of his, but have you thought how you will do it?”

Duauf smiled. “I plan to travel as a priest of Amun.”

He expected to hear Ramose’s deep chuckle at the irony, but the tall black man regarded him gravely. “Others have tried that ruse. They failed.”

“But were they priests of Ptah?”

“Ah, no, they were not.” Ramose smiled. Perhaps Duauf’s southern journey would not be a waste. He needed to know how the Nile was rising at the Nilometer of Elephantine, and if Duauf was prepared to take the risk.... “Such a journey would be courageous, the action of a true patriot.”

Ramose’s responsibilities as Vizier of Lower Egypt had overwhelmed his apprehensions as High Priest in allowing a member of his order to venture into enemy territory. For, despite sharing the same language and culture, Upper Egypt was, in the end, a foreign country.

So it had been since ancient times. Not for nothing was the kingdom of the Nile known as “The Two Lands”, for the shape of the country determined that Egypt fell into distinct halves. In the south, towards Africa, the river ran through Upper Egypt like a narrow green stem, cutting between limestone cliffs and desert. Moving south to north, down to the sea, the Nile fanned out after the city of Memphis into seven main streams which together created a wide, fertile delta. The delta made up the bulk of the

second kingdom, Lower Egypt, although no one was sure where the boundary lay between the Two Lands, where Lower Egypt ended and Upper Egypt began.

Even religion was divided, and the gods were worshipped in particular cities, revered in one place, loathed in another.

The single point of unity in these two kingdoms was Pharaoh, the god-king, who wore a double crown to symbolize his rule over both. When Pharaoh was strong, Egypt was united.

So pharaohs had governed for over a thousand years, but then there came a change. One hundred years before Ramose's birth, the kingdom of Lower Egypt had been invaded by the Hyksos. These Hyksos—"Kings from Foreign Lands"—entered Egypt from the east, quickly overcoming delta settlements with their new weapon, the chariot. Aweserre, Pharaoh of Lower Egypt, was a direct descendant of these foreign invaders.

Upper Egypt had resisted the Hyksos advance and was still ruled from the city of Thebes by a descendant of the ancient, native pharaohs. This was Sekenenre, a man with two aims: to drive the Hyksos Pharaoh out of Lower Egypt, and to extend the worship of the Theban-based god, Amun.

So there were two pharaohs instead of one, and the two were, naturally, enemies. Aweserre governed the richer of the Two Lands, the lush farmlands of the delta, but Sekenenre possessed the Nilometer at Elephantine, the place where the rising of the Nile was first predicted.

It was vital to the well-being of the whole of Egypt to know what kind of yearly flood—inundation—the Nile would produce. If the floods were too high, the precious black soil could be washed away and the water take too long to recede, leaving no time to plant and harvest. If the river rose too little, drought killed off the crops. In either case, famine was the result.

Too high or too low an inundation needed to be prepared against, and the place in Egypt where the warning signs showed first was the Nile island of Elephantine, far away in the south of the country. At present, both the island and the Nilometer, which measured and predicted the flood, were under the control of the priests of Amun. No one else had been able to set foot on the island.

With all these points in mind, Ramose reached his decision.

"You are free to leave the temple of Ptah," he told Duauf. "When will you set out for the Theban kingdom?"

“Tomorrow, my lord.” Duauf bowed as Ramose glided away towards the innermost sanctuary.

“Why are you smiling?” hissed the second priest, after the long echoing hall had returned to silence. “I thought you hated our Hyksos pharaoh and his Kushite vizier.”

Duauf threw him a look of scorn. “You heard what black Ramose called me, a true patriot.”

That was what he was: a true patriot.

For many years Duauf had known that the Hyksos pharaoh was an abomination to the gods—why else had he himself lost his faith? At the beginning, serving in the great Memphis temple of Ptah, he had been so certain of his own place in the scheme of things. But then he had seen preferment go to lesser men, he had heard the petty quarrels and jealousies between his fellow priests. Soon, the rituals themselves became dead forms.

It was then that Duauf made his discovery. Ptah had deserted his temple. Where had the god gone, if not to the temples of Upper Egypt?

Sekenenre, god-king of Upper Egypt, was a purebred Egyptian, like Duauf. As his faith declined, Duauf invested Sekenenre, whom he had never seen, with all the virtues of the great pharaohs of the past, men who had ruled the two lands of Egypt as one.

Seduced by his dream, Duauf watched for an opportunity to help Sekenenre overthrow the foreigner, Aweserre.

And now the chance had arrived to escape. Duauf had never travelled beyond Memphis, and felt trapped by its looming horizons of desert, pyramids and temples.

He was getting out. He was going south, into his true heritage. He was going to Sekenenre with detailed information concerning the defenses and food supplies of Memphis and Lower Egypt—Duauf had kept his ears open in the temple of Ptah whenever Vizier Ramose had visited.

Ramose, the black, the beautiful. When the vile Hyksos stain had been removed from Egypt, Duauf would ask Pharaoh Sekenenre to give him the High Priest as his slave.

Picturing the scene, Duauf quivered with emotion. He was going into Upper Egypt not as a spy but as one who would give Sekenenre the knowledge to destroy the oppressors of his country. He could hardly wait for tomorrow.

## Chapter 5

To reach the island of Elephantine, Duauf followed his plan and disguised himself as a priest of Amun. So far, the deception had worked. After a nine day river journey from Memphis, he and his slave had reached Thebes, the heart of Upper Egypt. Amun's own city.

And what a city! Despite his mouth being as dry as when he chewed on natron to purify himself for temple duties, the slim priest experienced rekindled excitement. Memphis had done little to prepare Duauf for the heat, the noise, the dry, lascivious scent of this second capital, trapped at the feet of its gray-brown mountains and rising temple gates as a fresh dung-ball is stuck between a scarab's legs. The crowded streets were impassably narrow, tall, mud-brick houses climbing on each other's roof-beams to a lapis lazuli sky.

Duauf had been in Thebes half a day, disembarking to barter for provisions while sailors unloaded cargo under the watchful eye of soldiers. Before being allowed to reboard the boat and continue on his journey south, he would have to explain his movements to the captain of the guard.

The captain kept him waiting. Finally, after poking into several of the quay-side bales with his staff, the man approached. At a barked command from his second, eight soldiers left off searching cargo for smuggled wines and spices and jogged along the stone quay towards Duauf's boat. Their spears and triangular shields stood out sharply in the brilliant sunlight. Overhead the vultures circled in lazy sweeps, waiting.

Duauf tapped the gold at his throat, feeling the amulet of the god Amun under his thumb. He was a priest, he could write, he was purebred Egyptian. Courage was for army conscripts. He was above all that.

Boldly, his long nails traced the hieroglyphic signs stamped on the tiny amulet. His pretty Nubian boy had somehow acquired this token and Duauf by now trusted its protection.



The captain stopped in front of him. The Nubian boy performed a graceful obeisance on deck and came up grinning. I am better than this man, thought Duauf, the golden amulet of Amun touching cold against his skin, yet he envied the smiling slave.

“What is your name?” asked the officer.

“I am Duauf. I am a priest.”

“Show me your right hand,” said the officer.

Duauf did so. The officer gazed stolidly at his upraised palm.

“Good. No mark of Set.”

At Duauf’s questioning glance, the man added, “If your right hand had carried the forbidden beast-shape of Set, I would have had to kill you, as I have done others—even those that have tried to disguise their tattoo with fire.”

Duauf trembled.

“Yet you do not carry the staff of a priest of Amun,” continued the officer.

The captain moved closer, stepping out of the shadow of the ship’s mast. Duauf had a sudden vivid impression of the man’s face—the face of Egypt, untainted by the Hyksos invaders—breaking in to him through a blaze of light. It was a keen face, smooth and taut as a bowstring, the eyes glittering and solemn as a kestrel’s. It was a dark face. The man was almost as black-skinned as Ramose.

Thinking of the Memphis High Priest, Duauf was conscious of a different kind of heat. Quickly, he bared his throat. “No staff, yet look well—is this not a sufficient token of my status?”

The soldier took hold of the amulet around his throat and studied it. “This is the sign of the Unseen One.” He released the gold and made an upward sweep of reverence with his hand.

Duauf recognized the movement and mirrored it, although in Memphis only old people used such gestures. “Yes, it is Amun’s.”

“Yet you speak with the accents of a barbarian.”

Duauf felt his throat close up, even while the musk of desire lay in his belly. His heart skipped back to the immediate danger, and he clicked his fingers.

With a shake of anklet bangles for the soldier’s benefit, his Nubian slave tripped forward and placed a scroll of papyrus into Duauf’s hand. The letter

was a forgery, designed to fox more learned men than the captain. “See there, the name of the High Priest of Amun. I am about sacred business.” Recalling a certain wrist movement of his grandmother’s, Duauf motioned the soldier away.

The captain saluted and withdrew. This stranger might be as pale as limestone, but the letter, and above all that gesture of dismissal, could not be denied. Let the priests deal with their own. He would delay the ship no longer.

Even as the soldier left the boat, Duauf began caressing the Nubian boy.

\* \* \* \*

Reaching the baking, wind-blown city of Elephantine several nights later, on the same day Ramose returned to Mazghuna, Duauf followed a retired priest of Amun to his house.

The old fellow, who still shaved his head and brows, had been a *wab* priest, one of the lowest ranks of temple officials. He was flattered when Duauf—a full priest—asked if he might stay the night.

They spent a pleasant evening, Duauf enjoying the praise and reverence of the humbler man. He sipped the old priest’s wine and dreamed of a country of true-born Egyptians.

It was not long before a certain name recurred again and again in their conversation. Sekenenre, Pharaoh of Upper Egypt, Duauf learned, was the true son of Amun.

“At first his divine parentage was doubted, because his mother, Tetisheri, is a commoner,” the *wab* priest explained, serving himself and Duauf another slice of roast goose.

Duauf rubbed dust from his eyes and became most attentive. Fearing an overt curiosity might be suspicious, he said cautiously, “Of course, I have seen Tetisheri. She is very beautiful.”

“Beautiful as the moon,” agreed the *wab* priest, “and desired by Amun himself.” His wife and Duauf’s Nubian boy slept in the doorway, replete after their food, and the old man felt it safe to add more.

“When I was as young as you, I lived in Thebes and served Amun. I was tall and strong, and was one of those privileged to bear the god’s statue through the Luxor temple on festival days. After the god had been sealed

into his sacred barge, I and other chosen priests would lift him up and carry him on our shoulders on a circuit of his house.

“Once Tetisheri’s son, Sekenenre, was brought within the temple. That day Amun made himself heavy, so his bearers had to kneel at Sekenenre’s feet, and all the temple knew that Sekenenre was his son. I remember the great weight of the god then, and how my heart beat so fast I was afraid it would burst.”

The old man slipped a hand inside his long kilt and brought out a pouch from which he took a tiny, painted sliver of wood. “This is part of the god’s barge which came away in my hand that day. Feel how heavy it still is.” He dropped the sliver into Duauf’s palm.

“You have been fortunate.” Nothing he had touched as a priest of Ptah had moved Duauf so much as this tiny piece of wood. His hand trembled as he returned the old man’s relic. “I hope that the god sends as clear a sign for my task.”

“What task is this?”

Duauf breathed in. He needed to test his story on a safe audience, but was reluctant to lie to the old man. “I have been sent by my temple to gather the holy waters of the Nile, at the first cataract where the land of Egypt begins,” he said at last. “Our sacred lake has lost its virtue. We need the pure water for the holy of holies.”

The old man’s watery eyes blinked rapidly, and he raised his hands. “Ai! Ai! Our land is filled with omens of despair! What times are coming!”

Duauf said nothing. He watched a mosquito settle, a black pen stroke, on the shoulder of the Nubian boy. Out in the darkening streets farm laborers groped their way home, oblivious to impending disaster.

“You are my guest for the night,” his host said finally. “I will give you this warning. No priests, except those of our god, are allowed upon this island—did you not know that? Yet without the sign of Amun you would not have come so far. Now, without some token from our ruler Sekenenre—may he celebrate thousands of jubilees!—you should not go near the sacred rocks. Such a course of action would be dangerous.”

“I have a letter. A scroll from Sekenenre himself.”

Instead of being overawed by this pronouncement, the old man cleared his nose and spat. “If that is so, make certain that its seals are correct. And remember this: my son now serves Amun, and your guest’s debt extends to

him.” He patted his food-bloated stomach. “It is his goose we have eaten.”

“I will thank your son, should I see him.” Duauf closed his eyes and pretended to go to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

He had indeed planned to stay overnight at the house of the retired priest, who seemed pious and kindly, a living pattern of Egyptian virtues, but with the reference to his son being a priest of Amun the old man became less simple or trustworthy. Duauf decided that it would be prudent to move on.

Waiting for moonrise, he changed into his sacred robes, gathered his things together and stole outside into the still-warm street.

The Nubian he left behind as a guest-gift. If all went as planned, he would soon be rich enough to keep a man slave—a very special man slave—and not a boy.

Keeping to the shadows, avoiding strays, animal and human, Duauf ventured through Elephantine. He reached the heart of the city, the blank high walls of the temple of the ram-headed god Khum, and there encountered a foot-pad.

As Duauf retreated back against the stone wall, the thief grabbed the priest’s member and squeezed, rather too hard. Duauf felt the man’s hands and heavy thighs pressing against him and shuddered.

“Please don’t kill me,” he gasped. “No, not the letter!”

But he was helpless. The thief took everything of value—his silver coins, the gold amulet of Amun, the letter—and then neatly struck the slighter man so that Duauf folded like a camp chair and fell down.

It was some moments before the agony in his groin subsided and he could move. Draping his linen belt across the hand-marks on his kilt, Duauf hobbled past the great stone towers of the temple towards the city gates. Now, without gold or other means of bribery or barter there was no question of turning back. He must complete his patriotic task, and without the deception of the forged letter.

That knowledge, which should have been bitter to him, created a strange euphoria in Duauf. With every passing moment, the ruse he must use to get out of the city became clearer. Many priests of Egypt were

stargazers, trained to watch the heavens. Duauf climbed the six steps to the city gate and rapped smartly on the door of the watchman's house.

"Open at once!" he called, as a sleep-bleared face appeared in the door-crack. "You ought to have been ready for me! Hurry man, the night is passing!"

The slim priest waved at the dark sky. "Are you blind? Look at that new bright star, overhead—it must be plotted tonight! The King's fate lies with that star!"

Sometimes, for a lie to be convincing, it needed only the lift of an eyebrow or a particular tone of voice. The yawning watchman shouted up to the sentries on the tower that all was well and drew back the bars. One of the great cedar wood gates creaked open.

"Tomorrow night, be awake to let me back in," warned Duauf, "Or I shall report you to the governor of the city." He did not stay to hear the watchman's promise.

\* \* \* \*

Using the stars as his guide, Duauf walked over the black mass of the island. After an hour or so he came to a building which showed no smoke or light. A sharply-angled block, it seemed neither large enough for a temple nor small enough for a house. The moon had still not set, so Duauf could see its dressed stone foundations and the gap where the rushing floodwater of the inundation would run up the levels cut out from the gray rock and be measured by the priests of Amun.

Dotted on the headland behind the Nilometer, and no longer obscured by it, glowed rank after rank of fires. A soldiers' camp, whose presence Duauf had expected after the *wab* priest's warning. Why else should they be here, if not to guard the vital flood measures?

Throwing off his cloak so that his white robes should reflect the moonlight, the priest walked in the direction of the river. Already he could hear raised voices. A breeze rocked the boughs of the acacia trees, their leaves sounding like the rustle of an arrow quivering in its target. Duauf stumbled on, his journey almost complete.

A dozen spearmen solidified out of the darkness, and he shouted. "I serve King Sekenenre! I put myself in your hands!" A tiny shiver entered his

voice. "I have vital news concerning the Hyksos usurper, the one who calls himself Aweserre. Take me to the priests of Amun, who will understand what I say."

Duauf knew that his loyalty to Pharaoh Sekenenre was a patriotic duty. Whether the guards of the Nilometer would accept his sincerity was still in doubt.

The soldiers were in range and had a clear target. In another moment he would know.

## Chapter 6

“Preposterous mortal,” muttered the god Set, staring over the stem of the sun-boat into the rising sun. Beneath the heavenly river sailed by the gods, the land of Egypt steamed in the early warmth of the morning, the Nile a thin glittering ribbon across it.

“Who, Duauf?” asked the goddess who was with him.

“No, that idiot Aweserre. He’s thinking of building a chariot track in the middle of my new temple in the city of Avaris. Says the thunder of chariot wheels should please me, my being a storm god.”

“Yet you are fond of him,” said Nephthys, his wife—or was it her sister, Isis? He had been tricked by these two before.

The Kas of Nephthys-Isis—her nine golden spirit doubles, which she and all immortal beings possessed, compared to a mortal’s single ka—chuckled in delight at his uncertainty. “Come now, you monster of the delta, admit that this Aweserre creature pleases you.”

The touch of the goddess, which could burn cities, was mildly ticklish to the god. He pulled her onto his lap, and they looked together over the dry face of the earth.

“Aweserre dances for me,” remarked Set, running his tongue around the creases of Nephthys-Isis’s ear.

“Ah, you mean like the temple-harlots of the eastern lands?” The goddess blew a breath of incense into the god’s long nose.

“Not so interesting. But entertaining.”

“Yes, one can grow weary of the same rites.” Nephthys-Isis made a cat-like yawn. “Sometimes one longs for change.”

Both gods glanced to the center of the reed ship, where Ra held court. Today, the old sun-god received emissaries from the deities of the Sea Peoples and Sumerians. The goddess Astarte, tantalizing with her long silver legs and hair, played draughts with the god Baal. Baal’s brows were molded

into a dark rain-frown which made the whole ship heavier.

“Odd, aren’t they?” remarked Nephthys-Isis.

“Aweserre thinks I am the same as Baal.”

“Your beard’s not as grotesque as his.” She spoke softly, out of the corner of her mouth. “Why not inspire Aweserre to build his racetrack? It might impress our provincial deities. Strictly, it’s burnt offerings and virgins for them.”

Set made a face. “Spare me that! I’ve other plans for Aweserre. A few ideas to surprise his majesty and his foreign friends.” He glared at old Ra.

“Hush! Dangerous talk.” Nephthys-Isis kissed him quiet. “When are you going to kill Osiris this year?” she asked after a moment.

“I haven’t yet decided. The murder of our green vegetation god Osiris must be late, because our blue god Amun wants war.”

“Amun is very presumptuous,” said Nephthys-Isis. Her gaze fell on the blue god, seated towards the stern of the boat. “Is it true that Sekenenre is really his son?”

Set shook his head. “That’s a piece of political fiction. Like his god, Sekenenre is ambitious. Both need more followers.”

“Amun will gain them at your expense.”

Set smiled. “There are other wild men to carry on my worship, apart from Aweserre.”

He pointed to a village near the Nile’s lower reaches. “Look at that one now: the angry man standing in his fields.”

The two immortals leaned forward to watch.

\* \* \* \*

Standing in their dusty fields, two Egyptians contemplated the ruin of most of their livelihood in disbelief, one stunned, one sullen. In a single night, wind and the desert had overwhelmed the narrow fields. There would not be enough left to feed themselves before the next inundation.

Kasa, the older, bigger and darker of the two men, shaded his eyes and squinted towards the river. “Still too low.” It was April, season of harvest. The Nile had shrunk into a slow-moving, brackish stream.

“We shall get work at Pharaoh’s tomb,” said Nakht, bright eyes scanning the neat patchwork of fields that led away from the river. The freak



sandstorm had touched only a few of them. "They are good people here. They will feed your mother and father and little Tiyi while we are away."

He pointed with his staff to their neighbor's land. "See, Bata has had greater misfortune. His crops are buried, and the tax collectors have come."

Kasa grunted to show satisfaction, but said nothing. Nakht never seemed to care that he had been cheated. It was Kasa himself, the tall, burly heir, who was puzzled, angry at life for making his mother old before her time with endless work, angry that Nakht, the cousin who was as a brother to him, should be shunned and scorned because he was a pig-keeper.

Kasa was often angry. He was one of those men, swarthy-skinned and black-tempered, powerful in build and in resentment, whom Egyptians called "Followers of Set." These "wild-men", like the storm god, were always larger than life and rightly feared. Many were also desired by women—it was said that "Followers of Set" made good lovers.

Nakht interrupted his cousin's grim reverie. "They're bringing Bata out of his house. They are not pleased." He glanced at Kasa. "Surely they will not beat him? How can Bata pay taxes when he has no food?"

How can any of us? thought Kasa, but he stopped Nakht moving forward. "Save your breath and your legs. The tax scribe and his soldiers will be coming here next."

\* \* \* \*

As Kasa predicted, the tax collectors paid his family a visit. The big farmer watched stolidly as soldiers ransacked the house and yard, seeking grain he had told them was not there. Finally, it seemed they believed him and returned to the fat scribe in charge of tax collection.

"We have searched. There is no more barley."

Hearing the soldier's report, the official scratched his fleshy nose with the end of his reed pen. He was hot, parched and irritable. Collecting legitimate dues from these creatures was a task he detested. Coldly, he assessed the family knelt before him. The parents were gray mongrels, fit only to grovel and serve. Their eldest son was a wild man, tall and broad as a carob tree, his shoulders bowed into a vulture's hunch, the tilt of his head an insult. The scribe did not like the way the fellow stared—those deep-set, hooded eyes were disrespectful.

“The god is not yet satisfied.” Noting the daughter of potential interest, the scribe unrolled a papyrus and read out the full taxes due from this land: so much grain, so much wine. “Where is the wheat?”

“It is here,” replied Nakht at once, raising bright brown eyes to the sleek round face. “We require only a few days to clear off the sand. Some harvest we shall be able to save.”

He glanced at his cousin, but Kasa said nothing. He had dealt with taxmen before. They accepted no excuses.

“The god is not yet satisfied.”

Nakht, always idealistic, did not understand that bargaining with these men was impossible. “See, my lord, my uncle is a potter and my aunt a weaver. They could work for you in the village. And with Kasa’s labor and my own....”

“Stop that whimpering, girl,” commanded the scribe, ignoring Nakht. “Come here. Lift the braids back from your neck.”

He pretended to look for lice amongst the tangled black hair. Half-formed and filthy as she might be, the girl was also desirable. Her skin was as luscious as a date’s and her breasts were like two love-apples. “This female will supply part of the shortfall,” he said, clearing his throat.

Nakht’s feet hit his swineherd’s goad as he moved to protest. A guard jabbed the back of his calves with a club, and the youth subsided.

Still Kasa said nothing. Since Tiya was almost a woman, it did not greatly concern him whether she went to a farmer or to an indoor worker like a scribe. His sister might fare better with one than the other, but Kasa could not say which. At least she would eat.

Tiya’s mother, whose wits had been dulled by age, did not see matters in that light. She began to weep, and with his father and Nakht looking ready to make their own lamentation, Kasa spoke.

“Will you also take my cousin for a year? He is a strong worker and should be equal to a measure or so of corn.”

A pig-keeper! The fat scribe was scandalized. He, as much as the illiterate villagers whom he so despised, regarded swineherds with superstitious dread. Pigs were the beasts of Set, the god of evil. The scribe knew that if the youth touched him he would certainly be ill or fall under a curse.

Seeking comfort and confirmation of his status, the man brushed his

fingers across Tiyi's breasts. When the girl sobbed aloud, he shook his head. "The god is not yet satisfied."

*Did this clerk know no other phrase?* Kasa drew breath to speak. But Nakht was ahead of him. "Perhaps the god should collect his own taxes."

Nakht's answer dropped into the farmyard like a boulder thrown down as a boundary marker. The scribe's face lost its look of roundness. He dragged Tiyi behind him and shouted to the guards. "Seize him!"

The guards raised their clubs and glanced at Kasa.

"Why do you hesitate?" shrieked the scribe. "Beat him!"

Nakht was grabbed by his shining cap of hair and thrown down. Tiyi screamed hoarsely, and her mother tried to cover the girl's eyes, but the scribe thrust off the old woman.

Six staves struck at the youth, and a seventh winded Kasa's father. Two men held onto Kasa, both punching him to keep him quiet, although it was clear that the farmer had no stomach for a fight.

Then Kasa head-butted one of the guards. As the man doubled into a knot of agony, Kasa wrested the staff from his twitching hands and rammed it into the face of the next soldier. Blood spattering from his nose, the guard staggered into an empty corn-bin and reeled backwards against Nakht. Beater became beaten as the guards could not check the stroke and their clubs cracked along the man's upflung arm. Swinging the staff in both hands, Kasa ran.

Not to his mother, prone in the shadow of the house. Not to Nakht, already quiet and still under the soldiers' clubs. Hit those who strike at you, ran the village creed, and Kasa would not forsake it, not to take on the scribe, who would certainly have yielded.

That was a fatal mistake. Attacking the first guard checked Kasa's momentum, and the soldiers had time to react. With one of their number still laying into Nakht, the others attacked him.

Against a group of five men, even a strongly-built farmer had no chance. His club shattered on impact, and the stump was smashed from his hands. As he lurched blindly forward to retaliate, Kasa was kicked off his legs and pummeled senseless by the guards. When he stirred again, it would be to a completely different world.

## Chapter 7

Nakht was dead. The army officer, being a decent man, had allowed Kasa to put Nakht's body in the dung pit, before the farm itself was burned. Kasa had no time to bury Nakht properly. The body had been cold and twisted, the face a shattered mass. He had felt more shame than sorrow, and relief more than shame. Dead, Nakht had no future claim on him. The rest of his kindred were different.

Where were they?

His parents, Tiyi, the fat scribe and his men had vanished. Battered unconscious, Kasa had come round to find himself being watched by other guards, real soldiers by their scars, who treated captives with a careless brutality.

Kasa was the seventh farmer to be enslaved for failure to pay taxes. For five days, the straggling line of bruised men had grown as the column was marched from village to village.

At the last settlement the soldiers commandeered fresh food and water. Kasa and the other prisoners had been fed that day.

"We'll be going into the desert tomorrow," whispered the man bound next in line to Kasa. "The building quarries. We'll be there until we die."

Not me, thought Kasa. He touched his thumb to the bloody rope-grazes at his neck and wrists and swore an oath to live. Somehow he must escape. Somewhere he would find his family.

The spirit of Nakht spoke to him all that night, teaching him how to survive.

\* \* \* \*

The building places had their own hierarchies. First came the quarries of limestone, of pink and gray granite, fine stones to adorn tombs and temples.

The workers in such places were free and skilled. They sang as they dragged heavy, rough-blocked boulders to the river transports.

Next came the mud-brick quarries—not true quarries, but known as such—where peasants labored to pay their tax, making bricks for houses and palaces. These men and women cursed and joked as they trod straw and mud with their feet.

Last were the dirt quarries, where the dregs—criminals and prisoners of war—dug out the mountains of earth needed for building ramps, the grit needed to line those fine stone foundations. Here men did not speak.

Kasa was in a dirt quarry.

In the place where he worked, landslides were common. They had bored deep into the cliff after rubble, leaving behind softer, treacherous sand. Whenever the fragile honeycomb of shafts and bore-holes collapsed, men were buried. Alive or not, they were left there by the overseers.

Kasa rarely saw the sun. Dust was everywhere: in eye and foreskin creases, in the half-rotten onions and stale bread, the one meal of the day. He got up when the dust was yellow and stopped when it was black. Between the two colors, he worked.

Thrust-shovel-heave. The muscle strain and broken back of harvest-time, without its rewards. No trees, flowers, songbirds. No view of the river. Nothing but clay-streaked figures wrestling with clods.

Kasa stole bread from the weaker prisoners. “You are murdering your own brothers,” Nakht told him—his spirit visited Kasa’s dreams each night. Kasa ignored him.

“Find your sister. You must find Tiyi,” said Nakht again and again.

Kasa knew that his parents were now dead. Perhaps he cried. He wasn’t sure. In the morning everything was forgotten except hunger, pain and work.

“You must escape,” Nakht told Kasa. “Watch for the chance.”

Kasa was too tired. In the night now he stayed awake to watch how men killed themselves. A month passed, and somehow he was still alive. Then fate took a hand.

More captives arrived at the quarry: new men with angry eyes and soft palms. Twelve were set to work near him. Kasa showed them how to save fingers and thumbs from shovel sores.

“That’s a good start,” said Nakht. “Make them your friends.”

“I didn’t want to be kept awake by their weeping,” Kasa had seen

blisters turn bad and men die of it.

Next morning, one of the twelve risked a beating and leaned on his pick to talk. "I was a farmer, like you. Deer trampled my corn, and locusts ate the rest. I'm here to settle my debts."

Kasa carried on with what he was doing.

"My name is Teta."

Kasa grunted his own name. He was shifting soil into a huge reed basket and didn't want to be interrupted. Teta helped him lift the pannier onto his shoulders. "My thanks," said Kasa.

That night, Teta made sure he was next to the big man. When the overseers had roped and staked them, Teta crawled to the limit of his bonds. "Kasa!"

"Leave me alone."

"There are twelve of us from one village," whispered Teta. "We do not want to die in this place."

Why should I risk myself? thought Kasa. "I am sleeping."

"You vowed to escape when you were brought here," Nakht's voice reminded him. "You're the one who used to say that you always keep your promises."

"You must help us," said Teta.

"Tomorrow we shall be put to new digging," answered Kasa. "Few guards linger near the cliff face. There have been too many collapses. We must make our move then."

"We shall be guided by you." Contented, Teta went to sleep. Kasa did not close his eyes again that night.

Next day, Kasa was slow. He delayed so long that he was beaten and slammed against a vein of rubble, the kind that looked stable but would fall if struck at a certain point with a shovel. Such faces were feared by the prisoners.

Kasa labored sullenly all morning. Finally, the inevitable happened. His pick hacked through to softer sand, and the section gave way with a soft thud.

Kasa emerged through the dust clouds and seized Teta's arm. Teta would not run. He pointed to the vast slurry of earth, dislodged rocks still rolling down on top of it.

"Khafra is under that," he said. "I knew his daughter."

That night Teta said, "There are eleven men from my village. We do not wish to end our days in this place." He gave Kasa his own ration of bread.

Why do they look to me? thought Kasa. He knew why: because he had survived a month in the quarry, longer than most men. He thought a while, then reached out and shook Teta awake. "Get me seven water flasks and seven days' worth of rations."

"Setna can do that. He was our village thief."

"We are going to see the river," said Kasa. "There will be a new earth-slip, an earth slide with a difference."

"Better," said Nakht, in Kasa's dreams.

\* \* \* \*

Setna was a good thief. They hid the flasks under a boulder and disposed of the food as Kasa told them. "When is the festival of the Apis bull?" Kasa then asked Nakht.

"In three days," answered his cousin.

Kasa smiled in his dream.

The day after the festival, he was the first prisoner to start work. Huddled together, overseers spoke of the previous evening's revels. Most were unsteady on their feet. Kasa watched them carefully.

He waited until one little group was directly in front of him. Drunk or not, the overseers still had sense enough to keep a safe distance. Kasa had to draw them nearer.

First he removed his head-cloth and dropped it over the wriggling mass in his soil pannier. "What is this dirty yellow stuff? See, there is a mass of it in the cliff." He lifted cloth and all from the pannier.

Other prisoners began gathering round. Kasa had to be quick then, but even after two months' quarrying he had clever fingers.

The overseers used their staffs to batter through to the cliff face. They thrust Kasa out of the way, too.

"Now!" shouted Kasa, and Setna the thief, whose eyes were keenest, hurled his shovel straight into the underbelly of the mountain. The cloth Kasa had fastened there a moment before ripped open, and an avalanche of sidewinders burst onto the overseers' faces.

In another moment, men were running everywhere. Overseers not

screaming and clawing their eyes sprinted for their bows, yelling at the soldiers guarding the quarry entrance. Kasa, who knew the snakes had already fed well on seven days' rations, set off past the stricken overseers along the line of the cliff face. With Teta and Setna and nine more following, he led the way, letting instinct guide him. Ahead, he knew, was the river.

Already he could smell freedom.



## Chapter 8

Tiyi was still weeping. The pattern of her life had been destroyed. In a single day family, home and future had been taken from her. Nakht was dead. Her brother Kasa was dead. Her parents were dead. They breathed beside her on the boat, but their eyes were turned inward. In the face of their misery, Tiyi shed her tears.

She had never wanted to be anything but a farmer's wife. A soft, sweet-tempered girl, she would have obeyed the man chosen for her, coaxed him to bed and loved their children, lots of little ones. Now she was a slave, and slaves were not allowed to keep their children.

Tiyi did not know where she and her parents were going. It was the first time she had traveled outside her village. The motion of the boat made her sick, and its great speed, smoother and faster than a galloping donkey, was terrifying.

At midday they dropped anchor. Her parents and the collected revenues of food and wine were to remain on board along with the guards. Tiyi was hauled from her place and dragged off the boat onto the beaten earth jetty.

The fat scribe, an anxious man, wanted to be sure of his rights. He hustled Tiyi up the steep track leading to a nameless village. The instant the path turned from the river and the boat was lost from view, he pushed her to the ground. Her tunic was pushed roughly up to her middle, and her forearms grazed along the hot sand.

"Higher!" The scribe raked her flanks with his fingernails, forcing Tiyi to lift her hips. The act of coupling was no mystery to her. She had seen animals mate.

He was hurried, casually brutal. When he had finished, he dusted her off with the pride of possession. She was sore and slow walking back to the ship, and he nagged her to hurry. Tiyi's childhood was over.

\* \* \* \*

Watching this scene from the ridge above was a warrior. The warrior's true name was unimportant since he liked to be known as Bakht, after his illustrious ancestor, or by the title "Governor of the Oryx Nome." Strictly speaking that office was not his, but he aspired to it. To that end, the unexpected tribute which had appeared alongside his jetty was too good to miss.

Bakht crawled back to his men hidden behind the limestone ridge. Orders were relayed, bows lifted and arrows notched. The sun-flash on his copper spearhead was the signal. Two score arrows hissed like striking cobras, each arrow hitting its target.

In the boat below them there was confusion and anger. Trying to get away, the guards attempted to do the work of dying sailors.

Bakht leaped over the ridge and skidded down the cliff face, followed by his men. He was first on the boat and first to draw blood at close quarters—a woman, as it happened, which he regretted. Twisting his spear free of the withered body, Bakht drove its point into her husband's throat as the old peasant lurched into an attack, and so dispatched both to the Field of Reeds. The scribe was next, and a guard, then the spoil was his.

With his men finishing off the dying and retrieving their arrows, Bakht lifted the girl off her dead mother and wiped the blood from her face and hands. He sat her on top of a stack of wheat and let her cry while he cleaned his spear and watched his men unload the boat. The vessel itself would be useful, though it would have to be repainted.

"What's your name, girl?" He picked a fig from one of the baskets of produce and bit down on its sweetness.

Tiyi shook her head. Bakht shrugged and called over one of his men. "Dump the bodies in the river as usual." Spitting the fig stalk onto the deck, he prodded the nearest bodies with his spear. "Sink these with a food offering each. And remember to use stones."

He glanced up at the girl and saw a flicker of confusion. A gentle type, he'd known plenty who would have gone for his eyes or guts by now. Beneath a bush of wiry black curls, her little grubby face was as dark as a Kushite's. Bakht let her scramble down from her perch as her parents' bodies were put into the river, but caught her arm in case she tried to join

them.

“Better this way, eh, than them starving to death in the building quarries? That’s where they would have ended.”

He shook her, and she did not resist. Already he sensed her girlish hatred wavering. He’d never had an easier catch. Either she was sensible or simple.

“Did that scribe enjoy you?” he asked doubtfully, having seen most of the man’s performance. The girl nodded and, in the blunt custom of the peasants, raised a finger to indicate how many times.

“Can’t you talk?”

Tiyi tried. Her lips moved. “Aaa.” Her tongue remained fixed. Yet speech would not have saved her family, would it? Had there been time, just now, for a shout of warning when the robbers attacked?

The robber-captain pinched the end of his snub nose in thought. He jabbed a dirty thumb between her teeth.

“Ah!” he said, looking into her mouth. “Tongue-tied, eh? Very good. We can make use of that.”

## Chapter 9

While Bakht, Governor of the Oryx Nome, dealt with his mute slave and Tiyi's brother escaped the quarries and Ramose waited in Memphis for news from Duauf, Pharaoh Aweserre defended his kingdom. A force of Retanu had been spotted creeping towards the delta from the marshlands of the Bitter Lakes. Lately retired to the northern city of Avaris to escape increasing heat and pre-inundation torpor, Aweserre had to march his personal forces straight into the desert to stop this advance.

Soon they would hear the enemy. His scouts reported them to be close, moving in three columns, chariots at the head.

"The Retanu are eating and drinking as they march. Should we not burst upon them, and take them unawares?" asked the scout leader.

"Not yet, my braves," answered Aweserre, signaling his trumpeters to sound a general halt. "This is not good ground for chariots. Let the Bushy-Ones tire of walking and bloat on beer and bread. We'll take them from the rear, like Kushite women, and drive their stinking infantry into the marshes."

His men dropped off their weapons and rations with scarcely a murmur. Desert marching was wearisome.

Aweserre never tired. He gulped a mouthful of wine, then, tossing his horse's reins to another charioteer—Pharaoh did not bother with a driver—set off at a run across the dunes to catch his first glimpse of the enemy. Moaning, his chief barons staggered to their feet.

"Stay there!" called Aweserre from the top of the highest dune. Without looking back, he continued tracking the scouts' path. "Soft, soft, soft, hard," he chanted aloud, the rhythm of his words slower than his feet. "My scouts sink to their asses in sand shunned by horses - Yes, that's it! Man - has - no - horse - sense. A pity, my scouts, a pity." He jumped onto firmer sand, then followed his own course, sometimes crossing that of the scouts, at times

running far from it.

Soon he was back with the Egyptian force. He picked out the tallest captain and stood upon the man's shoulders like a tumbler so that everyone could see him.

"Lo, my children!" he called out. "These Retanu are as noisy as grasshoppers! Can you not hear their horns and pipes?"

Balancing easily on the captain's shoulders, Aweserre raised a hand up to his own ear. Sure enough, the hot desert air thrummed faintly with blown instruments.

"They are as numerous as the locust. Their arms dazzle the sun!" shouted Aweserre. "By the long hairs of my chin, we'll swat them twenty at a time!"

His men picked at their weapons, pretending indifference. Aweserre ran both hands through his ram's-head of curls. "Let me meet no man on the battlefield with hair as long as mine—unless it be a wig."

The short-cropped soldiers laughed.

"Gold for all!" Agreement rolled back from a hundred throats. "Aye!"

"Stain the sand, feast the vultures!" Aweserre's face went purple. "They are no kin of mine!"

The first tall standards of the Retanu appeared over the crest of the eastern dunes, brightly patterned flags seeming closer in the heat haze. Aweserre tumbled from the captain's shoulders. "To your chariots, my braves! Soldiers—follow me!"

He darted to his carriage and leaped upon the back of the lead horse. "Jump on, those who can!" He cracked the reins across the horses' necks.

Somehow, he spun the chariot within its own axle length. The wicker carriage, bristling pennants, ostrich plumes, chunks of polished glass, bounced madly behind the galloping horses, big blacks, hand-picked by Pharaoh. Moving at a smooth, racing gait, they rattled through the infantry lines, and men whirled in their traces to follow.

Astride the deep-chested lead animal, riding so skillfully as to be almost not part of the horse but floating a finger or so above it, Aweserre. He wore a black leather kilt, headband and chest-padding, big gold earrings, bronze arm-guards and leather gloves. He had not shaved for days and, like a veil, the stubble stopped blue and sudden beneath his eyes.

As he bore flawlessly through another column of rushing soldiers,

spreading himself through the army, men caught some of his unquenchable spirit and ran more lightly. One young archer even managed to pitch himself—an untidy, sprawling mass of legs, arms, arrows and quiver—onto the floor of the chariot.

“Throw me my helmet, will you?” a voice yelled. The archer groaned and rolled up tighter. He felt, he supposed, as water must feel, sloshed round in a bucket. As he attempted to regain his feet, the chariot floor suddenly bucked over a stone, and the man toppled sideways. The rushing sand would have scoured his face had not a hard, sinewy arm scooped him back.

“Don’t struggle. You’ll spoil my team’s rhythm.” The arm waited until he was clinging onto the wicker, then a hand slapped his shoulder. “Well done! The rest are behind you.”

The archer, staving off the terrible moment when he must look at Pharaoh, twisted his upper body and squinted back. Faces smeared with the standing dust, the nearest officer and his charioteer were both bent forward over their horses, trying to catch up to Aweserre. Behind them, horses and men jostled for positions in a swelling column.

“A muddle, aren’t they?” The hand which had saved him was unbuckling a helmet from the chariot rim. In a blink of an eye the rest of the arm, shoulder and body flashed past as Aweserre somehow launched himself from the chariot, this time onto the heavier, braking horse.

Aweserre brought the blacks round in an easy, sweeping semi-circle, talking softly to the pair in a tongue unknown to the archer. His pigskin helmet, with its colored streamers, nodded when he spoke certain words. Suddenly he looked round and grinned. “What’s your name?”

Startled, the archer gave it.

“I’m ‘Serre,” said Pharaoh, leaning back. When the archer could not clasp his outstretched hand, Aweserre simply jumped off the horse’s surging rump. His landing in the chariot was practiced and casual. “I envy you, archer. Your kind are the backbone of the army. I’ve always wanted to sharp-shoot. How long did it take you to learn?”

“A season or so, master.” Taller than Pharaoh, the archer was terrified. Desperately, he tried somehow to meet the living god’s eye without looking down at him.

“Tell me what’s wrong with your officers’ tactics.”

The fingers which grasped his were slender-looking, but their grip was

enormous. The archer stared into the narrow, blue-eyed, eastern-looking face and realized that size was not important. He saw, too, that Aweserre knew it.

“Let it not trouble you,” said Pharaoh. “Only answer my question.” His shoulder muscles bulged as he drew on the reins wrapped round his arm-guards and brought the blacks to a dead stop.

A flood of gratitude and relief loosened the archer’s tongue. He spoke while the other chariots and infantry drew round Aweserre’s position.

“Yes, I see the sense of all you say.” Pharaoh did not stop him, but the archer’s own general, a strapping warrior broader than his shield, leaped down from one chariot and ran to Aweserre’s.

“Get down from there!” he bawled. “You pollute the presence!” He bowed to his commander. “Your pardon, Lord. He will be punished.”

Aweserre prevented the archer from moving. “This captain fights with me today.” He lifted his own staff of office from his belt. Speechless, the archer received it. He had just advanced through several ranks in one stroke. “Now run as you did before and fetch the other generals,” said Pharaoh. “No trumpets now to alert the enemy, we do not have much time.”

Aweserre pointed to the clear horizon. The army had run ahead of the Retanu and were backed into an ancient water-course. Ahead and slightly below them were the cracked hard sands of the bitter lake marshes, dried out in the summer drought, perfect for chariots. Farther away, smooth golden dunes looked even better.

Not so, explained Pharaoh. That honey-colored sand would clog up wheels, hooves and boots. Men would flounder in it. “The Retanu, being foreigners, will not know.”

“Neither did we, and we’re Egyptian,” muttered the massive general who had threatened the archer.

Aweserre smiled and gave the rest of his plan. Tactics were briefly discussed, then the generals returned to their own command to pass on the orders. After some noisy flourishes and rearrangements, the army quieted. Men tightened their grip on newly-greased reins or newly-sharpened swords and rocked on their feet, waiting.

“I hate this part,” said the archer, standing in the chariot beside Aweserre. He remembered to whom he spoke. “Master, I did not mean—I’m not a coward—I’m sure your battle plans are perfect. They always are.

You've never been defeated!" Feeling better, the archer straightened. "Thank you, master, for the staff," he added shyly.

"Try my name," said Aweserre. "A chariot's too cramped for ceremony. Oh, and one thing more. Don't trouble about your commander picking on you. By the end of this battle he'll have forgotten your face. A brave man, but if the chain of that golden fly he wears were threaded between his ears, there'd be no impediment."

The archer turned away, hiding a grin.

Aweserre took a comb from his leathers and tugged it through the ends of his hair. The close-fitting pigskin helmet jammed his earrings against his face like two cheek-pouches—he looked uncannily similar to a baboon.

"Here they are!" The archer had heard and seen nothing, but Aweserre put two fingers in his mouth and whistled.

The entire force strained forward, hounds catching a scent. Wrapping both reins round a forearm while leaving plenty of slack, Pharaoh raised his long sword. Heart hammering, the archer captain braced himself as best he could against the spider-thin body of the car and notched an arrow.

He heard the Retanu, the hiss and crackle of many chariots, the punch of marching feet. They were not blowing their trumpets here. Perhaps they were afraid. Or maybe so confident that they spared their breath. The archer blinked, squeezing the stinging sweat that ran into his eyes.

Retanu scouts, mounted on horseback, burst into view, racing neck and neck in profile. Pharaoh's sword fell, the signal for the attack to begin, and arrows whirled. Every enemy horse was brought down, their places taken by other riders: Egyptians dressed as Retanu—a dangerous ruse, yet necessary to ensure surprise. They whipped their horses hard, changing track so the main force would not see the dead bodies until too late.

The archer drew another arrow, found the shaft splintered and cast it aside. Examining others in his quiver, he did not see the first column of Retanu cross. Shielded partly by the high sides of the water course, the Egyptian army made sure that none of their weapons or horses' bits would catch the light. Everything depended on surprise. If they failed, the delta would be open to these barbarians.

Another column of chariots passed the funnel opening of the dead river, slow and stately as a god's procession. The archer killed the exclamation which had risen to his lips—all through the army, he heard the same



smothered hiss—and tried not to glance at Aweserre. He failed. Again, the likeness struck him.

“My father’s people were cousins to the Retanu,” said the Hyksos Pharaoh blandly, “and in me the resemblance has always been marked. We are fair-skinned for desert races, and our hair grows long down our backs.” His sad reflection changed into a smile. “In my eyes now, these folk are as different from me as the Kush. I know you cannot see it.”

Impersonal as a scribe, Aweserre lifted his sword. “I prefer a long-blade to an Egyptian sickle-sword. In other respects, I am more Nile than the river itself.” He turned his glittering sea gaze on the invaders. “Except perhaps for one thing—”

The flat of the long Retanu sword whipped down across horses’ rumps. Accustomed to this signal, the two blacks sprang forward, eight legs pumping, tails striking the body of the chariot. The archer dropped his arrow to hold on. One-handed, Aweserre snapped the reins. They skimmed over the dark sand. Behind them, using whip and voice, leaning low over their cars, the flower of Egyptian chariotry tried to close the growing gap.

Attacked from the rear, the Retanu infantry had no head, no commanders to react decisively and no chariot protection. Instead of drawing together and fending off the charge, men scattered.

“Sutekh!” Aweserre rode into the brunt of the column and slashed his sword. Bearded heads rolled under the chariot wheels. The archer jabbed his bow into a Retanu face. Another face took its place. Flicking round, Aweserre flashed his sword down. A hand was left clutching the edge of the chariot.

“On, my braves, onwards!” Aweserre swerved the horses out of the path of a falling warrior and sliced open the man’s throat. Beside him, the archer shot arrow after arrow. His black horses were gray with dust. A mace clubbed at their plunging heads. Aweserre leaped down at the rushing ground, and in a swirling arc of sand skidded the car. The Retanu warrior never knew what was coming, until it was too late. A chariot wheel popped his neck bones, a sound discernible even in the thundering racket of battle.

At last the enemy chariots had lumbered round. Aweserre picked out the battle commander of the Retanu, a prince by his heavy armor. Slipping his team between shoals of fighting men, Aweserre concentrated on him. “Don’t run away, golden boy!” he shouted in the Hyksos tongue.

The Retanu commander realized that here in this small, red-cheeked man was his opposite number. He opened his black-bearded mouth, and a half-dozen chariots joined his, the warriors in them armed with long spears. They made a half-moon phalanx in front of the prince.

“Get behind me. It’s going to be rough,” Pharaoh warned the archer, hitching the reins off his forearm guard. He whistled. The lead horse jittered its ears and stretched its long legs further. The chariot shook like a man with fever. Aweserre’s face grew redder and redder. He shot out his arm into the rushing air and scooped back a shield. The soldier he had stolen it from screamed as an Egyptian hacked off his genitals.

“Cover yourself.” The leather shield was tussled round the carriage and thrust at the archer. Aweserre snatched one of the swinging bits of metal which decorated his chariot and checked his appearance in that rude mirror. “Yes! We’re ready.” He snapped the left-hand reins. The horses streaked onward. Arrows ripped at the leather shield as the archer protected himself and Pharaoh.

In the chariot, Aweserre raced: guiding, cutting, whistling, shouting, checking, thrusting. His upper body, slicked over with sweat and blood, moved faster than a runner’s, smooth in its own gait and certain of purpose. His mind ran faster still.

Veering suddenly at the left wing of the half-moon phalanx, he took on the first of the spearmen. Ducking under a predictable attack, he rammed his sword home.

“Sutekh!” Aweserre screamed again, and the second warrior fell in a tangle of reins, his chariot crashing into its neighbor. “Hyksos made chariots first, and I’m the best there is!”

Somehow, he swapped sword and reins between hands. The blade dipped red into a driver’s heart. “You’re looking at a man who can drive between your wind and your ass—watch!”

He pulled at the blacks’ heads. As the two horses slewed sideways, the archer lost his footing and almost slithered out of the chariot. Aweserre lassoed him with the end of a rein and threw his own weight against the left side of the carriage. Teetering on one wheel, the chariot screwed round and, with an explosion of sand, flopped onto both wheels and catapulted forward, straight to the center of the disintegrating phalanx.

Moving at top speed, the blacks rammed the carriage of the Retanu

prince at the precise point—no more than the length of a man's hand—between car and horses where the chassis pole was exposed. Needing no urging from Aweserre, the massive lead horse crashed fearlessly against the lead horse of the Retanu chariot, biting at its neck and head. The chassis pole snapped and the Retanu carriage flipped over, taking its commander with it, his black-bearded mouth frozen in a shout of horror. The Retanu prince's own charioteers could not avoid the wreckage but trampled over it and crashed in their turn.

Speeding out of range of the flying wreckage, Pharaoh hauled the archer in by his shield and put his sand-grimed face into his.

The archer recoiled at the grim hatred in the man's cold blue eyes.

"Don't do that again, do you hear? Next time, I'll not get you back!"

He smacked the man against the side of the chariot like a fish and leaned into another turn.

The Retanu, stunned by the death of their chief, fell back to that smooth-looking, golden sand to regroup. Filling his lungs, Aweserre let out an enormous shout of victory, yelling encouragement to his tired infantry.

The enemy did not know it yet, but the rout had already begun.

## Chapter 10

They had bound Duauf's arms crossed together over his head, tying the rope so firmly around his elbows that his forearms and hands had gone dead. When Duauf protested that he was a priest like them, loyal to the true god-king Sekenenre and no prisoner, they answered that it was better that he go to Pharaoh thus.

"It may inspire his pity," added the High Priest of Amun, and because the man was handsome and had been gracious in his questioning, Duauf believed him.

Fear he expected. Sekenenre was god on earth, ruler of thousands. After death he would be Pharaoh in heaven. Yet when he was brought to Sekenenre's tent, a seed of doubt entered Duauf's mouth and grew upon his tongue, making his throat cold and thick. No ruler surely would receive vital information at his leisure, surrounded by dancers, musicians, his pets—Duauf glimpsed a baboon in a jeweled collar pelting dates at the slaves before he was knocked down and his head thrust to the floor.

"This had better be worth the interruption. River game promises good sport today." The dry, expressionless manner of speech was terrifying. "Get him up. I don't want him bleeding onto my floor carpets. Those rugs are made of wool, you donkeys, not reeds."

Even during an audience, it was dangerous to look at Pharaoh unless he commanded it. Duauf fixed his eyes upon a corner of Sekenenre's throne. A slender sandaled foot brushed impatiently against painted throwing sticks and other discarded hunting weapons.

"He is unarmed? You've searched him thoroughly? Search him again."

The Nubian guards were efficient, even finding a louse which they crushed lest it bite Pharaoh. Cutting the priestly robes from him, they left Duauf naked, taking his tattered shreds of clothing with them as they withdrew from the presence.

“Ugly,” remarked Sekenenre, stretching his own flawless limbs for comparison. “No proper depth of chest or length of leg. You have become like frogs in the delta.”

A hunting club cracked down across Duauf’s body. “Your reactions are slow, little man. My heir, Zoser, and I daresay even my other son Kamose, who is somewhat limited, would have flinched back out of the way. Let us try again. Musicians, strike up a tune.” Armed with his club, Sekenenre left his throne.

\* \* \* \*

“Don’t!” The carpenter dropped his antique spear into the street and put up his hands. Kamose severed the man’s spine with one stroke and continued his pursuit, sprinting after the youth who had disappeared into the chieftain’s house.

Kamose was stronger than his father Sekenenre, convinced of his own destiny to free the lands of Egypt from the Hyksos. He carried a curved sword of bronze and silver and a leather shield as tall as himself. For three years no man had been able to teach him anything new about war.

“Wait, my Lord, it is dangerous. We should go first.”

Ignoring warnings, Kamose ran on through a spatter of arrows. He was not surprised when no dart pierced him, nor astonished a few moments later when the door of the chieftain’s house swung off its hinges into his grasp, crushing the man behind it.

Full of himself and his mission, Kamose hacked off the heads of the chief’s two youngest sons after they dared to come at him with their children’s daggers and dragged their father outside. From the back of the house he heard a door bang and the sound of running footsteps. “Let him go! He’s mine!”

His followers, all young noblemen, grinned at each other and fell back to the village granaries. In the pattern of other raids, they had systematically fired the settlement, and now they completed their attack by forcing the surviving villagers to crawl and squat inside the spilled and shattered corn bins.

A spear-distance away in the street, the carpenter was still alive. Holding his sword at the chieftain’s throat, Kamose watched with interest as

the carpenter tried to crawl into shade, dragging himself by his elbows.

Suddenly the man whimpered. His head and forearms drummed the sand. A dark stream of blood and urine fanned out over the ground from his lower body.

Kamose pricked his sword into the chieftain's neck. "Now you die." He pushed the old man away. The bronze sword followed, pinning the chieftain's long kilt in the dust.

"Charge at me, then." Smiling, Kamose was the image of his father: the same hard eyes, aquiline nose and long white teeth. "Look, I have only a dagger." His shield skidded to the chieftain's feet. "By Amun, I swear that if you kill me you shall go free."

His right hand made the symbol of life. One of his followers coughed, spoiling the moment. "Take the sword." Kamose revealed his contempt by turning aside. "It's your only chance."

Judging the chieftain's reactions to perfection, he moved the instant before the blade sliced into his guts. Springing forward, Kamose performed the Horus Snatch—his own invention—knifing at his opponent's eyes while sweeping a kick at his ribs. The attack worked, and the chieftain dropped like a stricken bird, losing shield and sword. Kamose pecked out his eyes with the dagger, finishing him with a blow to the heart.

Flicking the fine fringe from his eyes, Kamose retrieved his sword. After a habitual check at his long turquoise earrings, the youth strode across to the corn bins. An example would be made of these villagers. They, as well as the chieftain, had paid tribute to foreign overlords. He beckoned to his second-in-command.

"One woman each for the men. Two for Per-hor. He fought well today. Kill the rest." His narrow jaw quivered, possibly with amusement. "Burn them in their hives."

Ignoring the screams as captives were selected and each corn bin stoked and fired, Kamose walked through the empty village. He had not forgotten the boy who had escaped from the chieftain's house, but for the moment he was satisfied. Another part of Egypt won back from the Hyksos, another border village recaptured. From such beginnings came glory, he thought.

Kamose quickened his steps. He had much to tell his half-sister Ahhotpe.

\* \* \* \*

Hunting bored Ahhotpe, but since Zoser—the Pyramid, as she'd nicknamed him—had been commanded to attend Sekenenre, she had been obliged to inveigle an invitation for herself. It would be entirely predictable of Zoser to try to advance his position and fix himself firmly in his father's favor. That she was determined to prevent. She would discredit the Pyramid and his fat cow of a mother forever.

Ahhotpe glanced at the wax manikin before smoothing down the papyrus sheet with her gold burnisher and reaching for her palette. As a pastime she enjoyed writing. The hieratic script, precise and beautiful, flowed from her pen.

"Ahhotpe to her father's mother, Tetisheri, in life, prosperity and health." Formal greetings over, Ahhotpe indulged a little gossip. "The Pyramid's mother is here, of course, waddling into Sekenenre's tent with a lotus flower stuck behind one ear, like a great white duck in a reed bed. She looks quite a meal for a crocodile."

Leaving it at that, Ahhotpe passed onto other matters, details concerning the state of her clothes in these humid marshes, and lavish praise of her father's hunting prowess. She was fond of grandmother, and tried to show the old lady her gentlest side, the side she kept for dependents and servants.

Ahhotpe shot a second glance at the wax figure posted just inside the doorway of her tent. Noon was not the most propitious time for magic, but the midday heat ensured that her people were resting and that consequently she would be unobserved. When she saw the shaft of sun chink through the closed tent flaps and strike the figure, the young woman laid aside her letter.

She had fashioned it well, rolling and mashing the wax between her fingers, infecting it with her hatred, until a startling likeness formed. That same narrow forehead and wide jaw, the bull neck and broad chest, the wider hips and massive legs: the Pyramid in miniature, three fingers high. Ahhotpe smiled as she settled cross-legged before the model. It was, she thought, the closest she might ever come willingly to Zoser. Invoking the proper forms, she thrust the first small copper pin deep into the manikin's heart.

"What are you doing?" A gray eye disappeared from the tent opening and was replaced by hands, deftly untying the tent-strings. Kamose stepped

over the threshold and knelt beside her. She heard him catch his breath. “By Amun—the Pyramid!”

“Sssh. You’ll spoil the spell.” Ahhotpe put in more pins until the model bristled like a pig. She placed an incense burner at its foot and coaxed the flame to eat into the wax. “That must be allowed to burn down.” For the first time she looked properly at Kamose. How handsome he was! “You may kiss me, brother, in greeting.”

His lips pressed softly against hers, presuming nothing. Ahhotpe, the leader here as elsewhere, caught his beautiful head between her hands. Their embrace was a long one.

“Why were you not waiting for me at the palace?” Kamose asked, when his sister leaned a little from him in order to watch the flame. “You promised me you would. I went there first.”

Ahhotpe trailed her fingers along his frowning jaw. “Dear one, I couldn’t stay in Thebes, not with Father and the Pyramid going hunting. You know how manly the Pyramid can be on such occasions.” Kneeling forward, she jabbed the final pin into the melting figure. “He mustn’t be allowed to make too lasting an impression.”

Kamose stared at the graceful curve of her body. “You promised, Ahhotpe.” He blushed.

The fears and hurt of a boy. From the wisdom of her greater age, her three years’ advantage, Ahhotpe pitied him. She drew a maternal arm about his broad young shoulders. “Aren’t you pleased that I watch Sekenenre’s movements?” she asked softly. “Our father is not to be trusted, Kamose. He likes Zoser the Pyramid.”

“No man chooses a successor because he likes him.” Kamose spoke from military experience, where such a course would invite disaster. Still in that role, he was bold enough to touch his thumb between Ahhotpe’s breasts. “Your heart is over-suspicious, sister.”

“Yours is too innocent.” Ahhotpe rose to her feet, stretching her arms above her head. “I trust you have brought me back a present from your latest adventure,” she said sharply, interlocking her fingers and cracking her knuckles. She disliked the risks Kamose took on his raids into Lower Egypt. Now, paying him back for her sleepless nights, Ahhotpe twisted round. “See these lovely earrings!” She moved her head like a dancer. “I promised Father a kiss for them.”



Kamose's hawk face tightened. "If I were Sekenenre, I'd lock you in a golden cage. I'd never let you out, except—" His tongue failed.

Ahhotpe, his knowing, beautiful sister, peeped at him through her eyelashes. "What a way to treat your family! I shall have to be careful when you are Pharaoh." Suddenly forgiving, Ahhotpe ran forward and threaded an arm through his. "Let's go out. I want us to be seen together."

She laughed, and Kamose was caught again.

Watching her face, Kamose did not see her feet grind the pool of wax beneath her slippers as they walked arm in arm from her tent.

It was by then a little after noon, and their father's hunting camp was quiet. Slaves drowsed in what shade they could find, while the nobles of the court lounged in their brightly-patterned tents, ears pricked for Sekenenre's summons. From the river came the shout of bathers.

"Father will be down there," said Ahhotpe. "He hates to sleep in the day." She smiled. "Did you hear the Pyramid snoring in his sty?" She pulled her robe tightly over her breasts.

"You already show too much," grumbled Kamose, glad that his own kilt was dark and full. Ahhotpe had called Zoser's mother white, but in truth she herself was whiter, the palest of ivory. Her small bones and delicate features gave her a look of fragility, although she was almost as tall as her brother. This engaging beauty was Tetisheri's gift, but Ahhotpe's bold carriage was her own invention, and the spectacular coloring her inheritance from the barbarian who had given her birth. In full sun, Ahhotpe looked as though she had been dipped in liquid gold. The years of being "That sand-colored brat," in the women's quarters were long gone—only Ahhotpe remembered them.

"What is this piece of crocodile-bait?"

Ahhotpe, considering the problem of Zoser, was not pleased at the interruption. She tapped Kamose lightly on the wrist. "Lend me one of your earrings." She removed a gold disc from her own ear without looking at what had intrigued her brother.

"How have they staked him?" Kamose moved in for a closer look.

Ahhotpe, who had seen the man brought into camp, said tartly, "Ask the executioners. The creature's been here since yesterday. A spy or a priest or both, forever declaiming his loyalty to the one true Pharaoh. Father got bored with him."

Kamose was struggling to remove an earring. “Did he say anything useful?” Then, as his sister made to take the earring from him, “No—it’s mine. You must let me do it.” They stood still a moment while Kamose threaded the gold and turquoise through his sister’s flesh.

“I wonder why Sekenenre hasn’t killed him. The man told us nothing new.” Ahhotpe flicked the earring against her neck. Yes, it would do. She and Kamose walked on, leaving the priest, Duauf, to his fate.

“Try not to antagonize him,” Ahhotpe said of their father. “He’s very fractious these days.” She practiced a slightly different smile. Sekenenre liked change. “He’s nearly thirty six.”

“That’s not old.” Kamose looked back at the prisoner pegged out in the sun like a tanning hide.

“Did you know that his teeth are starting to loosen?”

Kamose picked his nose, bored with the way the conversation was going. “That won’t make him die any sooner. Be patient, can’t you?”

Ahhotpe was patient. When she was eight years old, it was claimed that she had lice, and her head was shaved. Kamose, the five-year-old son of Sekenenre’s “Great Wife”, tried to protect his half-sister. Ahhotpe waited four years to poison the courtesan who had sat on her chest and cut away her hair, and she never forgot Kamose. One day—surely it would be soon—she would make him Pharaoh. Unless—

Unless the Pyramid usurped his place.

Unless the Pyramid’s mother became the new “Great Wife”.

That second threat was very real. Kamose’s mother, like Ahhotpe’s, had been dead for many years. Sekenenre might choose to take another Queen. And the Pyramid’s mother looked the kind who would be a breeder....

Ahhotpe shivered. “We must get rid of them. Look! What did I tell you?”

By this time they had reached the river. Kamose saluted the guards and waved at the figures in the water. Ahhotpe, frowning, drew him back to a nearby stand of reeds.

“Don’t you want to join them? You’ll be the only girl there.”

That was shrewd for her brother, but not clever enough for Ahhotpe. “The path’s been too well-trodden. I don’t want mud on my clothes.”

“I’ll carry you.”

“No, we’d both enjoy that too much.”

Kamose chuckled and brought his hand up to her lips for a kiss. Ahhotpe smilingly obliged, thinking how she might turn the situation to her greatest advantage. Chances to command Sekenenre's attention were rare. Why waste them? Already she had aroused interest by turning aside.

"Hurry, Ahhotpe. They're playing water games."

Ahhotpe snapped her fingers. "Quickly, my brother, run back and seize the first fowler's net that you can find. Bring also the living birds."

She knew now how to make her impression.

\* \* \* \*

Sekenenre the Great, hurling the ball at another smiling young man, was ready to be distracted. There would be the evening's entertainment, of course, but for the moment the pretty impudence of Ahhotpe would do.

He applauded her invention in emerging not from the riverbank but from the Nile itself. No other woman would have had the courage to make a path for herself through the tall papyrus, risking the malice of snakes and other riverside creatures. When she first appeared, rising from the river with a beating of birds' wings, sun flashing on her pale hair, even Sekenenre had trembled. The waterfowl fluttered around her outstretched hands as though waiting to receive a blessing, then passed in a rush of color straight over Sekenenre's head.

"Lord, I bring you good sport." Ahhotpe's warm, golden voice added to the spell. Several of Pharaoh's companions had lowered their heads. She floated through the water towards him, the wet linen gown and net lusciously defining every line of her body. Nearer still, he saw that her earrings matched her eyes: one gold, one blue. The trick made Sekenenre roar with laughter.

"My ka delights in you, 'The Moon is Content'," he said, giving Ahhotpe her true name. Desire and pride tugged at him, pride winning as his beautiful blond daughter sank to her knees in the shallow water. He caught her chin before she bent, and thus submerged her face, tipping back her head.

"The lotus-flower gilded." He touched her downy hair. He could never read her oddly-patterned eyes.

A shadow fell across them: stiffness, restraint. Kamose. The boy was his

double, only more so and younger. Sekenenre had wanted, but never achieved, those firm muscles, that wrestler's poise. This son would outdo him.

"My helpmate, father." Ahhotpe tried her new smile. "He released the birds for me." She tilted her head on one side. "I trust you are not angry? They were your catch first."

The young men in the river checked their breath at her audacity, but Pharaoh chose to be amused. Forgetting Kamose—as, indeed, Ahhotpe intended—Sekenenre glanced around the company. He liked to be surrounded by happy young people who as yet were no threat to him.

"Well?" He flicked a handful of water at the nearest youth. "What am I to do with such a girl?" Sekenenre liked to ask unanswerable questions simply for the pleasure of watching others squirm. It was useful, interesting, to see how people lied to him.

"Give her to me."

The booming sound issuing from the riverbank made them start, Kamose most of all. In a flash, Sekenenre saw Ahhotpe glance at her brother, a look of both warning and fear, and heard Kamose's smothered laugh—his own response when angry and hurt—before the two fixed on him. Feeling the tensions between them, Sekenenre turned in relief to Zoser, the son favored because he was different. Even his odd pyramidal shape was reassuring. This one was no rival in Ahhotpe's affections or in anything else.

"There may be something to that suggestion," said Sekenenre.

He felt his daughter shrink back and motioned her to rise. "Escort Zoser to my tent."

Playtime was over.

\* \* \* \*

"Yes, I agree we must be rid of him."

From being quite indifferent Kamose had conceived a hatred towards the Pyramid in the space of a single afternoon. His long legs crossed and recrossed the floor of his tent, kicking against the central support each time.

"Let us not forget his mother," Ahhotpe reminded. "She may be the greater hindrance."

"I was kept out." Kamose recounted his grievances. "They had a secret meeting to discuss strategy. Sekenenre and his generals. I was not allowed entry into his tent."

"You missed a very boring council," said Ahhotpe. She had been there, serving wine and food in place of Sekenenre's slaves. It amused her father to see her thus employed, yet it was also a mark of his trust. Ahhotpe felt a rare twinge of guilt as she lied to Kamose. She wished to retain her father's good opinion, perhaps not entirely because of politics.

"The Pyramid was with them, wasn't he?" Almost as if he had foreseen the run of her thoughts, Kamose fastened on Zoser. "Did he touch you?"

"Does that matter?"

The youth's fists closed round the handle of a wooden club. His tent contained nothing but weapons. Kamose considered beds and cushions to be self-indulgent. For an Egyptian, the ground and a cloak should be good enough. Ahhotpe, thinking that a little foreign luxury might not come amiss, shook out Kamose's cloak and sat down.

"You know the Pyramid," she went on with a shrug.

"Aah!" The horrible cry startled them both. Kamose ducked down, whipping up his club. A second strung-out cry came from the direction of the river. Brother and sister glanced at each other. Like children, each found and clasped at the other's free hand. At the third scream they ran from the tent.

Ahead the river was bright with torches and red with the sunset. A troop of soldiers were coming to fetch them. Sekenenre wanted no-one to miss this. "Yes, they must get on the boat!" Ahhotpe heard her father shout, and their escort thrust aside the courtiers on the riverbank. She and Kamose were ushered on board, where Sekenenre, dressed in state robes, waited on a dais in the middle of the barge. As they took their places beside Zoser and the officers of the royal guard, their father lifted his mace. Two blows were enough to club Duauf, the prisoner kneeling at his feet, into the water and there, with the waiting Nile monsters, the hideous ritual began.

## Chapter 11

In the Duat, the underworld cavern through which the divine sun boat passes each night along a black river, the immortal gods heard the screams issuing from the upper world. Dropping the tow-rope of the sun-boat, Set covered his ears with his hands. Hathor, goddess of music and lovemaking, cried out.

“Forgive me, the mortal’s shriek was unsettling.” Hathor’s voice sweetened the gods’ exile from all light. “There was no harmony in the mortal’s death.”

“What’s that you’re saying?” Ra prodded his fan-bearer with his flail. “Go on, slave, and find out. I wouldn’t be surprised if this isn’t one of Set’s pranks.”

“Unas, stay precisely where you are,” warned Set. The Duat was perilous enough without the ka of a long-dead Pharaoh groping around its narrow passage. “Father Ra, you may be sure that none of tonight’s events are of my making.” Set had recovered the tow-rope at his feet. He placed the thick end unerringly between Hathor’s fingers.

“If you will tug on this?” Hathor, he knew, was smiling. Drawn by the gods, the sun-boat once more began to move. Somewhere in the middle of the ship, old Ra dozed.

“Would you like to be revenged on the man that startled you?” asked Set, while he and Hathor pulled together.

“Perhaps.”

“The man favors Amun ahead of all gods.”

“The blue one, before me? That will not do.”

“Join me then, Hathor. Let us make a sport of mortal kings who think they own us.”

In the darkness of the Duat, the compact was settled.

\* \* \* \*

The gods might have long memories but Ahhotpe had not—not at least for men she neither knew nor cared about, little creatures of no use to her in obtaining her desires. By the following evening, Ahhotpe had forgotten Duauf. Her mind ran on pleasanter matters.

Reveling in the moment, she enjoyed the refreshing, pre-sunset breeze which lifted the tips of her yellow hair as she climbed the stone steps to the roof of her father's palace. Her people had manhandled a couch up onto the flat roof, and Ahhotpe stretched upon it, loosening the clasps of her jeweled belt. When in Thebes, Sekenenre always performed the daily rites of Amun at one or both of the two great temples. It would now be the ritual of the evening. With her father out of reach of the rest of his courtiers and her brother Kamose swimming with his friends in the palace pool, Ahhotpe looked forward to an hour or so of undemanding peace. Sekenenre dined late in the capital. She could stay on the roof until dark.

She did not loll long on the couch. She was not tired. She called downstairs for her women and, having already planned her robes, headdress and make-up for the night's banquet, told them to bring her harp. For a time she strummed the strings, gossiping with her servants about their own concerns. One had a daughter who was growing out of her clothes and Ahhotpe sent at once for items from her own wardrobe. She loved giving presents.

"Lady, not this one too. It is too fine for my child."

"Nonsense, see how the color suits her. The length is perfect, for a first adult dress, and I have a golden sash to take in its fullness. I know you like it."

Ahhotpe smiled at the little girl, who gazed back with the soft eyes of adoration. The women sighed like doves. They were always asking to comb Ahhotpe's hair, or perform other little services for their mistress. Later, Ahhotpe planned to satisfy them all, yet in this gentle, simple light she did not want pampering.

"Look at the new moon. Does Khonsu shine because he is glad or sad? Are the gods happy as we know it?" Ahhotpe pushed herself from the couch and walked to the edge of the parapet. Her women hovered close.

"We cannot tell, lady. Such matters are for the priests."

“Yes, and that is how we give them power.” Ahhotpe looked at the slim stone obelisks of the temples, needle-sharp in the cooling air and clearly visible from the palace roof. The sadness of evening caught her again. “We are so small in this, this whole.” She could not say what it was. There was no word in the language to describe the unity she meant. “Glory to thee, Amun-ra, god of Karnak, who dwelleth in Thebes!” She sang the opening stanza of that great hymn, softly, to the god.

\* \* \* \*

“She does that very well,” remarked the golden goddess, Hathor, leaning out of the sun-boat and sculling a cloud with her fingers.

“Of course she does. The princess worships me,” said the god, Amun, puffing out his chest with pride.

From his habitual place in the bows, Set averted his gaze from the glowing blue god and tipped his fellow-conspirator a wink. His own plans and those of the goddess were progressing. They exchanged an amused glance. Again, Set turned back to mortal concerns.

\* \* \* \*

“Ahhotpe, if you were as young as this child, I’d take my stick to you. Come back from that drop at once! How dare you frighten your servants?”

Ahhotpe swung round, her reflective mood swept aside. “Grandma, don’t fuss.” She moved to greet Tetisheri at the top of the stairs. “Where are your chair-bearers?”

“I walked, child. I’m not so decrepit that I need carrying like a parcel.” Tetisheri lifted her head, ready for her still-smooth cheek to be kissed. “I was Great House’s bride before I knew there were such things as carrying chairs.”

Ahhotpe opened her ears. Often, in Tetisheri’s frequent repetitions of what, to Ahhotpe, was ancient history, her grandmother would let slip a useful fact or two. Besides, Tetisheri’s common accents and expressions, which she had never lost, were quite charming.

“Will you attend the banquet?” She settled Tetisheri on the couch.

“No, rich food makes me fart,” answered her grandmother. “You should



go, of course, and Kamose. Isn't he a splendid boy! Listen, you can hear him from the pool even up here." Tetisheri beckoned to the little girl in Ahhotpe's saffron-colored dress. "My, a pretty girl! Let's do your hair like a lady."

Her fingers were nimble, artistic. Ahhotpe stood nearby and picked an old song on her harp, letting the servants see how very much alike she and Tetisheri were.

"Do you know what a Heb Sed festival is, my darling?" Tetisheri stroked the child's forehead.

"No, granny." The little girl naturally used this title. Tetisheri was every child's grandmother.

"It's a special time for the King, a sort of birthday. He runs along a magic track, and the gods make him youthful again and fit to rule the whole of Egypt." Tetisheri cuddled the little girl. "Now you can go to the party."

"Have you seen a Heb Sed festival, Grandmother?" asked Ahhotpe, re-tuning her harp.

"I saw my husband's, Sekenenre's daddy." Tetisheri suddenly tugged off her wig and fanned her sparse brown hair. "He ran straight from the track into my bedroom!" She and Ahhotpe, and then the other women, laughed.

"Surely thirty years have not passed since then," remarked Ahhotpe. "Kamose says you look younger than I do."

"That's brothers for you," replied Tetisheri, pleased none the less at the compliment. "But you're right, little one. My boy hasn't ruled as long yet, but he wants the magic the festival will give him."

"Isn't it dangerous? Pharaoh running alone?"

"Well, things have grown rougher since my husband's time," admitted Tetisheri, "but Sekenenre doesn't want anyone else's feet under his table, so to speak." The old woman sighed. "For myself, I'd certainly feel easier if Kamose ran with him."

"So would I, granny," said Ahhotpe.

\* \* \* \*

Next day Ahhotpe obtained her wish but, when she told Kamose, he was less than impressed.

“So, as I run with Sekenenre on this kingly mile, this Heb Sed, the nobles will be swearing their allegiance to me too. Is that what you’re saying? How did you get father to agree? He’s not one to share power.”

“I bribed him. I gave the answer that he wanted to a certain question.” Success did not usually make Ahhotpe careless, but the coup she had pulled off to get Kamose running with Sekenenre on the Heb Sed was so spectacular that her tongue kept running away from her. Her brother gripped her shoulders.

“Stop smearing that stuff on me.”

“It’s liniment. Do you want to be stiff afterwards? Father will make sure that he’s bounding around like a young man.”

Kamose shook his sister. “What did you give him?”

The times that he could frighten Ahhotpe were growing, and it marked a new change in their relationship. Seeing her different-colored eyes swimming both gratified and alarmed Kamose. “What have you done, Ahhotpe?”

His sister blinked, momentarily disconcerted. She must get a grip. It wasn’t like her to be cowed by a male. “Dear boy, I merely put the idea into grandmother’s mind.”

“You said a bribe.”

“I meant to Tetisheri, of course.” Ahhotpe slapped him with the perfume spoon. “Do pay attention.” Leaning forward, she kissed the spot she had marked.

“Your queer-colored hair always smells good.”

He wanted to kiss her again, and Ahhotpe knew how to deal with that. “Let me look at you!” She stepped back to admire their handiwork.

Kamose swelled his chest. “Ridiculous,” said Ahhotpe, trying to keep it light. Kamose laughed.

“I’d like to see you run,” he said, “Especially in what you’re wearing today. Is the new gown to bring me luck?”

He moved, but Ahhotpe had already slipped further back.

“That’s enough, I can hear women coming. If you’re found in this garden, grandmother will want to know why I haven’t a chaperone.” She stepped behind a sycamore tree.

Kamose watched her as she ran down another garden path. When he saw her next, she’d have all that marvelous hair bundled under a wig, and

probably her golden jeweled headdress on top of that. She'd be wearing make up and perfume, and would have bathed in her robe, to make it cling to her body.

Kamose swallowed, angry that he was taking part in the Heb Sed. He wanted to stay with the royal family, who would watch his father from the roof of the palace. He wanted to keep an eye on Zoser.

Dissatisfied at what should have been a great honor, Kamose strode from the lower butterfly garden towards his father's apartment.

\* \* \* \*

King Zoser the First, who made the first pyramid and united the Two Lands of Egypt under the double crown, had built a special enclosed track for his Heb Sed festival. Sekenenre Tao, master of Upper Egypt and scourge of the Hyksos usurpers, was going one better.

"I shall run outside, like the ancient kings," Sekenenre told his splendidly-gowned courtiers. "Today, I am like my father, the god Amun, protector of Thebes. I am as the god Horus, youthful in strength, the god Osiris, green grower, who blesses the river."

"It is right, beautiful and good," chanted the chorus of priestesses, ranged outside before the two lines of flags which marked where Pharaoh would run.

Sekenenre stood in the entrance-way of the stone kiosk of the god Amun. Priests removed his robes and headdress of state, a fan-bearing official knelt to remove his sandals. Barefoot, dressed in a simple linen kilt, Pharaoh received the beaded flail that he would carry with him on his run. The tall conical white crown of Upper Egypt was placed upon his head.

"Your blessing, if you please, Mother."

Tetisheri, her face painted like that of the goddess Isis, moved slowly forward to embrace her son.

"Good fortune, my child, and good running."

She bowed her head and continued her gracious progress to the second waiting figure in the kiosk.

"Hail, slave of the living god!" she told Kamose. Her eyes said more. Protect my son. Do not outshine him.

Grudgingly, resentful of title and office, Kamose answered with the

words he had been trained to say. "My master is lord of the earth. I am dust at his feet."

Sekenenre stretched out his arms. Incense poured over him in a fragrant stream. His fingertips and the golden metal tassels of the flail touched stone, warm even in shadow.

He heard a dark, bitter voice and thought with satisfaction of how, in one stroke, he had clipped Kamose's wings. After the Heb Sed, he would let the boy know that his precious elder sister had agreed to marry Zoser.

Outside, the priestesses' singing rose to a climax. Bowing so that their wigs touched in the sand, nobles and priests withdrew backwards from the kiosk. The moment of the Heb Sed had arrived.

Sekenenre inhaled deeply. He took the kiosk steps at a run, knowing he need not pause to receive the people's acclaim. Red and blue, the pennants showed where he must go. Between each flag, a thousand throats, two thousand round and dazzled eyes.

It was magic. He ran like a long-limbed cheetah, tireless as a gazelle. The crown on his head threw down a long forward shadow on the smooth earth. The shouts of the people were sweeter than *shedeh*, better than his women's love-cries.

Trailing behind, stunned by sun, bellowing racket, jangling sistrums, Kamose sucked in great mouthfuls of air and tried to keep pace. His father's turn of speed jabbed like a spear between his ribs: the Heb Sed was doing nothing for him.

A noble ran out between two limply-hanging flags and prostrated himself. Without checking his rhythm, Sekenenre jumped lightly over the man.

Three pregnant women ran out. Kamose almost collided with two as they knelt and kissed each footprint left by Pharaoh. Cursing aloud, Kamose watched the distance between himself and his father grow larger.

Then Sekenenre stumbled. A death-gasp rattled the crowd as Pharaoh lost his footing and skidded on the roots of a palm tree. Legs swinging like a *shaduf*, Kamose tried to reach his father.

Sekenenre lurched backwards. His crown slipped sideways. He snatched at the white cone to stop it tumbling from his head, and his heels slid away. It seemed he must fall.

Out of his own raised dust ran a man. A peasant, dark skinned, one eye

blinded by the worm that lives in irrigation ditches and burrows under a victim's skin. He swung a hand towards Pharaoh.

Kamose saw Sekenenre strike at the peasant's face. The flail cut into his blind eye and the man kept coming. Light blazed from his fingers.

Kamose rushed at the knife. He thrust his father aside and whirled in to the peasant's throat. With a scream of rage, like a hunting falcon, he snapped the man's neck and trampled the fluttering limbs, stamping out the signs of life.

Abruptly, when the body stopped moving, Kamose began to weep.

Sekenenre, also weeping, embraced his son. They stood in the middle of the track, swaying in each others' arms, slapping each other on the shoulder, celebrating their foiling of the assassination attempt. Kamose vowed undying loyalty. Sekenenre answered with undying favor. To the joy of the people and the gods, they ran the rest of the Heb Sed arm in arm, united in trust and love.

\* \* \* \*

"What a man, my father! He has the speed of a leopard."

"My boy, son of my great wife! What a son for a warrior-Pharaoh!"

Sekenenre and Kamose toasted each other again, and the nobles lifted their own tall goblets and drank, pledging allegiance to both. Torches blazed throughout the banqueting hall as men and women dropped off their wigs and entertainers practiced final flourishes in the odd dark corners. Ahhotpe kissed the cheek of the slave-girl who had brought her another perfume-cone and, with a sigh of pleasure and relief, shook off her own wig.

"Allow me." The Pyramid loomed at her elbow. He placed the cooling cone of perfumed grease on her hair. Ahhotpe shivered as the perfume-cone melted and ran in a delicious fine rain down her face.

"Thank you, my lord." She glanced from Zoser to Sekenenre. Her father and younger brother were very drunk. She was very drunk. She looked again at the Pyramid.

He took her practiced smile as an invitation to join her on the couch. Kamose saw but did nothing. And how could she resist a man so much bigger and stronger than herself? Alive with the wine, Ahhotpe was in a mood to enjoy.

“My arms are full of flowers, and my hair is weighed down with perfumes.”

She waited for him to complete the verse, as her father would have done, or to lay his broad head in her lap and have her say the rest of the poem, as Kamose did. The Pyramid merely grunted and tugged on her anklet bangle.

“We’re betrothed, little bird. I don’t want you to keep staring at Kamose.”

“I’ll gaze only at you, my lord.” His face in the torches seemed sleeker, his dark eyes, lined with malachite, lustrous as the beads of his arm-bracelets. Ahhotpe saw new possibilities for Zoser. Being engaged to the man had its advantages.

Two nobles, shouting and throwing bones at each other in an argument over a Senet game, gave Ahhotpe and the Pyramid their opportunity.

“It’s getting to be a real riot.”

“Father’s drunk. Everyone takes their cue from him.” Ahhotpe pushed aside a tipsy slave, who fell giggling against her couch. “Why not come and study the paintings in my room? They’re by a Keftian artist, and very fine.”

The Pyramid cupped her breasts and licked his lips. “Let’s go to my room instead, and trade parts.”

“Such a coarse expression for love.” Ahhotpe, with a drunken little smile, held up her arms to Zoser. He scooped her from the couch like a barbarian, throwing her over one shoulder.

Raising her jiggling head and squinting back into the hall, Ahhotpe noticed Kamose sprawled on purple cushions, ponderously explaining how he had saved Pharaoh’s life. Her father, fondling the Pyramid’s mother, smiling at everything Kamose said, talked earnestly to a drunken acrobat. None of them saw her undignified exit.

Ahhotpe lowered her head, feeling the broad flanks rub against her face, and ran her thumbs between the Pyramid’s legs.

\* \* \* \*

Later, lying in the warm dark circle of the Pyramid’s arms, Ahhotpe was talking to herself. This habit, born of a lonely childhood, she would never lose. Zoser snored.

“This fat pig who rutted on me and fell asleep afterwards as though I were a slave has done me a true service. Any doubts I had concerning him are gone. Sleeping with the Pyramid has cleared my mind. A pity though, that it was such a dismal lesson.”

Ahhotpe smiled and scratched her nails across the man’s broad chest. Zoser twitched and rolled onto his back.

“Sleep on, prince pig, and let me puzzle for myself.” Ahhotpe drew aside the Pyramid’s hairy forearm and wormed out of bed, taking the bedclothes with her. Zoser’s hand groped for the covers, and she quirked a golden eyebrow.

“Ah, you must learn to do without. How much better it would have been for you, Zoser, had your mother ever taught a little self-denial. Of course, if she had, I wouldn’t be here yet. You wouldn’t have let me come until our official wedding night, and then it would have been too late.”

Ahhotpe blew him a kiss. “I’m glad you’re as you are, pig.”

Swiftly, she sped onto the balcony. In this last hour before dawn, the night was as cold as it would ever get. A mist of dew wet her bare feet. She heard a hippo grunt, a donkey braying somewhere, both sounds carried by the Nile. Ahhotpe leaned out and listened to the closer shufflings of the palace night-watch. All was well.

“By Amun—well, why shouldn’t I use Kamose’s oath?—there’s the wine cup!”

One hand hugging the covers round her middle, Ahhotpe darted back to the bedchamber and retrieved the silver cup. She and the Pyramid had drunk from this vessel, pledging each other before love. Zoser had drunk from it afterwards, too.

“His mistake.” Ahhotpe took up the water ewer and walked back to the balcony. She washed out the silver cup and replaced it on the table, filling it with new wine.

Carefully, she applied new lip-paint and then took a good long draught from the cup. The imprint of her lower lip showed red against the metal.

She sat on the bed and listened to the Pyramid’s breathing.

She heard his breathing stop.

She waited.

When quite sure that Zoser was dead, Ahhotpe took his own knife and slit open his belly. She’d learned quite a lot listening to Kamose’s exploits,

and knew the wound would bleed very slowly.

Carefully, she unwound the bed sheet from her body and threw it back over the corpse. Later, when the Pyramid's mother came rushing in to snuggle up to her son, she'd find herself covered in blood before she realized that her darling boy was dead.

"So she'll scream, and the guards will come, and they and my father shall make of it what they will," said Ahhotpe.

She left the room, closing the heavy cedar wood door with a bang. Startled, a palace serving-woman sent to sweep the corridor knelt hurriedly and bowed her head into her pile of dust.

"Good day," said Ahhotpe, moving hurriedly herself.



## Chapter 12

Gods' troubles are soon over, reflected the woman Hathor, concubine of Ramose. She stared into the darkness. If only she were as powerful as her immortal namesake. If only there was a way to banish thought. In the softest bed that she had ever slept in, the woman sighed.

Ramose had her trapped. She could not move without waking him. Slowly, Hathor—she had no other name now—attempted to work her numb arm free. For a man who had never labored in the fields, he was supremely strong and fit. The priest whistled softly in his sleep. Even now, he would admit no confidences. It was not a matter of trust. Not *wholly* a matter of trust.

Tonight he had emptied her, sucked her breasts dry, taken her caresses, accepted all that she could give. Hathor was both frightened and grateful at the passion he roused in her. She loved what he could do to her body, yet something was missing. A concubine might not expect love, or trust, but what of humor, conversation, a certain lazy affection after mating? Ramose would not talk to her. Where were they going?

Brought from Ramose's town house to join him and Mose at the Memphis court, she had seen Pharaoh from a distance. Too far away to appreciate his charisma, Hathor had been disappointed in Aweserre. A small, wiry man with reddish-pink features: what was the fuss about? His court had bored her. People had been polite, but Hathor missed the spontaneous laughter and shrewd observations of village life. None of the courtiers really knew each other. Talk was light, trite and predictable. Where were they going tonight?

In the month she had been with Ramose, Hathor had begun to change. She had never realized how full of questions she was, until given the means and time to find out. It's not that I'm ungrateful, thought Hathor, just—she could not say. Perhaps appreciation. Mose was no longer shy of her. He

sought her out whenever Ramose allowed it. The priest seemed wary of encouraging their friendship. Hathor understood why, but it still hurt. Even her sex, the thing he took delight in owning, was worth less to him than a good dinner, or wine.

Why were they on the ship? Why were they sailing at night? Ramose told her nothing. He was always warning her not to ape her betters. "Your vowels are becoming too grand for a courtesan." He liked to keep her sure of her place.

It was cool on the river, and quiet. Their small cabin had two sets of doors, one facing the rowing benches, the other the stern. Ramose had ordered that the stern doors stay open, and from their sleeping-place he and Hathor and Mose had watched the night. At such moments, Hathor knew she was happy. She lifted her head to look again at the moth-bearing sky. The swish of the sculling oars made her think of a weaver at a loom. As far as her eye could see, water mirrored the star-patterns. She smiled.

\* \* \* \*

While Hathor reflected on the good things in her life, other members of Ramose's household were less fortunate. At the Vizier's palace of Mazghuna, Bakmut lay shivering with fever on her mistress' bed, there being no other places left. At times she cried out to the god Bes, although it was not childbirth which afflicted her.

Neith wiped the girl's sweating body with a cloth. "It's cold," whimpered Bakmut. Neith rolled another blanket over her and then, hearing that fearful choking she had come to recognize, hurried from her room to the corridor.

There two of the gardeners lay stricken with the same sickness. One was vomiting again. Neith tried to hold his head over the bowl until the racking spasms subsided. "Cold, Mistress." His teeth chattered together while fever made beads of moisture on his groin and forehead. Neith gave him water and packed fresh dried reeds about him. In the early morning light her old nurse, Gemny, was doing the same for the other servants lodged in the Great Hall. Of the entire estate, only they and the steward had escaped this shaking sickness.

Thinking of Hori, Neith was immediately thirsty. Her head no longer

ached at the start of each day, because she must be strong, but her resentment had increased. Hori saw the tending of the sick as women's work, and he would disappear for hours to escape it. Having no time to seek or reprove him, his mistress felt justified in being furious whenever the man did materialize.

Neith stepped out into the garden for a drink. The pool was the only supply left, servants being too ill to walk to the well. She knelt and sculled away leaves from the water. Her reflection hovered, shadowed and trembling, before it was joined by another. Neith quickly wiped her mouth. "What are you doing back?" The skin of her arms crawled with fear.

\* \* \* \*

"My Lady?"

Dreading this meeting, Hathor did not know what Ramose's wife was talking about. While breaking the news of where they were—the instant before they left the boat—Ramose had implied Neith was unbalanced. Seeing the woman, Hathor realized why.

For one thing, she stank. Her nose was dirty, and her hair had not seen a comb for days. Yes, there was sickness on the estate, and she was hard-pressed, yet why had she not sent word to her husband to stay away? Did she care nothing for her son's safety?

"Lady, I am our Lord's concubine," said Hathor, who wished to get that point out of the way at once. "My Lord sent me to you to. If I might be of some use to you."

She spoke to the water, for Ramose's wife had not yet turned about. Seeing the lady's reflection ripple, Hathor felt pity for Neith. Peasants did not have the cruelty of princes.

Then Neith rose and faced her.

"Our Lord's concubine. His wet-nurse, more like. Does he drain you dry every night and bite your dugs with his teeth?" Recovering after her initial start when she had mistaken Hathor for someone else, Neith smiled her contempt. "Do you think you are the first?" Her fat-enfolded eyes sparkled, though not with amusement.

She almost unnerved Hathor. But Ramose had named her well, and Hathor was not easily put off.

"It is being the last which matters. I know my Lord chose me because I have the likeness of another, yet it is my name he calls out into the darkness and my body which he enters." Hathor discovered that she could be as unkind as nobles. "I see Mose is your only child."

"You talk more than your double; the Keftian girl, I mean," answered Neith. "I suppose that might amuse Ramose. Two months I give you. Then you'll lose him."

Folding her arms beneath her drooping breasts, Neith sought the shade of a tamarisk and glanced about. "Since the gardeners are sick, the weeds have taken over." She would not ask after her husband or son from a courtesan. "Perhaps you could tend people. Yet let me not be cruel to my faithful retainers. No, I really think digging will suit best. You look to have the muscles for it."

Before Hathor could fashion a reply, Ramose came out into the garden. At his appearance, Neith underwent a change.

"Husband! Your presence brings order to our distracted household. Let me welcome you." As one who is glad to see her lord, Neith opened her arms. "Where is my son?"

"Mose is back on the ship, where I sent him." Ramose strode up to his wife and gripped her hand. "Come, the steward is in charge here. We shall leave at once." He drew Neith past Hathor, motioning for her to follow.

"No, it will not do." Neith stopped their rapid progress. "Someone must remain. There is harvest to store and sort, buildings to repair, crops to plant—". She squeezed Ramose's hand. "Hori must not do all this alone."

"I cannot stay," answered Ramose, frowning. "I must get back to Memphis, to the temple." The smooth planes of the High Priest's face hardened further, as though he did not wish to admit what he must say next. "In truth, wife, I should already be waiting there for a messenger whom I begin to doubt will ever appear."

In those few sentences, Ramose had told Neith more of his affairs than he revealed to Hathor over fourteen days. "It is my dread that I have allowed a man to go to his death." He finished almost dispassionately.

"You have saved many others," answered Neith, brisk and purposeful, as a wife should be. She smiled at Hathor. "This new girl, for one."

"I am pleased you like her. I named her after the goddess of love." Ramose stood a moment, admiring his new possession. "Except for the

slight hook of the nose, she has the profile of the Keftian, do you not agree?"

"Yes—and you should take better care of her," scolded Neith. "Let the girl be with Mose on the ship." She pointed to the river. "Go on, child. I would not have fever spoil your prettiness."

"That is not my will." Ramose stepped forward to block Hathor's path. "Stay here. I will fetch you later."

He and Neith withdrew into their stricken house, making such plans as seemed fit. Excluded from the conversation, Hathor walked about the dying garden. Unstable or not, it seemed that Ramose still trusted his wife. And where did that leave her?

"Will I ever know respect?" thought Hathor, and her question was partly a prayer.

\* \* \* \*

Neith, too, was resentful. Ramose did take her son and his concubine away: "Only for a few days," he said. "I have business at court which I cannot leave." But he had left her, to cope somehow with sick servants and a mass of other duties.

"You will have Hori to help you," Ramose had said.

Neith hated it.

During the day, she recognized her husband's obligation to return to Memphis. As Vizier of Lower Egypt, Ramose had to make appropriate plans. If he believed the next inundation would be too high, then dykes needed building to protect the towns and cities. But flood barriers would be of no use if the Nile did not rise; instead food supplies would be vital.

Here was the reason why the early warning signs of the inundation at Elephantine were so important. Should he make a mistake and prepare for the wrong kind of river, then Ramose would be blamed.

"Rather as I am," said Neith, speaking into the darkness. Tomorrow—today, since she was already awake—she must make more decisions, try to solve a host of daily troubles.

Yesterday, it had been the tomb-builders. Seven of their number had been waiting in her dusty audience chamber to complain at the scarcity of rations. "We cannot work on Lord Ramose's tomb without food," they told

her.

“Go out into the fields, then, and gather some,” said Neith, for a whole harvest of figs, dates, grapes and carobs rotted on their trees for lack of labor.

Hers was a true, fair answer, yet the tomb-builders had not liked it.

Unlike Ramose, who at night could lay down the burden of office and sink into the perfumed arms of his courtesan, Neith was frequently disturbed. So that her people would know where to find her, she slept with her nurse.

“Awake, my gosling?”

Neith frowned at the sleepy voice. “I told you not to call me that. One day my husband or the steward will hear you.” She thrust her elbow into Gemny’s side. “Up, old woman. You must wash our clothes.”

“It’s not right.” Gemny lifted the sheet from her bald, wrinkled head, “A great lady dressing herself and painting her own face. Your Lord should have given you that new girl.”

“A pretty revenge,” remarked Neith, “but I will hear no more of your insolence.” Adept at finding her wig by starlight, she crawled from the low-roofed, beehive hut. With her chamber still slept in, occupied by the weakest and most ill, she was in the servants’ quarter.

Dim sounds of coughing issued through the mud-brick walls as Neith passed along one side of the house. She reached the garden pool and, looking down into it, muttered, “A pity it couldn’t last us, but then what does? Bakmut will just have to drag herself to the well after she has milled our corn.”

Licking her dry lips, Neith continued her daily check. Water: almost gone. Wine: finished. Beer—finished? Was her memory playing false, or did she not see a whole amphora of black beer here yesterday? Wheat: several bushels. Dried meat: none. Surely there should have been sufficient food to see them through until the late summer cow-killing? Fruit—

In the midst of her counting, Hori caught her elbow. “Lady, should you not be in your bed?”

Neith blinked when he brought the lamp close to her face. He smelled of strong perfume. Suddenly, she realized why. “Hori, you have sealed your own fate—sealed it just like a jar of beer.”

“My lady, I cannot guess. What are you talking about?”

“Do you think I do not know the signs?” Neith laughed. “I’m not the old woman. Yet I cannot say what vintage matches you. Drinking in secret while others thirst! If you were a true servant, you’d be ashamed.”

“Your words are empty and the grossest slander.” Hori pinched out the light and touched his staff gently to her forehead.

“Do not even hope that you frighten me.” Neith was hot then cold at the man’s growing impertinence. She must write to Ramose at once about this. “You are a broken vessel to throw out of my door.”

“I shall have my pot down to its bottom,” answered the steward. “And a man shall wear the wig in this house.” A drizzle of white spittle appeared on Hori’s lips. “Ramose, if you can remember this, Lady, left me in charge.”

He jerked his wrist and Neith’s headdress fell into the dirt. “This wand fits a woman’s back.”

The lack of decent drink must have affected her hearing. She could not believe Hori had said that. “Use it on Bakmut,” answered Neith promptly. “Since she’s recovered, that girl’s been bone-idle.”

Hori stepped away from her, his insinuating smile firmly back in place. “I shall do as you say, Lady, and tell Bakmut it is your will.” He melted into the shadow of a sycamore tree and was gone.

## Chapter 13

“Neith to her Lord and husband, Ramose. This letter is to let my Lord know that the tomb builders will no longer work on our house of eternity,” Ramose read aloud. “They claim to have no food or drink.”

“Lord of Truth, she must have enjoyed writing that.” Ramose rolled the papyrus tighter and slipped it into a glove. He tapped his driver on the shoulder. “Let us make haste: the men are all mounted. I want to have this finished and be back in the city by evening.” He was still hoping for some word from the priest, Duauf, although with each day that passed any good news seemed less and less likely.

Ramose blew down his nose. With ‘Serre off in Avaris, taking his ease, the High Priest had decided to return to his home estate. After tomorrow, Duauf would have to linger about the town-house like the rest of his clients and wait. His wife’s latest letter was full of her usual hysterical complaints against the steward and other reproaches, this tomb-builders’ strike being merely the most urgent of several problems. He needed to get back to Mazghuna to sort out the rest of the mess.

“Daddy! You said I might go with you to the pyramids! You promised!” Mose shouted after him from the balcony of the town-house like a street urchin.

Irritated—could Mose not understand that today was not the time for trips?—Ramose jerked round. His son was crying. Hathor had an arm round the boy’s shoulders. She waved, the morning sun lighting her body through fine Egyptian linen. Why did she keep wearing his tunics? Ramose laughed softly, anticipating the night. Relenting, he waved back.

“Drive towards the riverbank,” he commanded his driver. “I don’t want everyone to know my business.”

Shedding flies, the chariot spurted forward. A rooting pig scrambled out of its path, a one-eyed woman pounding grain in a stone mortar cracked



jokes with the passing guardsmen. Still waving, Ramose nodded to two guards flanking the street entrance to his house. Memphis was an uneasy place these days.

Out on the dirt roads, hot sand obliterated everything. Market stalls had little fresh produce, and the flower seller and fish girl were nowhere to be seen. Signs that the next inundation would be bad were everywhere, but he still did not know what form the calamity would take. Would the Nile flooding be too much or too little? When would he hear from Duauf from the first Nilometer at Elephantine?

“Stop—I’ll walk across this.” Ramose didn’t want to be jolted to pieces over the cobbles of a street that at harvest doubled as a threshing floor.

On foot, he crossed into the newest quarter of the white walled city, where the poor and dispossessed built their leaning dirt tenements right up to the shale-marks of the river. A tinker, patching a metal pot, holding the copper nails in his mouth, saw Ramose approaching and pointed. Jogging up before the beggars swarmed in, his mounted escort held back the onlookers.

Swatting flies, Ramose walked round a stunted palm tree to a wide brick wall. He rapped the top of the wall smartly with his knuckles. This had to be sufficient to keep back any flooding. Unimpressed, he sent a runner to the superintendent of the city with orders to make the wall higher.

“Leave by the Red Gateway,” he commanded, stepping back into the chariot. Unless one of the animals went lame, Ramose expected to be out of Menes’ ancient capital and at his own tomb in the desert city of the dead by midday.

After the column crossed the river, going from the side of the living to that of the dead, it traveled into the hills above the Nile valley. Threading along the once flagged causeway which led towards the half-buried pyramid of Unas and the massive stepped pyramid of Zoser, Ramose considered Hathor. He must speak to Mose’s nurse, remind her that on no account must his concubine be left alone with the boy. As for Neith....

The horses, patiently plodding through desert, dragging the chariot through deep creases and pockets of sand, suddenly reared. The thing hurled through the entrance of his own house of eternity struck against Ramose’s feet. The priest shouted with surprise and pain, and his charioteer wrestled with the reins. Looking down in the bucking carriage, Ramose realized what the object was. With an exclamation he lifted it.

The face of his stillborn son looked out from the torn wrappings. With that sense which still remains, even in shock, Ramose saw the mummification had worked well. His son's features looked like Neith's. Hiding the tiny head to his breast, Ramose felt a second figure hit him on the shoulder. One of Neith's dead cats: he recognized the shape through the bandages.

Grief changed to fury. His temple had been defiled, his tomb robbed. Laying down his precious burden, Ramose snatched up the charioteer's whip. Pounding the length of the paved courtyard, he flung himself against the half-open door. The wooden panel crashed back against a mud-brick wall, and the priest burst through into his own mortuary temple at a Heb Sed length ahead of his men.

"Murderers! Pig-droppings! Wasn't it enough to steal, must you also wreck?" The priest swung the whip. "Eat this! Let the food-offerings that you've stuffed in your bellies be laced with your own blood!"

The lash cracked. Scouring open a man's arm, it struck a fallen *shabti* figure on the rebound and powdered the small clay figure into dust. Recoiling upwards, like a striking cobra, the whip whistled and beat across a man's eyes. Shrieking, the thief smashed into a temple wall. Red sprayed across the yellow reliefs.

Deserting their blinded comrade, two thieves scuttled to the back wall of the temple and flung themselves down the stone steps leading to the underground tomb chamber. Ramose seized hold of a guardsman who would have followed them.

"Bring my son's body!" He waved the whip. "Dispose of that—creature."

"Lord, you must not go first," the guard exclaimed, as Ramose made for the stairs. "They will be trapped down there, wild as leopards in a pit."

Ramose smashed the whip head against the protesting mouth. "Am I not a man? Have I not killed my leopard? You will follow me, or nothing!"

He plunged into the blackness of the tomb, almost losing his footing on the steep steps. Ahead, a despairing shout told that one thief had reached the first level of the tomb and was now lost in an antechamber. The second man had remembered better and had found the hidden stair to the lower vaults. Ramose could hear him half-tumbling down the damp, twisting passageway.

Behind, some guard lit a torch, but the priest had no need of it. He ran

on, taking steps three at a time. He knew his house of eternity.

At this deep level, sound was muffled, an oil-light gave nothing after three paces. Reaching the broken terra-cotta pot he'd left as a marker, Ramose knocked the counter-weight that grew like a rock from the smoothly-sculptured walls and shinned round the narrow door. He almost could not squeeze his shoulders through, but then he managed it and dropped the three feet down into the main burial chamber way ahead of the thief, still toiling down the stairs.

Landing on top of the stone sarcophagus that one day would cover his own body, Ramose surprised two more robbers. One was breaking the seals of the alabaster jars and sniffing the oils and perfumes already put by for use in the afterworld. The other thief, a tall brute of a man, held the stub of a torch in one fist and used a stone in the other to club out the eye of a witness, a life-sized ka figure painted on the nearest wall.

Ramose threw back his arm. The whiplash sounded slow, but the tall thief was not fooled. He jerked aside, and the leather skittered down the wall.

Ramose was only just in time to flick it back before the man grabbed hold. Angry at himself, he whipped the light from the robber's hand. In the dark, he lashed out again.

Oil splashed up his legs. A second jar smashed on the corbelled roof just above his head. The whip hummed but touched nothing. Running feet: a strong body landing against the huge stone coffin, hands feeling for a hold. Ramose struck down into darkness: a body slithered away. He must have hurt the big robber, but the man did not cry out.

Suddenly light flooded the room. His men raced into the chamber by the square-cut door that would someday be sealed by a block of solid limestone. In a moment they had overpowered the first two robbers and jostled them into the chamber. Somewhere in one of the tomb's many antechambers they had picked up three more men and now dragged them forward.

Ramose looked down at the seven. He had notched the tallest robber's cheek with the whip. "Are you the leader?"

"No," said Kasa.

"Yes!" cried the others.

The big man shrugged. "Alright, yes." He glared up at Ramose. "What are you going to do about it?"

“Light more torches,” ordered Ramose. “Strip them. Pull out the man who has a golden rattle in his tunic and cut his throat.”

Exhausted, he dropped the whip. A small, stiffly-wrapped figure was handed to him and he looked once more into the face of his son. Clutching the pitiful remains, wanting never to let them go again, Ramose remembered Hathor’s dead son. A wave of nausea overcame him.

He swept his gaze round the torn and ruined grave-offerings, the spoiled wall-paintings. The tomb-builders should pay for this. His family’s afterlife was not to be lost through builders’ carelessness or greed.

His eyes met those of the tall robber, naked, beaten but still alive.

“We were starving,” said Kasa. “That’s why we did it.” His gaze wavered, or perhaps it was simply the torch-light. “I’m sorry about your young one. That wasn’t me.”

“Obviously not,” answered Ramose, for a man was bleeding to death all over the floor of the tomb. A soldier walked up to the sarcophagus and handed Ramose a child’s rattle, first wiping it clean. Ramose gently shook its golden bells.

“Now we’ll visit the tomb-builders’ village to pay our respects,” he remarked. “Bring those men with us. One or two should serve as examples. The rest can be used later for javelin practice.” An idea came, which pleased him. “Don’t feed them.”

## Chapter 14

The opportunity was too good to miss, Bakht had decided. Here was the High Priest of Ptah, lately returned with his son—after another of those hasty visits to Memphis—to find his country house stricken by sickness. Ramose would be forever grateful to the man brave and resourceful enough to pay him an early visit and bring much-needed supplies.

Bakht readied his new boat while heralds were dispatched and gifts gathered. Amongst the presents he included Tiyi. “Time for you to leave, little one, before you use up my anise.”

Bakht was proud of his newly-trained masseuse. Wanting to make an impression and also do his best for the girl, he prepared Tiyi himself. Bathed, powdered and made up, the farmer’s daughter was put into a long skirt of feathers and a linen coat worked over with sequins.

Tiyi liked the coat, which sparkled and made her shine. She was neither glad nor sorry to leave snub-nosed, long-armed Bakht, who had killed her parents.

“Another master for you, eh?” said Bakht on the morning that he carried Tiyi, coat, oil-box and all, onto the ship. He put her down between trunks of fine pottery and placed an awning over her and the wine amphorae. Stripped of her clothes to save them from the dust of the journey, Tiyi knelt beside Bakht’s chair. Living in the baron’s fortress home, she had learned this was expected of her.

When the last of the gifts were on board, Bakht ordered the rowers to start and took his seat under the awning. Lifting a heavy jewel-casket onto his lap, he fed Tiyi slices of melon.

“I doubt Ramose will spoil you like this, but then he might. The man has a name amongst women.”

Tiyi rocked her hips slightly and made the strange cough in her throat that was her way of laughter.

“Next to the King, he’s the most powerful and dangerous individual at court,” Bakht continued. “Of course, when he married his wife she brought double his lands and treasure into the reckoning.” The man’s fruit-stained fingers slipped onto the jewel-casket. “All in all, a most useful couple to know.”

Tiyi swallowed and closed her eyes. For some reason, when Bakht said the word “wife”, Kasa came into her mind. Would his ghost blame her for surviving? Would his ghost be ashamed of what she did, of what she was now? Quickly blocking her brother out, she thought instead of her pretty spangled coat. Tomorrow, her master said, she would wear it.

\* \* \* \*

“How much longer?” murmured Neith to Ramose from behind the shield of her fan. Needing the chamber pot, she squirmed on her chair. The cat on her knee opened a reproachful yellow eye.

“Four sides of beef, four gazelle, two dozen amphorae of flour....”

Standing beside the entrance, blue wig black in the lemon afternoon light, the steward described each gift as it was brought into the banquet hall by Bakht’s uniformed attendants. Occasionally he lifted his left hand to admire the gold ring Bakht had given him as a bribe. Bakht, unlike Neith, had recognized him as a man to respect, thought Hori.

“The fellow certainly knows our business,” remarked Ramose, as more and more foodstuffs were placed around the bases of the four great pillars of the hall. “At this moment, his grain alone is worth more to me than silver.”

“Ah, and you resent it.” Neith could not resist glancing at Hathor, placed by the steward on a couch at Ramose’s left side. “Yet we must all make allowances.”

Ramose snorted. “Governor of the Oryx Nome indeed! The man’s nothing but a princelet, a robber-baron.”

Neith shifted her hips again. Disturbed, the cat dropped from her lap and scooted across the tiles to investigate a heavy platter of cooked meats. “So that is how Bakht styles himself. How interesting.” Neith’s unpainted mouth wore the self-effacing smile of a wall-painting. “When will the Governor make his appearance, Hori?”

“Very soon, my lady. First he wished the master to receive and review

the gifts,” answered the steward, cool and deferential in public. ““Let the lord Ramose dispose of my poor offerings within his house as he sees fit, then we may both meet each other without embarrassment.”

“Thieving donkey, braying over other people’s corn.” Ramose tugged at his beard-wig, looking as though he wished to sweep Bakht’s entire assemblage out of doors. Hathor saw the steward’s profile jut and pulled thoughtfully on her own lower lip. She hoped Ramose would be gracious to the stranger’s face.

More familiar greeting gifts, voice-tagged by the Steward, were now being carried in. “Lovely man, sending us so much wine,” said Neith, sitting up on her chair. Beyond caring what her guest or husband thought, she slipped down from her hard seat and crossed to the toilet-stool in the room’s darkest corner. Ramose returned an irritated attention to the baron’s final offering.

“Excellent!” The exclamation was genuine, the inhaled breath sharp and explosive. “Yes, potential is there.”

The small dark-skinned slave in the spangled coat and jewels blushed but never faltered. Eyes cast down, balancing a tray of goblets on a head of thick black curls, she knelt before Ramose’s chair, clutching a polished stone vessel in both hands.

“My, there are enough sequins on that to bower the entire harlot’s quarter of Memphis.” Neith swiftly resumed her place, tweaking one of the girl’s feathers on the way. “Our governor disappoints me. I thought for a man of such obvious resource Bakht would show more imagination.”

“Ramosé!” The coarse voice rang out like a battle cry as Bakht dashed into the hall, arms outstretched. The black man drew back on his seat.

“Dear man, how good it is to see you!” Bakht spoke as though they had been friends for years. Kicking aside the low cushions laid out for a guest, he strode up to the three couches and squeezed Neith’s hand. “Delighted! A real couple of love-apples, eh, Ramosé?” He kissed Hathor on the cheek.

“The lady Neith is my wife,” answered Ramosé with chilly emphasis. Hathor blushed and hid her face.

“Naturally,” said Bakht, not in the least perturbed. He snapped his fingers, and the kneeling slave girl moved gracefully into action.

“Your gifts show you to be a man of stature,” observed Ramosé, shrugging a disinterested shoulder at the heap of presents.

"Trifles to a noble such as yourself." Bakht dismissed them with a sword-cut gesture.

In the short silence that followed, all of them watched the dark maidservant. She lifted the tray of goblets from her head and set it on the tiles, then poured wine into each gold cup. To Hathor, there was an aura of simplicity about her, as though the tensions of the room did not touch her, or in touching, were changed by her stillness into peace.

"Pretty little creature." For the first time since entering the banqueting hall, Ramose showed his teeth as he smiled. He brushed the dark maid's wiry curls as she offered Neith a goblet. "How old is she, Bakht?"

"Husband! She's dark enough to be your sister." Ignoring the steward's frown, Neith tossed off her drink, smacking her lips. "Ah, that's good!"

"The wines of my country have been famous for centuries. Rightly so, in my view." Bakht raised his goblet. "To the lands of Bakht and Ramose! May they continue to be great!" Drinking deep from the goblet, he left Ramose's question unanswered. Let the priest be intrigued, it would make the girl more exciting.

"Hathor, why not take the governor onto your couch," said Neith, fingering the top of her cup. "It is plain he does not wish to sit upon our cushions."

"Of course my lord is welcome." After the general laughter which greeted Neith's remark, Hathor had no choice but to have the burly robber-baron next to her.

"The drought is widespread and growing." Bakht talked of farming. Let townsfolk speak of money and fine crafts. To a prince land was the only subject worthy of comment.

Ramose made some reply. Anxious to appear interested, Bakht leaned forward, and the heavy pectoral slung round his neck jabbed into Hathor's back. She yelped at the sudden cold and was rewarded by a smirk from Neith and a stare from Ramose.

"My apologies." Bakht rubbed the spot, which made it worse. Oblivious to her discomfort, Ramose inquired after a noble known to the governor, a man it seemed of uncertain loyalties.

"Never!" Bakht raised his hand, as though making a sacred vow. "He would go down to the riverbank and throw himself to the crocodiles, rather than desert Aweserre's cause."



"Such a course would seem excessive, even for a patriot," replied Ramose, twirling a reed pen between his fingers, indifferent to Bakht's opinion. He gazed at the slave-girl.

Jealous and uneasy, Hathor looked away, beginning to understand Neith's frequent demands for wine.

"You have heard, I take it, of Sekenenre's Tao's latest pretensions?" asked Bakht, one man of the world to another.

"Naturally, I keep myself informed."

Hathor knew Ramose was lying. She sensed a slight stiffening from the occupant of her couch and rested her chin on her elbow, genuinely interested. Bakht glanced at the steward. Ramose nodded slightly: it was safe to continue.

"It is rumored that our true Pharaoh was behind the assassination attempt. I see you are surprised."

"Only at the folly of men. It is impossible that Pharaoh would fail in any such undertaking."

Digesting Ramose's answer, Hathor was forced to admire how the priest had surmised so much from so little.

"Ah! I thought so. To strike at the Theban in that way—even though it was a false ceremony—did not seem to me like Aweserre."

"The manner of a king." Ramose withdrew into dignity like a man shielding his face with a cloak. "Great House understands such matters. When Pharaoh decides to punish this wayward vassal, Sekenenre's southern fiefdom will shake. Jackals will make their homes in the empty courts of his ruined palace."

"May that time come soon!" said Bakht, in a way that suggested more than political expediency, the good manners due to one's host.

Hathor wanted Ramose to ask the man what he meant. To her frustration, the priest seemed ready to let the matter rest.

"Baboon." A single word broke like wind from Neith's lips. Hathor started, but the woman had returned her attention to her cup, re-filled by the silent-stepping slave.

"Perfect timing." Ramose held out his cup, and the awkward moment passed.

Wondering if the slave had deliberately diverted Neith, Hathor thoughtfully put out her own hand. The dark slave took the goblet. Hathor

smiled. The girl smiled back, seemingly guileless. With a stab of jealousy, Hathor saw the neat soft figure, small, firm belly, unmarked by pregnancy. Pressing her own milk-turgid breasts, she smiled again, miserable.

“The upstart’s son, now, Kamose, is getting to be quite a nuisance on my southern borders.” Bakht ran a callused hand across the dark slave’s flanks, flashing the sequins on her coat. “Nothing I can’t deal with, of course, but still an inconvenience. These roving gangs are hard to catch.”

The robber baron raised his head. “Perhaps a letter from Aweserre, to authorize the raising of a small force—”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” answered Ramose smoothly. “It’s well known at court that the governor of the Oryx Nome has particular expertise, not to say experience, when it comes to dealing with bandits.”

The man was stupid or vain enough to take that as a compliment, although the dark slave jerked her head aside as though struck.

Drawn by the movement, Ramose spoke directly to the girl. “I recall asking how old you were. Perhaps you could tell me.”

Shyly the girl shook her head.

“Typical peasant,” said Neith. “She’ll have no idea.”

“Younger than you, anyway,” said Hathor under her breath. The robber baron grunted and drained his cup.

“She’s a masseuse. She’ll answer to anything you like.” He rolled his big head, cracking the neck bones, and the girl scrambled round the couch and started to knead his shoulder muscles.

“Continue on this lady’s feet,” ordered Bakht, and the girl immediately shifted her attentions to Hathor.

“As you can see, my lord, obedient and skilled,” said Bakht. “And a sweet field to plough.” He winked like a common pander.

“Is she foreign? Does she not speak our language?” asked Ramose.

“Neither our tongue, nor any man’s,” answered Bakht. “She is mute.” He winked a second time. “And therefore discreet.”

“I note that she is good with her hands,” said Ramose, passing over the question of discretion. “Is that a taught skill? Mutes, I’ve found, are so often simple-minded.”

Hathor felt the girl’s thumbs pressing into the instep of her left foot. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, as Bakht and Ramose continued to confer. She felt ashamed of all men. The hands on her skin stroked calmly, the language

of the senses. Be my friend.

Hathor closed her eyes and relaxed.

She dreamed of a man, dark-skinned like the slave girl but bigger-made, unyielding: basalt instead of ebony. The man had been betrayed by life, though he did not feel cheated. He fought life back. Hathor liked him and wished him well. In the dream she washed his wounds.

\* \* \* \*

A touch against her back brought Hathor awake. She threw an arm across her face, shadowing her eyes from the newly lit torches, then blinked and shuddered.

"Perhaps it would be more appropriate if the ladies leave us?" asked Bakht, rising from the couch.

Saying nothing, Neith stalked out of the banqueting hall. Ramose pointed after her. "If you could also go, Hori, and see to the ordering of the feast."

"My lord." With a low bow, the tall steward withdrew.

Hathor reached down for her sandals.

"Not you, my dear. You stay." Hathor remained where she was, arm still outstretched.

Bakht gave her the kind of smile which made Hathor clench her hand into a fist. She watched him cross to the heap of gifts and pull out a studded footstool. Near the entrance to the hall, a round moon-face peered from behind a pillar. The lady Neith had returned to watch.

"Move up, my dear." Ramose joined Hathor on the couch. His presence made her skin jump. He pressed himself against her, imprisoning her with an arm.

"What's happening?" She saw Bakht clasp the slave girl's shoulders and begin to peel off her lurid coat. "He's not going to hurt her?"

"Nothing that she won't enjoy."

"That's right, Hathor," said Bakht. She detested the robber-baron's use of her name. It made her feel violated.

"Let me help your wife." She didn't want to watch. The whole thing reeked of corruption.

Ramose laughed. He drew Hathor back against him, crossing his hands

over her body. "Watch. This might be instructive." Bakht stripped off the mute's jewels.

"Why are you doing this to me?" said Hathor.

Naked and smiling, obviously a willing participant, the dark slave knelt and bent over the footstool. Taking a phial from his tunic, Bakht scattered its contents over the girl's raised haunches. "Anise, a noted aphrodisiac. To add a little spice to the proceedings."

"That's costly." Ramose pulled Hathor's robe down to expose and fondle her breasts. His courtesan stiffened but said nothing.

"I agree—costly," answered Bakht. "So when a certain slave-girl accidentally breaks a full bottle of anise in my house, what must I do?"

His open palm cracked across the slave's rump. The girl's body jerked. A second blow made her arch her back like a cat. A third had her writhing. Ramose laughed a second time and rapped his knuckles against the couch.

"One from me," he said, and glanced at his couch-companion. "Perhaps I should call this one Hathor, too—yes?"

Saying nothing, Hathor closed her eyes on the pitiful spectacle.

Neith watched from behind her pillar in scandalized disgust.

Only Tiya did not care what anyone thought.

\* \* \* \*

Sickened at what she had been forced to witness, Hathor begged then to be excused. Ramose refused, insisting that she remain by him while the first cold dishes and the wines of the night's banquet were brought in. The center-piece of the feast, a foreign dish of the Keftians, was displayed to them by the returning steward.

"I see the cook has not lost his skill," remarked Ramose, admiring the whole roast kid, arranged as though sleeping on its bed of olives. He beckoned the steward closer and removed one of the fruits, meant to symbolize the green pastures of Krete. Lowering his arm, the priest waited for the mute crouched under his divan to take the olive from him in her mouth.

"Why are you doing this?" whispered Hathor.

"You keep asking that question." Ramose fed the naked slave another olive. "Would it disappoint you to know, Hathor, that I am doing nothing?"

"I don't believe you." Ever since his return from the tomb builders, Ramose had changed towards her. At times he seemed to see her as an enemy. "Why do you want to call that girl my name?" She pointed at the masseuse.

Hathor expected the mute to look away. Instead the girl shook her head, moving her lips and showing her white teeth.

Ramose laughed, although not at the mute's reaction, which he did not see. "You presume too much, woman. A pretty peasant who has murdered her own first-born should not object to sharing any title with another slave." He rolled over on the couch, turning his back to indicate his displeasure.

"At least let me know what wrong I have done." Braving Ramose's strange new mood, Hathor touched the priest's shoulder.

Ramose turned his head. Another instant and he would have spoken. They would have fought, and the shadow that had come between them would have been expunged.

Instead, knowing that she deserved punishment (she had thrived while Kasa and Nakht and her parents had died). Tiyi flung herself at the priest.

"What's this?" Ramose was both pleased and amused at the slave's sudden snatching of his hand. "Let go, little monkey, we'll have you up here first."

"Let me give you more room." Hathor moved off the couch. She'd had enough of watching them play. Leaving Ramose to cavort with another of his slaves, she pushed her way through the long processions of servants.

Convinced she'd saved Hathor from a beating, Tiyi was happy.

\* \* \* \*

Still unaccustomed to the dark-time hours kept by the nobility, Hathor wearily climbed the stairs to the moonlit gallery. After a moment, almost as though it had been arranged between them, Bakht joined her.

"Lord Ramose's banqueting guests are finally arriving," he said. "I must say, he keeps a late house. I think half of those who've come for a free feed must have received their invitations this evening."

Lit by silver moonlight, apathetic to Bakht's shrewd guess, Hathor flicked a finger at one of the gallery's rarities, a tall blue glass vase, standing alone on its own plinth. "Late or not, his wife will be welcoming them. I am

not needed.”

Bakht came closer. His breathing bubbled in his boxer’s flattened nose. “The noble priest said that you’d entertain me while his clients and friends are being seated in the hall.”

Hathor stiffened. “Did Ramose see you leave?”

“Ramose told me where I’d find you.” Bakht put his arms around her. He smelled of stale wine and body wind. “You’re beautiful. Any man would be proud to share you.”

Smiling, Hathor closed Bakht’s hands over her breasts. “Come, let us make sure. If you were sent by my lord to test me, I do not wish to fail.” She laughed softly in his ear and kissed his throat. “My lord feeds and clothes me. I must do the proper thing by him.”

Stiff with desire, Bakht willingly agreed. He moved back with Hathor along the gallery.

Pausing to check that the banqueting hall was indeed now teeming, Hathor called to the steward. “Hori, bring light!”

Arrested by her clear voice, polite conversation ceased. Neith, in her fresh robes and make-up, no longer drew the eye. Everyone, including Ramose, looked at Hathor.

“Steward,” she said, addressing the room at large, “I must protest. I found our own guest of honor lost. Look!”

Two servants carrying blazing torches ran to where she pointed. Half way up the stairs, blinking in the smoke, stood the Governor of the Oryx Nome. The fire hid nothing of his condition.

Satisfied, Hathor walked to the table of laid-out sweets and helped herself to a fig. Suddenly she felt very hungry.

## Chapter 15

Kasa tugged again on the rope. He felt the knot beginning to slide. His sudden movement roused Setna the thief, sprawled against his back. “Are they here?” Setna croaked, screwing up a sun burnt, peeling face.

“Get back to sleep,” snarled Kasa, working against his bonds. Escape was impossible, but he’d not die fettered. When they’d cast him into this pit, he’d dragged two guards down with him. Now he could hardly stand without support.

Setna, Teta and the others quarreled when awake and raved in their sleep. A week without food, three days without water, finished off two men. The rest ate spiders and odd scraps of leather. Setna drank urine. He said it wasn’t bad, but didn’t try it twice.

Kasa tensed his shoulders. His strength was pitiful compared to what it had been. Once he’d thought he could rely on muscle-power, see his family right by it. Since then, with Nakht gone and mother, father and sister missing, dead to him if not to the world, he’d learned otherwise. Strength was nothing without power.

Ramose, the man whose tomb they’d broken into, had power. It lay over him like shining wings: dignity, assurance, knowledge. Perhaps it was his training as a priest.

Kasa envied him. Not the big house, the servants, the guards, the secrets, only the power. If he had the power of the priest, he’d remake the world.

Water splashed over him. Shadows scurried round the rim of the pit. Kasa threw back his head to let the next bucket-load crash against his open mouth. His skin smarted with returning life.

“Get a move on!” yelled the guard captain. “I don’t want to see them dropping shit on the house floors!”

Roused by the drenching, the others sighed and sucked their wet fingers.

Pushing against sand, Teta and Setna rose unsteadily to their feet. Guards dropped ladders down, but they remained where they were, propped along one wall of the narrow pit.

Swallowing a mouthful of sweet water, Kasa made one final attempt to slip his bonds. After an agonizing wrench, the knot loosened, and he jerked one hand free. Leaving the rope hanging from an elbow joint he climbed out of the pit, his body shaking with effort.

“Fetch up the rest!” bawled the guard captain. “The Lord wants some entertainment tonight, not next flood! Never mind this one. He’s too far gone for trouble.”

We’ll see about that, thought Kasa, but he did not try to straighten. Crook-backed like an old man, coughing up the buried dust in his throat, Kasa stumbled along. Only Setna, the nimble, the quick, picked up his feet and looked about him as he walked.

Beetle-slow, the scraggy group of captives passed through a dark garden into black corridors. Into high, lighted corridors spiced with lingering food-smells. Into a great cave of a building where torches turned night into a golden dawn. Here they found food, drink, scents to reawaken appetite: a feast of the senses. Flower garlands, so bright they hurt the eye, provided a feast for the soul.

After a time, Kasa noticed there were people.

A crowd, he realized, well-dressed and well-fed. Sleek as children, they seemed nervous, although prepared to laugh at their fears. No longer overwhelmed by the smells of food, Kasa caught their chattering voices, their twitching hands and darting eyes. They were looking at him.

Suddenly a slave ran forward and threw a spangled coat round his middle, tying the coat sleeves round his waist. Kasa sneezed in embarrassment—starving, he could still be perplexed by the girl’s nakedness, her shameless, clinging arms. The soldiers tore her away, and he saw her face.

“Tiyi.” He croaked. In another moment, his sister threw herself into his arms.

\* \* \* \*

Hathor gasped like the others as the guard captain grabbed at the slave,



only to be shouldered aside by the tall robber-leader. With his hands crossed protectively over the girl, the man flicked the mute off her feet and charged the closing soldiers.

“His fetters are gone!” screamed Neith. A minor panic broke out as several of the guests stampeded from their couches.

Hathor dashed the contents of her wine cup into a Nubian house-guard’s eyes, spoiling his hasty sword-thrust. She recognized the robber as the man from her dream. Now, thought she knew it was impossible, she yearned for him to escape.

With the girl still locked in his arms, the black-haired giant made a valiant attempt to get free. Skidding on spilled raw and cooked meats, big feet crushing cushions and the smoldering brands of an overturned brazier, the thief rushed at the stairway.

He was too late. Already there were guards waiting. Dropping the girl safe behind him, the dark man straightened and stood still, taking whip blows unflinchingly on head and shoulders.

“Ramose!” Seeing spears, Hathor scrambled up from her place. “Sweet lord, don’t let them—”

As she tried to reach the priest, Hori the Steward grabbed her shoulders. When Hathor struggled, he struck her so hard across an ear and cheek that the woman tottered. Eyes burning with tears, she sank to her knees.

Still she spoke. “Master, I beg you.” Her voice cracked. “There is more here than we know. Let him live—”

A noble laughed outright, and the whipping of the tall thief continued. Sure of themselves again, supper guests gestured for servants to clear off their spattered clothes and couches. Neith’s pet cat helped itself to a roast quail, stranded on a broken plate in a pool of grease in the middle of the room. Three girls together on their cushions giggled softly, flicking lip-paint at Kasa’s long legs. Soon everyone would be ready for the proper spectacle to begin.

Ramose raised his palm, and the beating ceased. Talk subsided. Across the plumes of her fan, Neith smirked at Hathor and the steward.

“Get that female out of the way,” commanded the priest, and a guard thrust Hathor like a parcel onto the nearest couch. Ramose shot her a look. “Be still, before you’re sick.”

Hathor opened her eyes. “My lord, I know this man. In my heart, in my

dreams, I've seen him."

"Be quiet, girl. Do you think I want to know that?" Ramose was half out of his chair, gripping the chair arm so tightly that the wood creaked under his hand. He pushed at Hathor and put his face close to hers. "Don't press me, Hathor. You've made me one new enemy by refusing Bakht this evening. Speak again and I'll send you to him tonight and let him take you with him when he leaves."

Hathor shrank away. After this moment, she could no longer pretend that Bakht had approached her in the gallery without the priest's consent. She could no longer presume to be the equal or rival of Ramose's wife—knowledge that was a bitter grief.

Unaware of the hurt he had caused, Ramose watched his courtesan's withdrawal. "Not another word!" he snorted, leaving Hathor sick and trembling on the couch.

"That's told her!"

Ignoring his wife's comment, Ramose resumed his seat. "Bring the leader of the tomb robbers forward."

But now there was another interruption. As the Nubian house-guards circled the tall Egyptian, glancing at each other to move in on him all together, the speechless slave darted from the shadows. Dropping onto all fours, the girl scampered to Ramose's chair and, touching her forehead against his sandals, began silently to cry.

"A pretty part of the entertainment, my lord," said one guest, looking around to acknowledge laughter.

He got none. Irritated at these delays, Ramose thrust the weeping slave from him. "By the seven Hathors, what is it with you women? I'll have no more of this!"

"Her name is Tiyi." The tall, dark robber came forward of his own accord. The veins on his upper arms stood out like ropes. "Strike her again and I'll kill you."

Tiyi sobbed aloud and made a lunge at the priest. She flung herself against Ramose, covering his hands with kisses, raising her dark eyes to his in dog-like fear.

"A lover, without doubt," called out the guest who'd spoken a moment earlier. "Let the wench embrace her brutish childhood sweetheart. Their parting should be most affecting."

Hathor sat bolt upright. Fighting her swimming head, she cried out, "They are brother and sister! Are you all so blind you cannot see the likeness? My Lord, can you not be generous?" she went on, ignoring the angry buzz her outburst provoked.

Ramose glared at her. "I have warned you once—"

Tiyi seized his hands in hers and shook them, trying desperately to get the priest's attention. Over her head, Ramose saw the robber-leader strain against the points of the guards' upraised spears, ready to attack and accept the consequences.

"Hold." He took the slave's head between his hands and compared the two faces, one blazing with hatred, the other with grief. Thoughtfully, he released the girl. "How old is your sister, man?"

"Tiyi is too young to die."

"You help neither yourself nor her by your impudence."

The shock-haired giant glanced about the hall. "Do you expect me to believe that anything I say or do will change the outcome of your evening's sport?"

Tiyi moaned. She went down again at Ramose's feet, then, as though sensing no pity from the priest, lurched sideways and cast herself at Neith.

"Stop that pawing!" Neith snatched the folds of her dress back from the girl's agonized clasp. "How dare you grovel to me?" She scraped her chair back, laughing scornfully when the leg caught a tress of Tiyi's thick black hair.

Pinned and supposedly helpless, the mute ripped herself free, and every woman flinched. Hathor gasped, seeing blood run down the girl's nose and chin, but Tiyi made no sound. Straightening, she walked across to her brother and reached for his hand through a thicket of spears. An absolute silence fell in the feast chamber. Men and women forgot how to breathe.

Tiyi smiled up at Kasa, then shook her head. Women sighed at the softening in her brother's face.

"I know," he said gently. "Nahkt's dead too. We're the last." He wiped a blood-smear from her jaw. "I'd forgotten how pretty you are."

Tiyi pushed herself against a guard's shield, pushed her throat against the tip of a spear-head. Her skin was paler against the pressure of the gleaming point.

"No," said Kasa. "Not you. As your elder brother, I forbid it." Suddenly

he was weeping.

Tiyi smiled. For the first time in her life she was not frustrated by her lack of speech.

“Stop!” shouted Ramose and Hathor. Tiyi looked back, throwing both a look of pity. Fearlessly, she moved closer.

A bloody spear fell clattering on the tiles. Tiyi swayed, and Kasa caught her. Her eyes were still open, and they sought Ramose.

Now do your worst, they said, as clearly as though she’d shouted.

The black priest hid his own eyes.

## Chapter 16

Having the kingly colors painted onto his face to prepare for the war council, Sekenenre stared into the silver mirror. To prepare for a future offensive into his hated rival's country was diversion and revenge. Aweserre should be made to suffer as he did.

A clouding in the mirror revealed another entrant into his chamber. Sekenenre turned listlessly on the simple stool seat to see who it was. "Daughter." His dry voice rustled.

A servant, tracing a brow back onto Pharaoh's haggard features, tactfully withdrew from earshot, leaving father and daughter alone. Ahhotpe came up to Sekenenre and put her arms about his neck.

"Father." She lowered her head to his. Ahhotpe's odd-colored eyes, one gold, one blue, were rimmed by a blackness which was not the result of kohl. Under a thick smear of grease, her lower lip was cracked where she had bitten it. She was dressed in mourning robes, as he was.

"This fifth day must be the last, Ahhotpe. Today you must eat." The clear-cut planes of Sekenenre's face looked longer after his own fasting. He had also shaved head and eyebrows as a further token of respect.

Ahhotpe drew a deep breath which Sekenenre felt himself. "Father—" A tear fell from one pinched cheek onto his bare shoulder. "Will you deny me in this, too?" He had forbidden Ahhotpe to cut off her hair. "Please, let me fast with you, for as long as you do. Had he lived, Zoser would have been my husband."

Unable to hold her gaze in the mirror Sekenenre lowered his head, grinding his knuckles against his temples. "Make them go away." He managed to restrain his tears until Ahhotpe had persuaded the officers of the court to leave.

"Go. I will tend Pharaoh myself." Dismissed by a direct command, the servants also pattered from the room, and Ahhotpe swung the doors shut on

the outside world.

Suspicious even of her—knowledge is power, and what use might Ahhotpe make of his grief?—Sekenenre would not embrace his daughter. He wept in private, soundlessly, hunched over on the stool. Afterwards he wiped his face dry with a sleeve, blotting out traces of tears. Anger was the only intimate emotion in which he felt safe to indulge.

“I was going to make that white bitch my Great Wife. Why did she kill him?”

“Father, I don’t know.”

“Her own son! I got not a word from her under torture, not one single explanation!” Sekenenre watched Ahhotpe’s ivory skin mottling with a blush. “Not so pale now, are you?” His bloodshot eyes narrowed into slits. “Is it possible that you know more than you’re saying, Ahhotpe? Just what were you doing in Zoser’s room that morning?”

Ahhotpe sighed. “Father, what can I say that I have not told you a hundred times already? The truth is that I loved Zoser. That morning, I—I desired him. Is that now a sin to you?”

“Enough!” grunted Sekenenre. “I have been young myself. I remember times with your mother.” His voice faded, his mind inevitably fixing on Zoser’s mother. “Death by stoning was too quick.”

His daughter understood the regret he would not voice. “Father, it had to be. You could do nothing else except order her execution.”

Quick as a scorpion, Sekenenre’s hand came out and pinned his daughter’s wrist down onto his thigh. “What else do you know about that night? Answer me this time!” Ahhotpe’s perfection made him wary. Her behavior seemed too flawless, almost rehearsed.

She stood before him in the chink of sun from the upper window, a tall slim figure, looking as though she had been dipped in gold. Her eyes met his without flinching. “I, Father? Nothing at all.” Honesty shone from her like a ray of light.

Wanting to believe, Sekenenre released her wrist and took her hand in his. “Are you with child by him?”

Ahhotpe now lowered her gaze. “That is too early to say.”

“Are you with child by me?” The question shocked her, as Sekenenre knew it would. Ahhotpe drew back sharply into the shadows, hiding her features.

"I don't understand." Her body was shivering, but her voice did not tremble. "We have never—no more than kisses—"

"It may not be always 'no more than kisses,' Ahhotpe. I need an heir, and from a blood-royal woman. My new 'Great Wife'. Does that title not appeal to you?"

"What of Kamose? He is the son of your first great wife." Ahhotpe walked to the table of cosmetics and began searching for a fresh brush. "I was under the impression that you favored him after the Heb Sed."

She had her back to him. He could not see her face. "Kamose bores me. He talks of nothing but fighting."

"Yet you yourself are preparing for a war council today." He could hear the smile in her voice, a tone which always reminded him of Tetisheri. Thinking of his mother, Sekenenre smiled.

Ahhotpe turned and approached him with a brush full of dark lip-gloss. "I promise I will make you look your best. You will dazzle everyone at the council."

Wanting to believe her, Sekenenre leaned back on his seat.

Ahhotpe painted his face as one would a mask, layer upon layer of color and shade, hiding and disguising, defining and accentuating, adding impact and power. At the end, gazing a second time into the silver hand-mirror, Sekenenre saw himself made crystalline. His eyes gleamed out of their whitened sockets like a hawk's.

He did not thank Ahhotpe for his transformation. "Admit the court and the fan bearer of the king," Sekenenre commanded, naming the official whose duty it was to place the royal diadem upon Pharaoh's head. Rising from the stool, he moved into the single shaft of sunlight in the room.

Ahhotpe beat on the cedar wood doors, and the court streamed in, the fan bearer of the king coming first.

"Glory of heaven and earth! We salute you!" The man knelt and prostrated himself, the rest of the court following his example. Smiling slightly—so thinly that the paints disguised it—Sekenenre gave permission for his people to rise.

His dressing then continued, beginning with the removal of the mourning robes—a warrior king never needs to grieve. He is always victorious. To Sekenenre's simple linen under-kilt were added a studded belt, a faience pectoral, and silver sandals for his feet. The royal flail and

crook were put into his hands, each adding to his power and mystery. Sekenenre watched the swim of faces, tiding up and down in waves of ceremony, and was well satisfied with the results.

“Gentlemen—to the council chamber.”

Sweeping past Ahhotpe, he paused. “By tomorrow morning I expect you to have broken your fast. See that you obey me in this.”

“And in all things, lord.” Ahhotpe sank to her knees. When she raised her head, Pharaoh had gone.

\* \* \* \*

Kamose had slipped out five days earlier on another of his border raids in the dawn following the Heb Sed and did not know about Zoser’s death. Dashing back into the Theban palace, straight from chariot to chamber, he expected to see the Pyramid’s wide, frog-jawed face grinning at him when he came late to the council.

Skidding in through the beaded door hanging, weapons clattering across his back, Kamose found instead a group of Sekenenre’s timeservers, squatting over maps. Opposite this stiff semicircle, apart from his army commanders on a lion-skin rug, sat his father.

Looks more like a cross-legged scribe than a king, Kamose thought, unimpressed by the royal insignia or Sekenenre’s glare.

“Caught in a rainstorm? Returned for a meal, have we? Try some of the fish. It was freshly caught this morning.” Pharaoh waved crook and flail towards the long, low, buffet table at the dark side of the room. “Please watch where you put your feet. I’ve only just got the carpets back.” He spoke to the room at large. “Last time, it took the fullers three weeks to get rid of this goose’s mud-prints.”

The five generals busied themselves with their charts and would not look.

Kamose was elated by the implied insult. The old fool clearly perceived him as a threat. Yet, as the goose is sacred to Amun, his father had said a lucky thing. It was time for action, and he was the man for it.

Throwing aside a cushion, he rolled the shield from his shoulders and seated himself on that. A daub of blood from the base of the metal smeared itself over the sand floor.



He started at once. "Strategically it would be easiest to sail the bulk of the forces downstream after inundation, but the Hyksos will be expecting that line of attack."

Itching from travel and battle, Kamose scratched the dust-marks on his neck. "I shall take the army north across country. My men are building a special road. I shall launch a direct attack on Memphis."

Sekenenre gave a smothered laugh which Kamose should have recognized as a warning. It was his way, too, of showing anger or hurt. Dreaming his own role, he missed the sign.

"Their chariotry is still better than ours," he continued. "I captured six cars two days ago, and will get more in other raids, but I doubt that we shall match the enemy's numbers this year. We can't meet on any battleground where our infantry can get hacked to bits by a chariot charge."

"Another good reason to attack cities?" asked Sekenenre softly. His generals had stopped shuffling their wads of paper, not wishing to draw attention to themselves.

"City dwellers have little stomach for war, my father. Memphis's white walls will be breached as easily by my army as a duck's egg is smashed by the heron."

Drumming his fingers on the shield, Kamose became aware of a certain tension in the chamber. He rose, flicking the long fine fringe from his eyes. "Something is wrong?"

Holding the crook and flail before himself like weapons, Sekenenre stood up. "What is the king's role in this?"

"Why, nothing," answered Kamose, surprised at the question. "I am the commander. I have the experience. The army follows me." He glanced at the generals, expecting them to confirm this. Two started to choke, as though they had sand down their throats.

Kamose glanced at his father again. He tasted sand in his own mouth, black and gritty. Somewhere in the palace a door banged. "It is my right." Kamose bent and picked up the shield. "No one knows more of the Delta kingdom than I do. I and my captains have raided there over a dozen times."

Sekenenre cleared his throat. "Zoser always thought that your border skirmishes were too provocative."

The same door banged again, more sharply this time. Kamose stifled a laugh. "So, the Pyramid's deadly presence finally blights this council!" He

turned left then right. "Where is the glorious Zoser? Still creeping around my sister's skirts?"

There was definitely a sandstorm coming. The wind whistled eerily through the window slats.

"Zoser is dead," said Sekenenre.

Kamose's head snapped back. "What? How did he die?"

Sekenenre shook his head. To tell of his own child's murder was beyond endurance. He could not do it.

Around him life continued in hateful normality. Three women dashed into the room to shutter the windows and cover the buffet table before sand ruined the bread and meats. The most senior of the generals querulously demanded that the servants help him up.

"What happened?" Kamose asked again.

Wetting his lips, Sekenenre finally fashioned his tongue around the dreadful words. "The day after the feast of the Heb Sed, Zoser was found dead in bed. His mother had put a knife into his guts." Pharaoh's voice was a rattled whisper. "The guards found her with the knife still clutched in her hand, and she was screaming, just screaming. When they brought her in to me, she kept saying that someone else had done it."

Kamose covered his mouth, hiding his reaction even from himself. "I suppose she's dead now." He spoke through his fingers.

Defeated again by the horror, the sense of waste, Sekenenre turned his back. His generals and servants had already stolen from the room. Outside, wind and sand battered everything. Forces of corruption and evil hurled themselves against civilization and the works of men. Sekenenre knew that only he stood as a bulwark against such senseless violence.

Shouldering the burden of kingship again, he straightened. "When the time is right, I myself shall lead the armies to victory over the Hyksos. As Amun is my father, so I swear."

Sekenenre clenched his fists tighter around the royal insignia. "Leave me, Kamose."

"Gladly."

Stalking from the council chamber, Kamose's thoughts were fixed not on the coming war but on one single image: a small figure, done in wax, burning slowly into the sand.

Ahhotpe.

## Chapter 17

Lightning slithered off the largest of the temple gates of Amun, snapping off a chunk of masonry that smashed into the street.

Huddled on the Theban palace roof where she, Tetisheri and their retainers had been trapped by the storm, Ahhotpe felt the impact as the heavy stone hit the ground. She heard the sound first, not with her ears, already dinning to the driving wind, but deep from the middle of her body, as though her bones were screaming. Somewhere under that enormous man-made boulder, she knew there would be crushed houses, broken bodies, spreading fires—there was always fire after lightning. The destruction made her angry, and when Ahhotpe was angry she was also exhilarated.

She spun round on her behind and addressed the figure at her shoulder. “Grandmother, you must take my cloak.” Tetisheri had insisted that Ahhotpe keep it.

Her grandmother’s face was a blurred brown oval in the levin-light of the storm. Ahhotpe could just make out the old woman’s birdlike features as Tetisheri expertly spat a mouthful of dirt from between her teeth and leaned forward to answer.

“I won’t have it, Ahhotpe. It’s too late for my complexion, but not for yours.” Tetisheri reached out a skinny arm and dragged the cloak hood back over Ahhotpe’s head, keeping a tight hold on the snapping cloth. “Bladders to that, my girl.”

Somehow, she managed to project her normal speaking voice above the keening gale. Ahhotpe had no idea how she did it. “What?” she shouted back.

“The notion you’ve had ever since this storm started. I’m not old, and I don’t need to come off this roof first. Get the others down before me.”

“Grannie, you’re impossible!” Ahhotpe touched the woman’s cheek. Both knew what she had to do.

“The best,” grunted Tetisheri, releasing her grip. “Just try to watch your face. Sand-scars are damned ugly.”

Securing the hood with an additional knot under her chin, Ahhotpe wound the rest of the cloak round her arms and then hitched her flapping tunic so that it would not get snagged under her feet. She set off in a low crouch.

Ahhotpe had been out in small sand storms, although never in weather as gloriously violent as this. Bending head down into the dog-mad wind, she staggered twenty or thirty paces.

Dirt bombarded her. Litter, twigs, bits of stone, were all mixed into a deadly sand-soup which rattled round Ahhotpe like stirred stew-lumps in a cauldron. If the gale changed direction, she might be tossed off the roof as easily as a doll.

That was not her greatest fear. She needed to get her people together: some were missing. She needed to find the staircase.

Groping in a yellow fog, head slamming with storm-noise, Ahhotpe’s surest sense was touch. Feet and fingers became her eyes, each step she followed with an outstretched sweep of her arms.

She had reached the lowest part of the roof parapet. The main thrust of the wind altered, battering her side. Ahhotpe reeled back, legs grazing the wall. Off balance, she teetered on the edge and then fell, smashing her back against the wall top. Her hands scrabbled frantically for a hold as wind bellowed her tunic. An unceasing flood of sand gushed over her thighs, stinging between her legs in an obscene parody of a lover’s caress. She shrieked and somehow levered herself by an arm, rolling back from the brink on the right side of the parapet.

Close by, someone matched her own sobbing. She had no time for self-pity. She must guide her people, shepherd them indoors out of the storm. Ahhotpe’s reaching hands discovered two women and the child to whom she had given clothes. All were cold and rigid to her touch, in shock but alive.

She comforted them, gathering each into her arms for a brief embrace. The child was a worry, her little cheek stiff as stone. Ahhotpe clung to her tightly.

With the girl hanging round her neck in a throttling grip, Ahhotpe seized a woman’s hand. Lightning flashed again through the boiling murk, hitting some other high building. “Grab your neighbor! We’re going to have to

crawl!”

With the first woman clutching blindly onto her arm, Ahhotpe led the way on her knees, meeting the force of the swirling hot sands. The little girl she carried whimpered, too frightened to struggle or help herself. Ahhotpe pressed the child's face protectively into her bosom. Slowly, one movement at a time, she brought them back to the rest of the group.

Tetisheri, a black steady shadow in a whirling world, held out her arms. Ahhotpe shook her head. The little girl would not be dislodged now. “I'll fight better because of her,” she said, speaking aloud, though not even she could hear. “I am my brother's sister. By Amun! Keep Kamose safe from this!” Repeating that prayer, Ahhotpe moved on, beginning the second stage of her battle with the elements.

After several false starts she found the stairway, then, the little girl still in her arms, she returned to the roof to guide the others. One woman at a time gripping onto hand or ankle, Ahhotpe crawled the empty spaces between roof parapet and stair. Only when she had taken the last servant, six trips in all, would Tetisheri herself consent to move.

By then Ahhotpe was exhausted. Catching her breath in the relative shelter of the stairwell, Ahhotpe heard from the palace below the sound of running footsteps, scarcely audible in the gale, but growing stronger. She leaned back against a wall for a moment, trembling in every limb. Yes, men were definitely coming this way. She need only wait and one of them could fetch her grandmother indoors.

One final effort—of course she could do it. Gently, Ahhotpe unclipped the narrow fingers around her neck. “Come, darling. Let me go.” She kissed the child and swung her into the arms of one of the less bruised serving women. Peering into the woman's face, Ahhotpe wondered briefly if she herself looked as wind-battered. She turned, defiantly tottering a few paces before being driven to her knees.

“Ahhotpe!”

Several tall figures appeared on the stairs.

“Stay!” she shrieked. “It's dangerous!”

The men took no notice, diving out anyway.

Ahhotpe was furious. They were robbing her of Tetisheri. “Leave us!” she screamed as their leader strode towards her out of a yellow twilight. She felt his hand close on her arm.

“We need to talk, Ahhotpe,” snarled Kamose.

“Grandmother!” Ahhotpe lunged forward again. Her brother dragged her back.

“My men have her. Get indoors!” He swung her round, hurling Ahhotpe at the stairs. She struck the top step and fell.

Her last clear picture, before hitting the bottom of the staircase, was of her servants running towards her with panic-stricken faces.

\* \* \* \*

Kamose carried his swooning sister to the women’s quarters. He’d had to threaten her servants before they would leave Ahhotpe to him. She had some explanations to give. That she was selfless, helping others in the storm which still clawed at every bolted door and window in the palace, was not important. Kamose knew that Ahhotpe had courage. It was her other virtues, or rather lack of them, which soured him.

Kicking open the double doors of the women’s quarters, ordering the guards posted inside to brisk attention, Kamose flung Ahhotpe onto the nearest couch. Behind the divan sat a vase of tall flowers. He snatched up the bunch, lashing those unwise enough to approach.

“This lady’s mine. You attend Tetisheri.”

Flicking the flowers across several rumps, Kamose drove out the serving maids and courtesans. He twitched the battered flowers at the guards. “Out.”

“My Lord, the princess—”

“Your duty is to guard the other females. Get out into that corridor and do so!”

Hastily, the men saluted and obeyed. Kamose kicked the double doors shut. Only he and Ahhotpe were left in one whole wing of the palace.

She was coming round. Kamose took hold of the divan’s wooden headrest. He needed to keep his fists off her. “Why, Ahhotpe?”

His sister sighed. Her cheek was grazed. Her eyes, when she opened them, were bloodshot. Kamose ripped the ragged cloak away, and her hair poured strong and golden over his arm. “Where am I?” she whispered.

“Back in the women’s quarters. Ahhotpe, how did you murder Zoser?”

Ahhotpe swallowed. “I need a bath. Let me bathe, change—”

Her brother laughed. "So you can gull me again? No, you answer first. How did you get so close to the Pyramid, Ahhotpe?"

His sister's eyes suddenly sparkled. "Silly boy!" She laughed. "I slept with Zoser, of course."

The name was the thing. If she'd not said the name, Kamose might just have been able to restrain himself.

The resentment he felt at his father's decision to command the army was nothing to the rage Kamose experienced in that moment. Staring into Ahhotpe's shining, bloodshot eyes, he jerked back a step. Had he possessed sword or javelin, he might have killed her.

Ahhotpe kept on talking. "It was the only way, my brother, my foolish younger brother. Do you honestly think I enjoyed the experience?" Her gaze dropped as she idly examined a broken fingernail.

What Ahhotpe considered to be a reasonable answer, Kamose took as merest provocation. His mind pounding like the storm outside, his hands closed towards Ahhotpe's neck.

"Stop it! I'm aching all over from the fall." Oblivious to danger, his sister slapped him off as one might an annoying child. "You were very rough with me, brother, too rough." She smiled at him. "You're losing an earring. Better put it back."

Mechanically raising thumb and finger to one ear lobe, Kamose was so angry he actually started to do as she suggested.

Still within his reach, Ahhotpe sat upright on the divan, frowning at her sand-ravaged tunic. She passed her pink tongue over her sweating top lip—tauntingly, thought Kamose.

"You should be more grateful to me, brother," she breathed in her warm, purling voice, "I have put myself in danger for your sake. Even now, our father is beginning to suspect that there was something strange about that night I spent with the Pyramid. And he grieves quite excessively over having ordered Zoser's mother to be killed."

That same hated name again. Kamose's scalp itched, and his calves stiffened. He could scarcely press the words out past the thickness of his anger. "The Pyramid should have been mine." *Now let Ahhotpe laugh. Let her say one word more—*

"I poisoned Zoser, then made it look like a stabbing. Rather clever, don't you think? I thought so...."

Missing her mouth, Kamose struck Ahhotpe so hard across the chin that her head snapped back. In a flying recoil of gold, her hair streamed across his thighs. Ignoring muffled protests and kicks, he ground his sister's face between the silken cushions of the divan. Watching her writhe, avoiding her fists, Kamose spotted a soft leather belt on the floor near his feet.

His one thought was to punish. He snatched the strap, seized Ahhotpe's raking hands as she went for his groin and threw her over onto her stomach. Pinning down a white shoulder blade with his knee, Kamose ripped off what remained of her tunic and wielded the leather.

Line after line of purple, fiery stripes appeared on Ahhotpe's slim body, running from her back to her heels. She struggled like a landed fish, screaming half-gagged curses.

Suddenly one lashing foot connected with his belly. Kamose grunted, dropped the belt and sprawled off his sister in an untidy knot of pain.

Both were still dimly aware of the howling wind battering the walls, the anxious whispering outside the doors. Ahhotpe recovered first. Balancing carefully on her side, she struck Kamose's shoulder with the palm of her hand. "Don't do that again."

Kamose straightened and rolled onto his back, presenting his hawk's profile in the guttering brazier-light. The whole of the women's quarters stank of perfume, sweat and sex. "You're my princess, Ahhotpe, not a whore. Next time you go with another man, I'll kill you." He slewed round on the couch to look at her.

Her smile was lop-sided because of the new bruise forming along the line of her narrow chin. "Any other man?" Her eyes glowed. Her golden hair was the brightest thing in the room. Keeping her gaze fixed on Kamose's dazzled face, Ahhotpe gently cupped her breasts with her hands.

And then there were no more words between them.



## Chapter 18

“The doctors say you were fortunate,” said Kasa, repeating what he had said nearly every day for almost three weeks. “Another fraction to the left and they could have done nothing for you.”

Tiyi, as she always did at this point, squeezed his hand: her way of saying it didn’t matter. Nothing was important, except that she and her brother were together. She opened her mouth like a bird.

Kasa spooned in another mouthful of wine. He opened his mouth. Tiyi fed him a chunk of bread. Recovering their health in a long convalescence, they had devised this ridiculous game. Each was astonished and relieved that the other was alive.

Kasa, Setna and the other thieves had been spared by Ramose—at the banquet, mercy had seemed appropriate. Now he regretted his impulsive decision, not only because he had been obliged to feed and house them for a month while they grew strong again. These men had defiled his house of eternity. They should be made to suffer. Quietly, Ramose was preparing that they do just that, and in a way that would cause no loss of face for himself.

For Tiyi the worst was already past. Wounded by the spear, she had almost died before it was realized that she had not inflicted a deathblow on herself. For days she lingered between the land of the living and the Field of Reeds, home of the dead. Now she was growing stronger. All that remained of her ordeal was a jagged scar beneath her chin and a few hazy memories.

“May we enter?” asked Setna, standing in the doorway.

\* \* \* \*

Kasa spooned drink into Tiyi, whether his sister wanted it or not. “It’s very cramped in here.” Throwing an arm out, he leaned back on the bed, taking up more room. Setna had Ramose’s woman on his arm. She wore a

new blue tunic, coral and gold earrings. “What are you waiting for?” Kasa demanded. “Come in.”

A spicy, musky perfume entered the room with the man and woman. Kasa knew at once the woman was wearing no scent. He cast a playful kick at Setna. “How’s the master thief these days?”

“Thriving,” answered Setna, looking at Tiyi. “The priest’s a good host. We lack for nothing.”

“He’s a good man,” said Ramose’s woman faintly. She tugged two broad fingers at her lower lip. “One day I must tell your sister how Ramose found me.”

From her bed, Tiyi held out her hands. The woman took a small step forward, hesitating to advance with Kasa’s bulk spread before her. Tiyi shook her head and pointed.

“Ah, it’s me she wants.” Making no bones, Setna pushed past Kasa and scooped the girl up. “To the garden!”

Balancing Tiyi’s backrest on his head, Setna kicked the door open and disappeared with the patient in a swirl of scent and bedclothes.

Alone with the dark brooding presence from her dream, Hathor backed to the threshold. “I think I hear Neith calling me.” She scurried from the chamber.

Kasa watched her leave. She’d spoken up for him at the feast, now she was always running away.

Disappointed, the farmer took his revenge on the wall, punching a great dent out of a frieze of water lilies. He glared at the faded and now cracked wall painting, wishing it had been a picture of Ramose.

\* \* \* \*

Hathor ran into the audience chamber and, retreating to the shadowed side of the barrel-vaulted hall, sat on the floor beneath the painting of the Apis bull. Two carpenters waiting nearby with their petitions stared, but the young woman could ignore them. Unless Ramose himself entered, the audience hall was the best place at Mazghuna to think. Here at least she would not be spied on by Neith or by any of Neith’s servants.

Hathor peeled the front of her dress away from her body. Was it really such sweating weather, or was her sticky heat due to other causes? She

closed her eyes a moment. Instantly he was there. “Go away!” she muttered, but was afraid when the picture wavered. Screwing her eyelids tighter, she indulged herself. Nothing dangerous could happen, no one else would see.

She had stored in her memory a host of gestures. He had five different kinds of smile. He had ten ways of frowning. He had the keen eyes and the powerful shoulders of a bird of prey. Yet his hands were tender. They had closed round his sister like wings. Tiyi in that ridiculous skirt of feathers....

Hathor started, and her eyes flew open. Tiyi’s former master had departed three weeks ago, taking gifts of gold from Ramose but no letters of authorization, nothing of real power.

In bidding her farewell, Bakht had kissed Hathor’s hand. Then, his head still bowed, he sucked her thumb between his teeth and bit. Her tears when he left were not those of custom but of pain and relief. More than ever, Hathor was grateful that the priest had not sent her to the Governor of the Oryx Nome on the night of the banquet.

Gratitude. Ramose’s house, Ramose’s food, Ramose’s clothes and jewels—what did she not owe the priest? The last two weeks Ramose had spent with her. Only yesterday he had sought her out in the middle of the day. He seemed to see her withdrawal as a challenge, setting himself to please her in their love making. And he had not made her go with Bakht.

Gratitude. It gnawed at Hathor like a wound.

\* \* \* \*

Satisfied that she had brought Kasa and Hathor together, Tiyi was innocently content, though not for long.

Neith found her in the garden. The mute, her bedding piled up to the dragging boughs of an unpruned cherry tree, was being ravished by Setna.

“A pretty scene,” Neith remarked, pushing into their bower.

Setna gasped and rolled away, hiding his nakedness in palm fronds. Deserted, Tiyi received the rest of the outburst.

“Slave and robber rutting while the world falls into ruin. You might have used some of that energy to help.”

Infuriated, Neith waved an arm at the empty pool, at the rows of onions in the vegetable garden growing rank. “You disgust me.”

Tiyi burst into tears. Today, she had wanted to talk to Kasa about their

parents, say more than his, "They ought to have died last season. Then we could have buried them." She had wanted to say "no" to Setna. She longed to tell Neith, who made the servants' lives a misery and Hathor's place a trial, that her husband whispered he might divorce her. Speechlessness bound with stronger chains than slavery.

Neith knelt and flicked an end of a sheet around the girl's narrow shoulders. "You can't even sob properly. It's no wonder you take strange pleasures."

Tiyi knocked her head with her fist. She ground her knuckles into her streaming eyes. What was she supposed to do but give and receive enjoyment? Strangeness was the penalty, fitting for one who would never be a wife, companion, mother.

Neith regarded her quite impassively. "Can you reason, or have you a mouse's wits? Because, my dear, if you do think, then it's time you considered your brother's position in this house. Ramose might favor dusky-skinned girls who can't answer back, but he'll have no use for a failed farmer turned cut-throat."

Tiyi stiffened and threw off the sheet.

"Ah, I see you understand the insult. Then you must also understand the rest. My husband is a contradictory man in many ways, given to large gestures of public generosity and mercy and then ordering private killings at some later date. You cannot save your brother, but it is within my power to send him to another estate, well out of Ramose's reach, where he can work at the hard labor for which he is so obviously suited."

Still kneeling, Neith turned to uproot a sycamore sapling which had sprouted in the shade of the cherry tree. Before she was finished, Tiyi had prostrated herself.

"You will obey me," said Neith. "Good. Tomorrow, now that you are finally fit and of some use, I will send you to the woman Hathor. You will make yourself agreeable to her. You will report to me—somehow—everything she does. Everything, do you understand?"

Neith sniffed. "If necessary, you will draw me pictures."

Tiyi lifted her head, locking her gaze above those soft, baby-dimpled features onto Neith's hard bright eyes. She nodded.

"Do not disappoint me," said Neith, rising to her feet. "Remember, your brother is a powerfully-built man. It would take him a long time to die under

torture.”

\* \* \* \*

Next day, Tiyi was duly removed from her sick-bed and presented by Neith to Hathor at the door of Hathor’s chamber.

Hathor was delighted at the unexpected gift. As Neith stalked away down the corridor she tugged Tiyi into her room, dragged shut the door-hanging.

“That woman’s face!” Giggles bubbled from her throat like bird-song. Hathor shimmered when she laughed. She hugged Tiyi tightly. “I’ve never had a servant. This is Ramose’s doing. Yes, it must be. Neith wouldn’t give me anything.” She looked down into the narrow dark face, seeking the brother. “You mustn’t be frightened.”

Hathor stroked the girl’s cheek and kissed her forehead, pleased to show affection where it was safe to do so. “When Bakht first brought you here, when we met in the banqueting hall, I remember that you tried to tell me your name. You did, didn’t you?”

Tiyi nodded and drew her lips back from her teeth. She also remembered the way Hathor had spoken up for Kasa, her willingness to risk Ramose’s anger, her defiance of the Steward. She pointed at the unmade bed.

Another bubble of laughter lit Hathor. “We’ll make it up together, shall we?” She released Tiyi and, using a trick she had learned from Mose, skidded across the precious floor-tiles to the brightly-painted couch.

Tiyi stuffed her perfume-box into a wall-recess and walked to the bed. Ducking underneath it, she found and flourished one of Ramose’s shoes.

Hathor, plumping pillows, felt herself turn sick. “We’ll leave that sort of thing to Bakht, if you don’t mind.”

Tiyi frowned, then as she understood, she flung the shoe down as though it burned. With Hathor staring, the girl made an attempt at speech. “‘amo—‘amo.”

Hathor sat down on the bed. She had assumed that Tiyi was completely mute. Hearing the raw voice, rough through lack of use, she swallowed. “Ramose? Is that what you’re saying? Ramose left before dawn this morning.”

Faced with a glut of estate business, the priest had been rising early and returning late. The daily management of the house fell to Neith and the steward.

That was precisely what Tiyi was trying to tell Hathor. She tried again, this time through mime.

“Ramose’s wife... holding.... No, a gift... a present.... Neith gave you to me?”

Tiyi nodded furiously. She ran to the sunlit side of the chamber and touched a painted flying duck. Her hands clapped onto the fresco like the snap of a snare.

“You feel trapped,” said Hathor.

Tiyi slapped the wall again.

“Someone else is trapped?” Hathor regarded Tiyi’s mobile, expressive face, the large, solemn eyes, and grew angry. “Don’t worry.” She walked across and put an arm round Tiyi’s shoulders. “You’ll see Kasa again, never fear.”

Hathor was pleased to make that promise.

Tiyi sighed, knowing she had failed to make herself understood. Her warning to Hathor had come to nothing. The woman was certain that she meant Kasa was the one who was trapped and in danger. She sighed again, and Hathor squeezed her arm.

“We’ll make sure nothing happens to him,” she said.

Tiyi gave her a look. Hathor decided it was wise to let the matter rest there. “First we must find you a place to sleep,” she said, becoming brisk. “Which would you prefer, cushions or a couch?”

\* \* \* \*

Tiyi expected Ramose to order her to the main couch once he discovered that she, too, slept in Hathor’s chamber. A summons did eventually arrive, but for the moment, Ramose, returning each evening around midnight, was content to rest.

The priest accepted Tiyi’s presence without question or comment, as though she were a piece of furniture. Often, he did not come to Hathor’s chamber, but bedded down elsewhere—perhaps in his wife’s bedroom. After Bakht, Ramose seemed very cold and distant.

“He is a man of great state with heavy matters on his shoulders, a man of many moods,” Hathor remarked once. “I have learned that he shares only a small part of his life with the likes of me.” Her voice was bitter as she spoke.

She and Tiyi by this time had become friends. Both were low-born and had known hardship. Both were warm-natured, hot-blooded.

Hathor was also impulsive. Somehow—not of course from her own servant—she heard of Neith’s complaints about lack of help. Next day, she presented herself and Tiyi to the steward. Hori, seizing this opportunity to annoy Neith, who needed people to work within the palace gardens, sent Hathor and Tiyi instead to muck out the cows.

In one of Ramose’s long, airless barns they found Kasa. The tomb robbers had been put to work. While Teta and another man pitch forked hay into the byres, Kasa was teaching Setna how to milk a cow.

“Not a skill I want to learn,” said Setna, milk spraying everywhere but into the bucket. “My family trade is thieving.”

Kasa laughed and stroked the cow’s long back. “Get on with it, man.” Tilting his head sideways, he scraped the itch of his bristled chin against the beast’s tough hide.

Then he saw them. His heart blazed. Somewhere in the back of his head, Nahkt’s voice, long silent, said, “Remember Tiyi, who was once dead to you and now lives.”

Sweeping his sister up, Kasa noticed everything about Hathor. The warm brown eyes with the tiny creases at the corners. Full lips. The round curve of her knees peeping below a short kilt. The way her nose curved slightly. Incongruous tufts of baby-fine hair by her ears.

She still wore the gold and coral earrings. The latest gift from her lover, no doubt. Kasa put Tiyi down. “Your companion is as silent as you.”

“Perhaps the lady has nothing to say to farm-hands.” Setna gave Hathor a sly look.

Hathor cleared her throat. “Such dust!” she said, with an off-key laugh. Setna glanced at her and Kasa, sensing undercurrents. She must be careful. “Come, Tiyi, now that you have seen your brother, let us leave the workmen to their labors.”

Kasa’s dark eyes opened wide, then narrowed. He should have expected no less. “That’s right. Don’t even touch the hand that feeds you.” He stared

at the woman's breasts, round and smooth as gourds. "Carrying your own supplies? Careful it doesn't go sour."

"I can do something about that. I've been trained." Setna made to rise, but a hard look from Kasa sat him down again.

"Tiyi, I think you and I should start in the open-air corral," said Hathor. It frightened her that winning the big man's good opinion should suddenly seem necessary. It might be better to let him think of her as nothing more than a pleasure-girl. "If the great bull will excuse us?"

She moved away, pulling distractedly at her lower lip.

Kasa watched her leave. When she had gone, the barn was dark, the air heavy again.

Tiyi ran outside, relieved that was over. She resolved not see her brother if it meant that he and Hathor were thrown together. One such meeting she could ignore. Others she might have to bring to Neith's attention before someone else—a man like Setna or the steward—told either the lady or her lord....

Under the hot sun, Tiyi shivered.

\* \* \* \*

"What are those women doing out there without any hats or shade? Bring them inside at once!"

Ramose had returned unexpectedly, already sweating and out of temper. When the steward moved too slowly, the priest struck at him with his golden flail of office. "Take that wig off and run!"

"Ramose, husband—" Neith did not have long to savor Hori's fall from grace. She shared in it. Ramose snatched her arm and hustled her up the stairs into the antechamber. "Get back where you belong and stop meddling in my affairs!"

He pushed her so hard that she fell against a pillar. Mose, racing to greet his father, started to scream.

"Take proper care of our son for once!" Ramose strode away to the great hall. "Find me that robber-chief, now!"

The tall black priest in one of his rages was not a man to be tangled with. Servants fled down side passages before they were mauled. Guards rammed to attention. The whole palace vibrated with movement and



anxiety, like the rattle of an angry snake.

“Carpenters! Builders! Laying down their tools like that—threatening me!” Ramose kicked a throne off the dais and smashed it against a marbled wall. “I should have torn their heads off!”

The guards in the throne room said nothing but tightened their grip on their spears.

Ramose paced up and down, rolling his head from side to side. A hot bath and the masseuse, that’s what he needed. His brain rang with men’s complaints and excuses. The carpenters’ refusal to work on the new flood-barriers was the final insult. In a fury he’d left them. Now they must come to him, beg forgiveness.

“Lord Ramose.”

The robber chief gave the briefest of bows. Ramose glowered. The other man planted his feet solidly apart and waited. Face to face, they were of a height, although Kasa seemed bigger because he was broader, piling on weight and muscle. “You sent for me.”

“You seem amused,” said Ramose. “Let me remind you that my earlier orders can be easily revoked.”

Kasa yawned. “If that were truly on your mind, my head would already be outside on a stake.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“Face it. You need me for something but don’t like to ask.” Kasa glanced down at his hands. “Whatever it is, I demand in return that you free my sister.” His breath hissed, seeming for a moment on the verge of another name. “That’s it. That’s what I want.”

“On your return, you may take Tiyi and go where you like,” said Ramose. “Until then—”

“Until then she’ll be safer here?” Kasa asked ironically. He tipped a meaningful nod at the guards.

“My point exactly.” Rather against his will, the priest found he could admire the other man’s straightforwardness. It certainly saved time. “Now, I want you and your followers—”

“They are not mine,” interrupted Kasa softly.

“Whatever, I need people in Upper Egypt. According to the man who brought your sister to us, the Theban King’s plotting some new offensive. I must know what it is.”

Kasa tilted his head to one side. "I hardly think a man like Sekenenre Tao will tell me his plans just for the asking."

"I'm surprised you know his name."

"That among other things. He's not someone I want to meet."

"My ship will drop you off somewhere upstream," said Ramose, ignoring Kasa's last remark. "Talk to the natives. Find out about this special run of Sekenenre's. See what preparations are being made for the year's inundation. Find out what you can."

Ramose gazed at the man's craggy features and scratched his own stubble. He was in desperate need of a shave: chin, eyebrows and head. "Tell me. Does my concubine like uncombed black hair?"

That touched a nerve. "Ask her yourself." Kasa's hooded eyes went black. He wanted to hurt Ramose, answer venom with venom, but it wasn't only he who would suffer. "She doesn't talk to me. I'm not rich enough."

"Frivolous creatures, women." The priest stretched his arms above his head. "Well, I'm glad we had this talk. Tomorrow you'll need to set out."

Kasa and the others would have no choice in the matter. They would be taken away, "dropped off somewhere upstream", by ship.

Ramose smiled, greatly restored to humor. This way he had his face-saving revenge on the tomb-robbers. This way he still had the girl, Tiya, and would keep her sweet and willing while she waited for her brother's return. "Well, I wish you good fortune."

The priest never expected to see Kasa again. Kasa was from the Delta. He would know little of the country or customs of Thebes. Even if he survived, even if he found his way back to Mazghuna—and that, despite his delicious sister, seemed unlikely—then what use would Kasa's information be? The man after all was no more than a peasant.

Aware that he was being dismissed, sent on a dangerous errand to a country he did not know, a fool's errand—Ramose would certainly have better spies—Kasa turned on his heel and left the hall without speaking.

## Chapter 19

“That’s it then.” Ramose waved from the reed jetty as the ship bearing Kasa and the other four men disappeared around the curve of the river. He slipped an arm round Tiyi’s shoulders. “Your brother will be back after inundation, I promise.” He wiped the girl’s face. “Come, stop your crying.”

In spite of her running nose, he gathered Tiyi in a close embrace, letting her feel his strength and be reassured by it. “There. Kasa wouldn’t want you to grieve.”

Finally she quietened. Ramose kissed the top of her head and pushed her gently towards Bakmut. Although the boat had gone, Bakmut waved a despairing hand across the sunlit water. She took Tiyi willingly into her arms, loving her because she was Kasa’s sister.

Ramose marveled at what Bakmut could ever see in such a brutish man, a “Follower of Set” if ever there was one. Certainly a one-sided passion, for Kasa seemed to have no time for any woman, except his sister.

Or perhaps Hathor. Ramose rubbed a newly-shaved eyebrow while considering that possibility. Whenever their paths crossed, Kasa and Hathor had insulted each other. This morning, Hathor remained in bed, pretending to be asleep.

The priest coughed, amused. Did the thief and his concubine really believe he was blind?

A crocodile splashed downstream, dragging itself from the mud to bask in the warming sunlight. Ramose whirled round in the direction of the sound, often the last warning before an attack. The jaws of a Nile crocodile could sever a man in half.

Then he saw the second boat. Its cedar wood prow, glittering with silver ribbons like the staff of a herald, came gliding towards him through the morning mists. His breath stopped as he craned his head back, seeking the device emblazoned on the silken sail. Already he knew whose ship it was. A

vessel with beaded awnings of gold and lapis lazuli, standards bearing the blue Egyptian lotus, scarlet flags proclaiming the birth-name and titles of a King.

“Hallo, Ramose!” Aweserre swung down from the stem post onto the jetty. “Did your god tell you I was coming?”

Aboard the golden barge, a trumpeter blew the call of his arrival.

“Too late, man!” shouted Pharaoh. The sun had burned a red brand across his forehead, yet he seemed in ebullient mood. “We had a rough trip here,” he was saying. “The river’s so low that I had to post a man in the prow to make sure we didn’t run aground on a mud-flat. But as you can see, here I am.” He opened his arms.

“I assume Avaris was pleasant,” remarked Ramose tartly. “I myself have always wished to visit that city in the hot season.”

“Peace, master priest, and spare me your censure. I have not been to Avaris, but to the Eastern borders to fight a war.”

“Then let me congratulate you on your victory, Lord,” replied Ramose imperturbably. He clicked his fingers. Some distance behind, Tiyi and Bakmut dropped to their knees.

Aweserre, missing nothing, was already skipping across the jetty. He offered Bakmut his hand and raised her like a lady.

“Bakmut.” Aweserre had a knack of remembering names. He tugged his beard-wig sideways so that he could kiss her.

“Bakmut, why don’t you escort my handsome guard captain to the lady Neith so that he can tell her we’re here.” He patted Bakmut’s belly in a blessing of future fruitfulness. “Go on. Take the little plum with you.” He indicated the kneeling Tiyi.

“Interesting,” he observed, as he watched the two servants leaving the jetty. “I believe she does not know who I am.”

“Tiyi is a peasant, lately enslaved through debt,” said Ramose. “Of course she is ignorant.”

Aweserre narrowed his blue eyes, shading them with one hand. “Tiyi. A short name for so sweet a bundle. I like the way she moves. I’ll wager on my chariot that she’s as plump and smooth within as without.”

He lowered his hand, squinting up at Ramose. “You are very sharp, old friend. Can it be that you have heard the bad news already and are wondering how to commiserate with your ruler?”

Tilting his head, Pharaoh looked over the tall priest. “No, I see you do not know what I mean. In your case, then, staring down that long nose of yours must be due to practice.”

Aweserre remembered and tugged his beard-wig straight. “Really, I do not understand why you do not divorce Neith, or throw over all the others. Your house must be in constant uproar.” He licked his narrow lips. “Just throw me Tiya, eh?”

“Everything in my house is yours, Majesty.”

“Don’t,” said Aweserre, flinching. “I hate it when you retreat into your office. It’s like talking to a statue. See, I’m sorry that I spoke of your personal affairs. A man has the right to close a door on his own dwelling.” He looked Ramose straight in the eye. “It’s terrible. Terrible what the Theban King has done.”

All of his reddish color disappeared. His cheeks grew as thick as whey. “It makes me ashamed, do you know that? Even to say what he has done, what I know I must tell you.” The Pharaoh of Lower Egypt was suddenly near tears.

Ramose was disturbed. For Aweserre to be in such cast-down spirits, something must be very wrong. “What is it, ‘Serre?” he asked, putting off the mantle of the courtier and drawing the man aside from the frankly curious sailors and soldiers still on ship. “Come, walk with me awhile. Now that Neith has received notice of your arrival, my house will indeed be in uproar.”

The joke fell flat. Aweserre seemed not to have heard. “The insult, yes,” he muttered. “We have been at each other’s throats for years, Sekenenre and I. I could see the point of the spearing, the deliberate affront to my god, but the rest?”

He shuddered like a man diving into the cold river at night and with a strangled gasp, surfacing again, blurted out, “Duauf the priest, he’s dead. He sought sanctuary with the priests of Amun, and Sekenenre had him murdered.”

Ramose sighed and closed his eyes. It was what he had expected, after so many weeks of absolute silence, although the idea of Duauf changing sides took a moment to grasp.

“They threw him in the water alive. They could have cut his throat first.” Aweserre cracked his fists together so fiercely that he drew blood on

the knuckles. "I am a soldier and a ruler. I have watched men die in battle and have heard the news of more men's deaths than I care to count, but this... It is wicked. Sekenenre has made the Two Lands into a nest of scorpions. The Retanu will call us torturers, and they will be right."

He was working himself into a rage, but Ramose could make nothing of Aweserre's disjointed tale. He walked the smaller man off the jetty and along the riverbank, just as he might calm a high-wrought horse, and, when 'Serre's color looked a little brighter, asked him what he knew.

"He has run a Heb Sed, our glorious Sekenenre Tao. A farmer tried to strike him down. Unfortunately the attack was not successful."

Unlike when he first mentioned Duauf's death, Aweserre spoke calmly. Aa threat to himself he could understand and act against. "It appears he claims the whole of Egypt. Even now he is gathering the self-servers and the greedy—men such as your Governor of the Oryx nome—to the justice of his cause."

Where Duauf's death had not greatly touched him, the details of Sekenenre's "kingly mile" troubled Ramose. As more was revealed, Ramose could see the consequences of the Theban King's actions stretching away for many years, more dangerous than the marshalling of an army. Sekenenre had run in the white crown of Upper Egypt, but had worn the red crown of Egypt's Delta when he made a sacrifice of thanksgiving in the temple of Amun.

"I know little of this god Amun," he remarked. "The more I hear, the less I like him."

Aweserre had stopped by a bank of papyrus and was winding one of the plant's long, springy leaves round his arm. "There's better yet." He let the leaf go so that it uncoiled itself with a sudden snap. "Aren't you going to ask me how your own priest died?" he went on, with a soft, deadly menace quite unlike the usual Aweserre. "Duauf was a member of your order, wasn't he?"

"I thought he was," said Ramose, frowning, still thinking of Amun. Perhaps it was time for him to return to the temple of Ptah. Of late he had been desultory in attendance and worship. "How have you learned of all these matters, 'Serre? Your information is always greater than mine. I only knew of the Heb Sed because of Bakht."

Aweserre gave him an oblique look. "I realize that you have a thousand troubles, that your head buzzes with plans, but Ramose—old friend!—can

you not take a moment from your business to consider this man Duauf?"

Embarrassed, Ramose fiddled with his gold rings.

"Good," said Aweserre. "Now that I have your full attention, we will proceed."

He started walking again, talking as he moved. "Sekenenre has abused my god. He has cursed the name of Sutekh and all his creatures. This he did by killing Duauf." Aweserre examined his own royal seal-ring. "Have you ever hunted water-cow?"

Ramose felt the impact of the question like a body-blow. Hippos, dangerous and unpredictable creatures that could overturn a boat and drown all those in it, were thought to be an aspect of the god Set. If Sekenenre had used those—

"He trapped an entire family of hippo in the shallows near Thebes," said Aweserre. "Caught them in a great net draped right across the river, so I'm told. Then he drove them mad with fire. Then—tell me what he did, Ramose."

Unwanted pictures formed in the priest's head, maddening as an itch. Aweserre's features were jackal-sharp. "Yes, I see that you know. Of course, it's the perfect insult. Sekenenre threw Duauf off his Nile barge and let the hippos eat him alive. He was screaming for quite some time and when they'd finished with him there wasn't very much left for Sekenenre's men to peg out for the crocodiles. Afterwards the soldiers speared the hippos. Sekenenre very kindly sent me one of their tanned hides....Are you going to consider the implications of that particular action, Ramose, or is it all too obvious for you?"

Ramose stood obelisk-still, fighting for breath. In his mind he saw the deep, accusing eyes of Duauf, that wounded look which the priest had always given him. With a sudden shock, he realized that Duauf had probably loved him. Yet why then had Duauf changed sides? Had he felt rejected, slighted? If so, he, Ramose, had failed as High Priest.

"I have allowed a man to go to his death." Ramose had said that once before, to Neith. The words then had no deep meaning. Now they poured into his heart a cold regret, bitter as ghosts. And still his mind ran on, turning possibilities.

"I shall go to Thebes myself, and demand an explanation," he said at last. "Sekenenre is supposedly subject to you. I shall ask him why he hunts

hippos in such a fashion that the appalling racket and din is heard all the way to Memphis. He shall not defy us or the gods in this way.”

“Duauf was a priest, yet he was murdered,” Aweserre reminded him softly.

“I shall travel openly as the High Priest of Ptah. Even Sekenenre would not dare to touch a High Priest.”

“Sekenenre worships only Amun.”

“I am aware of that.”

Aweserre smiled and clasped his shoulder. “There now, and you were going to do nothing for Duauf, not even think of him. Isn’t friendship a marvelous thing? So marvelous in fact—”

The smile slipped from his red-cheeked face as his forehead knotted. “We shall go down into Egypt together. I shall look into the eyes of my unruly vassal, Sekenenre Tao, to know the man, and only then will I decide how to avenge Duauf’s death.”

Ramose shook his head. “And who governs your kingdom?”

“Apart from myself and my absent vizier? My other officials, naturally—they do anyway, and well enough without you or me.”

“As a High Priest I may travel where I like, ‘Serre. For you to come too it would need an army.”

“Either I come with you, or you don’t go. It is as simple as that.”

So the action they would take was decided.



## Chapter 20

“Aweserre has returned to Avaris to oversee the building of the new temple complex for his god, Sutekh.”

“Has he?” Neith bent her head and rubbed the striped fur under her cat’s throat. “And what of this new ‘acrobat’ he has left us?”

“One of ‘Serre’s more eccentric guest-gifts,” answered Ramose. Husband and wife chuckled softly.

Tiyi had not the faintest idea why they were laughing. She plumped a cushion behind Neith’s back, wondering if Kasa had reached wherever it was that Ramose had wished him to go. Kasa had promised to come back for her, so it was only a matter of waiting. Smiling, reaching round Neith, Tiyi caressed the cat herself.

“She likes you, Tiyi,” said Ramose, as the feline purred and lazily splayed its claws.

“All sensual creatures like this one.” Neith patted the girl’s hand. “I have grown fond of her myself.” Tiyi had proved more than adept at soothing away her various wine headaches.

“Yet have you noticed,” Neith continued, “how Aweserre’s ‘acrobat’ has not yet availed himself of her skills?”

Tiyi, who had noticed, hung her head. She had spied on the tumbler once, while he practiced his trade in the palace courtyard. It had been in the early morning, when only the servants were awake. He moved like a dancer in the grayness, an iron and silver idol come to life. That morning, Neith’s masseuse had been late arriving with the oils and my lady’s breakfast cup of wine, and Tiyi had been scolded. Yet ever since, the girl lingered in crossing the courtyard.

Ramose coughed, a reminder that she was in his bedchamber. “Perhaps the fellow is shy.” He watched her closely.

Tiyi hoped her skin showed no betraying change in color. To many

Egyptians, she was so dark as to make her blushes almost invisible, but the priest was one of the few who could see. Averting her head, she tidied away the ivory pieces from the senet board into their box.

“Tiyi.” Directly addressed, she knelt between master and mistress, pressing her lips against the gold rings on the priest’s long fingers.

“Is Hathor still bathing?” Ramose asked, stroking her hair.

Tiyi nodded, although not entirely sure.

“I shall have the Steward bring her here tonight.”

“As you wish, husband.” Over Tiyi’s head, their glances locked.

“This evening is your idea,” said Ramose.

“Only because I thought it would please you.” Neith was winding a string of her long beads round her fingers. “And I am weary of sleeping alone.”

Ramose lifted his hand from Tiyi’s hair. “A man is not as a woman in these matters,” he said reasonably. “Man is like the inundation. His seeding cannot be confined. It must go where it must.”

Neith threw the cat off her knee and struck at her husband. “A splendid belief for you! What does that make me, one of your courtesans?” Missing Ramose, Neith slapped Tiyi instead, then burst into a fury of weeping. “Why do you not believe me when I tell you about Hori?” she was shouting. “The man is evil!”

“Out of my way, girl,” said Ramose, as Neith’s sobs turned into higher screeches. “Go and find Hathor. Bring her here.”

Yanking Tiyi aside, he took Neith in his arms, rocking her, smoothing her hair, kissing her face and throat while his wife struggled and kicked, tears pouring from her tight-shut eyes.

Glad to be escaping, Tiyi ran from the chamber as Ramose bellowed for the steward to bring the poppy syrup.

\* \* \* \*

She was sleeping. With a sigh of relief, Ramose laid his wife on the bed, covered her with a light sheet and turned to Hathor and Tiyi. They stood in the doorway, tense as mice when the cat is abroad.

Looking both over, Ramose found that he fancied neither. It had been Neith’s idea that they three spend the night together. The suggestion—wife,

concubine and masseuse under one blanket—had a piquancy of conception that unfortunately did not transmute itself into reality. So far, what would be his last night at home for many months had been a dismal failure.

He was tired, too, of this endless wrangling with Neith about Hori. He had already questioned both the steward and the other servants about the man's so called impertinence. None of them, even Neith's old nurse, had seen or heard anything approaching disrespect from Hori to their mistress.

"Return to your own quarters." Ramose dismissed the women, glad to be rid of them, and returned to his wife's chamber.

After a moment, staring at Neith's sleeping body, watching the rise and fall of those sagging breasts, Ramose stripped off, gently drew back the sheet and climbed into bed with her.

\* \* \* \*

The sickly taste of the poppy syrup had turned sour in her mouth. Running her tongue around her teeth, Neith grimaced and stirred fully. She rolled over, slapping up against the unexpected body. The man's long, black eyelashes flickered open.

"How are you now?" asked Ramose.

They were alone. He had sent the others away. Realizing that, Neith could not speak.

"You're crying," said Ramose.

"I'm happy," said Neith.

They made love with a sweet familiarity, each knowing how to move the other. "Ah, that's good!" exclaimed Ramose afterwards, his body tight against hers. "You're still as intoxicating as a mandrake fruit, my dear." He clicked his tongue, very affable. "Why not come with me tomorrow? I've heard that Thebes is an amazing place. You would enjoy it."

"A tempting offer," said Neith, head buzzing with excitement. She had been resigned to being left behind again, and this invitation came to her as an unexpected harvest of Ramose's goodwill. "Yet do court officials usually take their wives with them?"

Ramose laughed deep in the back of his throat, like the purr of a lion. "Be the first, Neith. Start a fashion." He rolled her over and blew a loud, undignified kiss onto the middle of her bottom.

“Ramose!” Giggling, Neith tried to bat him away, a blow his body took as easily as a rock turns a blade. No one else saw him like this, relaxed, black eyes sparking with mischief. She wanted to keep him all to herself.

“Well?” He was still waiting for an answer.

“Is Aweserre’s latest ‘present’ going with you to Thebes?” Neith asked, wanting a little more time to think.

“The acrobat will be one of my attendants.” Ramose shot her a look. “I’d advise you, Neith, to keep your thoughts on that matter to yourself.”

He would be taking Hathor and Tiyi with him, no question. Neith licked her lips, craving a drink. There surely was her answer: he’d miss her absence more than appreciate her presence.

“It is best, I think, that I remain here,” she said, knowing she was taking a risk but strangely glad to do so. “Is that acceptable to you, husband?”

She knew him too well not to read his most guarded expressions. Recognizing the mingled disappointment and relief in Ramose’s face, Neith could only hope that she had made the right choice.

## Chapter 21

It was becoming a habit. Tiyi should have been putting her perfume box in order. Instead she was spying again on the tumbler. She was afraid for him in this strange hot country to which Ramose had brought them.

The country was called Amun's land, and its capital, Thebes, was No-Amun: Amun's City. It was the first great town which Tiyi had ever seen, yet she, unlike Hathor, had no wish to explore. Speechless, she was terrified of being separated from her own people in this crowded, frenzied place, of never escaping those narrow back streets. Thebes was a nightmare to her.

The tumbler, balancing on his hands, "walked" his bare feet across the door of the High Priest of Amun's house. He did this so nimbly that the door never creaked or rattled.

Seeing the neat row of dusty footprints on the dark wood, Tiyi gave her low, coughing giggle. She also disliked the High Priest of Amun, who had lizard eyes and a sly mouth.

The tumbler flipped backwards off his hands straight into a tear-jerking leg-split. While the dust settled, he touched his black, ram's-head peak of curls three times against his knee.

Tiyi crouched lower by her box, its forgotten contents laid out in rows in the wall-shade. She had run out of *tishpes*-oil and myrrh, but ignored these empty bottles as the tumbler twisted his upper body and touched his curls three times against his left knee. He had a birth-mark in the middle of his back, its size and shape sharply defined against his pale skin. His hair was longer than hers.

The moving shadow made her start. Tiyi whipped her head up, but it was only a white egret, sliding down the thermals to roost on top of one of the temple flag-poles. As High Priest of Ptah, Ramose had been granted the honor of staying in Amun's City as a guest of the blue god. He dwelt within sacred temple precincts at the High Priest of Amun's house. This gracious

gesture had been extended to Hathor, but not to the rest of Ramose's retinue of guards, sailors, cooks, craftsmen, and entertainers. These people, twenty-five in all, were bivouacked in a makeshift camp outside the temple walls.

The acrobat, one of Ramose's entertainers, should not have been anywhere near the High Priest of Amun's house. Neither should Tiyi.

"Hallo!"

The exclamation made Tiyi cry out in shock. She huddled down into the shadows, hands over her ears, tears already blurring her eye make-up.

No kicks or beatings followed. Panted breath blew down the back of her neck as the acrobat slid front-first down the wall beside her. He finished in an almost seated position, except that his belly was where his back should have been and his nose was pressed to the stones. The sight was so comical that Tiyi cautiously raised her head for a closer look. The tumbler winked. Above the full, black Asiatic beard, a mark of his foreignness, his eyes were the color of a lotus flower.

On the river journey to Thebes and in camp, Tiyi had not been so close to the tumbler as now. She started. She remembered those same strange blue eyes staring at her from the face of a clean-shaven Egyptian nobleman.

"Sssh, little plum. Don't give me away."

So he knew that she had recognized him. The man might have been jesting in his plea for silence, but Tiyi did not think so. Glad to be taken seriously, she shook her head. Feeling they were now equal, Tiyi pointed at the tumbler's reddened shoulders and then at the wall-stones.

"Oh, I don't stiffen up, so never fret. What is it? Do I look uncomfortable to you?" He rolled over. Somehow his head finished up in her lap. Tiyi ran her thumbs across his forehead, something she had wanted to do for a long time.

"Ah, that's good. You're clever at your work."

Tiyi nodded once, then once more. It intrigued her to touch this nobleman-tumbler. He wasn't coarse, like Bakht, or taut-smooth, like Ramose. Her nails kept snagging on tiny body hairs.

"I'm glad you think I'm good, too." He had understood her second nod. "How long have you been with Ramose?"

Tiyi held up two fingers, then prodded the same two fingers gently into the man's hairy chest.

"You've not enough fingers there," answered the acrobat. "I've known

Ramose almost all my life. We grew up together.”

His features became guarded. Sensing further questions might be tactless, Tiyi changed the subject. She drew a lock of the man’s long hair through her fingers, wondering if he would appreciate the question in her action.

He passed the test. “My forefathers’ people came from outside Egypt, from a city called Sodom, a hundred day’s march from here. Now though we are all Egyptian.” The tumbler glanced at Tiyi’s hands. Even after Bakht had smothered them with unguents, the farming calluses had not quite gone. “One day, you must tell me the name of the official who drove you and your family off your land.”

Tiyi shook her head. A white-robed priest walked along the side of the sacred temple pool but never turned in their direction. When she looked down at the tumbler again he was frowning.

“If you do not know the name, then we must search the records of where you used to live. If you want something badly enough, there is always a way to get it.” His quick smile refreshed her like good water. “What’s your name?”

““ee—” Her mouth and fingers made the rest of the movements.

“My name’s Terre. Tiyi and Terre. We could earn our living on the caravan routes with those two names. Shall I teach you something of my trade, Tiyi?” He reached up and touched her cheek. “You’ve had some hard knocks of late, I think. Perhaps I could show you how to get up after falling down.”

Tiyi struggled with anger and tears, but she didn’t want to keep crying. She nodded stiffly.

“Come then. Let’s call a holiday, and go and see Thebes.” The man bounced to his feet and held out his hand. “Shall we go?”

\* \* \* \*

She was scared. Perhaps she thought he was too small to protect her. Aweserre, lately Pharaoh of Lower Egypt and now—for a while—Terre the acrobat, grinned at his own wounded vanity. This girl had him foxed in more ways than one. Who was she? Who were her parents? Did she like him?

She had a strong grip for a girl. His fingers were almost numb. Glancing back as he lead the way through one of the city's interminable alleyways, Aweserre was hit again by the fear in Tiyi's large black eyes. Fear and something else....

Where had he seen that look before?

Puzzled, Terre stopped, and the girl jarred into him. She cringed back as though expecting a blow and almost collided with a street trader. What must it be like, being so constantly afraid? Was this why so few women walked the streets of Avaris and Memphis?

"Here." He tried to pass her his dagger. She would not take it. "What is it then?" Staring into her face, Terre suddenly realized a little of what it meant to be mute.

"Fool! You fool!" The exclamations were against himself. "Look." He stripped a string waistband off his tumbler's short kilt and wrapped it around her wrist, tying the other end round his own wrist. He yanked on the string. The narrow cord hummed but held. "Whatever happens, we're together, understand? I won't lose you, Tiyi, and I won't leave you."

The girl lifted her arm and tugged. Again the slim cord held. She gave a strange cough which sounded almost like choked down laughter, then nodded animatedly, her round head bobbing like a date in a water-vat. Other parts bobbed, too, and a passing workman bird-hooted in admiration. Terre couldn't be sure whether his girl blushed or not.

His girl. He liked the sound, the idea of that. She was just his height, he noticed. He stood still, looking at her.

Tiyi pulled again on the string, obviously ready to leave.

"I'll follow you," said Terre. "You decide where you want to go." Thebes was a strange city to him also.

For a moment Tiyi looked worried, then she smiled. Her teeth were white as salt, her breath sweet as the fruit of the persea tree. Where would she lead them? What did she want to see?

The cord at his wrist tightened. He would soon find out.

She avoided markets, also traders and craftsmen. She walked past three different perfume sellers as though she had not seen them. She skirted the docks and ignored the temples. She seemed not to be looking at the buildings at all.

Suddenly her steps quickened. They rounded a corner of one street and



found a well. As is usual at such watering places, there was a huddle of women and children. Tiyi squatted down: behind her, a little more out of sight, Terre stood. He watched her watching.

An old woman spinning. Children playing hide and find. A city-woman making bread. Following Tiyi through the streets of Thebes, Terre saw the girl craved the world she had lost through slavery, a simple-seeming world to outsiders, and yet one she could not re-enter. Pitying her, he took her hand in his. They now walked side by side in the wider streets.

Then Tiyi took him to the harlots' quarter, that part of the city where daylight never penetrated down to street-level. It was a suffocating, closed-in world, twisting alleyways full of strained silence and scuffling business, where women and boys sold themselves to live.

At first Terre believed they had come to this ugly nest of ruined houses and boarded-up doorways by accident. Tiyi soon disabused him of that. Her fingers digging deep into his hand, the dark masseuse took a hesitant step carefully over a dead body blocking one of the entrance-alleyways to the quarter. With her free hand she beckoned. She had come looking for this place.

The acrobat took out his dagger again. Tiyi wanted him to learn something here and learn he would, but first he must keep them both alive. "I'll go first," he whispered. The girl spun round and blocked him. He'd need to knock her down or lift her out of the way to go past.

Tense, their gazes locked and Terre's eyes widened in surprise. He knew a spear-scar when he saw one. In that dim, sweating semi-darkness, the narrow gray line running from Tiyi's chin to her throat stood out as a defiant banner. He saw her as a defender, not aggressive, but as nurturing and persistent as water. The fighter in him could respect that. "Very well, I'll follow you." He sidled back, swallowing the joke he would have made to anyone else. Protective towards those weaker than himself, the tumbler thought humor against a mute the worst kind of underhand blow.

Still he did not like her going first. His shoulder blades pricked uncomfortably as they moved on.

In a different street, a couple were mating, backed against the smoothest of the many looming house-walls. To go past was impossible. Tumbler and masseuse were forced to wait, hearing and watching the harlot's feigned passion, until the man had finished.

Afterwards, the woman tugged down her tunic and made to spit at Tiyi. “Do, and I’ll cut your face,” Terre hissed. Tiyi blocked him again. She faced the prostitute calmly, almost inviting the woman to carry out her threat. In the darkness, her warm, round body was as still as light.

And magic happened. The other woman’s features changed, grew peaceful, became younger. She turned from them with a flash of dyed hair and was gone.

“How did you manage that?”

The masseuse looked round and helplessly spread her fingers. She seemed shy, but Terre was learning that, so far as she was concerned, appearances could be deceptive. “Can you show me how to do that?”

Tiyi’s wide-spaced eyes blinked solemnly.

Was she ever angry that she could not talk? Terre wondered. Did she ever feel the same frustration which he felt for her, like a stone in his chest?

His face must have hinted at his thoughts. The tumbler usually schooled his expressions well, but simple or not, this girl was adept at reading moods. She reached out to him, even while slanting her own face away.

They were so close that their breaths mingled. Perhaps that was why he took her in his arms. He saw her sadness then.

He kissed her briskly, to break the moment. “Best we not linger here.”

\* \* \* \*

On the way out of the harlots’ quarter, Terre came to a decision. He pulled Tiyi into a dead-end. The street finished abruptly with a shaggy palm tree and a rough hotchpotch of hovels. Behind the palm and before the blocking garden wall of one of the richer houses which butted onto this part of the city, glowed a rough disc of sunlight, a round eye of strong day.

First he cut the cord between them. “Sit.” He pushed her down in the sun. “Open your mouth.” He ordered her as he would have done a soldier, and for a very good reason. It was as a soldier that he always thought most clearly, and what he planned needed him cold and steady.

She trembled slightly, but otherwise did not move.

“Now, let us see why you are mute, eh?” He knelt and took her head between his hands.

Once, as a very small boy, he had seen a healer from the caravan traders

cut a mute's tongue to set it free. Whether the mute child had ever learned to talk he did not know. The caravan had passed from his father's city, and he had never seen the boy again. All he remembered was the gory operation itself.

He would have to warn Tiyi about the blood. Carefully, he ran a finger inside her mouth, over and inside her gums and teeth. He tilted her head back further and moved out of the light himself so he could see. The disc of sun shone like a torch down Tiyi's throat.

"Move your tongue as much as you can."

Squinting in the dazzle, her head dizzily craned back, Tiyi did what he asked. She knew he was trying to help her to talk.

"Now let me feel. Don't worry. I won't do anything else."

There seemed to be an obstruction, a blob of skin fixing part of the front of the tongue down against the lower palette. The tie was only as big as a wart. He thought it should be possible to cut it cleanly.

He took his hands away from her head and, still on his knees, shuffled back a pace while he explained what he thought had caused her lack of speech. Tiyi lowered her face from the light and listened intently.

\* \* \* \*

He was offering her a chance of speech. Only a slim chance perhaps, and after much blood. "You should not die of the loss, yet there would be a risk. I've seen some warriors go off to the Field of Reeds after nothing more than a scratch. So, there it is." The tumbler rested his hands on his knees. "It is for you to decide, Tiyi."

Before she could think—she had been given so many choices today by this man—he spoke again. "The healer priestesses will be able to give you something against the pain. Whatever you decide, Tiyi, it is better that we leave this place soon." He left her to think and moved off into the shade of the palm tree. She had noticed before that he was not as comfortable in full sun as she was.

Tiyi prayed to the ghosts of her parents. She prayed to the sun god above her. The gift of speech. Words, the tongue's children. Kasa would hear her voice. She smiled, imagining her grim older brother's surprise. Every tall man in the city today she had hoped might turn out to be Kasa.

Her gaze fell on the string round her wrist, its sawn-off end. Would these healer priestesses he had spoken of be able to cut her as cleanly? Terre was not the man's name. She knew that from the brief hesitancy in his speech whenever he told a lie. He must be a soldier. Only a very clumsy tumbler would have got so many scars on his chest and arms, and this man was never clumsy.

*I think your advice is good*, she mouthed, her jaw copying movements that she had seen and heard from others' lips, *Despite the beard*. To Tiyi as much as to other Egyptians, facial hair was the mark of a barbarian.

The man shook his long hair like a horse's mane. He did not understand what she was trying to tell him. Tiyi pointed to the knife at his belt and nodded.

"Are you sure?"

Tiyi nodded again and put out her hand to guide them out of the harlots' quarter.

\* \* \* \*

He had wanted to barter her a long drink of wine first, to calm the nerves and numb some of the pain, but Tiyi would not pause on her way to the temple. Her accepting trust both steadied and alarmed him. Now that she had agreed, he could think of a thousand reasons why she should not go before the healer-priestesses. *By Sutekh, what am I doing here? I'm not a healer. Ramose would call me a foolish meddler, and he would be right.*

A warm brown thumb fluttered lightly, like a butterfly, against his hand. The banging panic in his temples shimmered then broke up, leaving him on a plateau of calm. Tiyi had given him a space in which to move.

As they walked, Tiyi thought of the peasant from her village who had revealed the secret of easy childbearing. A mute, Tiyi had often been the recipient of confidences, though not all were as selfless as the old woman's advice. "You must breathe out the pain," she had been told. "Try it for yourself. Next time you've a thorn in your foot, breathe out as you draw it. I swear it will hurt less."

Tiyi was too nimble to have gone round treading on thorns, so she had never tried it. All she could hope was that the old woman was right.

She felt a shadow sweeping over. A soft kiss pressed gently against her

bottom lip.

“For luck,” Terre said, sensitive to the strange intimacy at this point between them. He did not know if Tiyi understood or not.

Hand in hand like two young lovers, they passed down the processional way to the temple of Mut, joining the small groups of people milling inside the gateway. These were waiting to be healed. Many were too sick to care that Terre was dressed in as little as a Keftian bull rider, or that he wore the full black beard of an Asiatic. The tall, dark-skinned priestess who came for Tiyi, however, remarked upon this.

“It is rare that one of the Peoples of the Sea visit our holy places. Can it be that you gray-skins have turned from your gods to ours?” The young priestess smiled, yet the temple guards were just within her call.

“Lady, you are astute,” answered the tumbler, flicking three pebbles into the air and juggling them one-handed. “You read the truth of my heart from my eyes. I should be a fool to lie. I am one of those terrible Hyksos.” He grinned widely and winked a wicked blue orb. “Yet, though I worship Set, I swear I have not come to abduct the Hidden One and to take your blue god north, but rather to seek healing for one of your own.”

Forgotten, the three pebbles cracked sharply against the flagstones, punctuating the end of his speech. Tiyi, still gripping his right hand in hers, lowered her head and blushed.

The slim priestess did not yet turn to her. “Why only three stones, tumbler?” she asked, brushing the nearest pebble with the sole of one of her upcurved reed tabtebs.

“Three for the royal hawks of the Two Lands: Aweserre, Sekenenre and Kamose. They are poised to squabble over Egypt like vultures, where all three might live alongside his neighbor in harmony and peace. Is that not the meaning of Osiris’ death and rebirth, as you tell it here in No-Amun?” the tumbler inquired gently.

“In that story your god Set is the villain,” the priestess reminded him. She seemed to be enjoying their sparring.

“Change is seen by too many as an evil,” answered Terre. “My companion has been silent too long because of others’ fear.”

Now the priestess looked thoughtfully at Tiyi. “I perceive that you are right, wild man. There are few laughter-lines here.” She drew back the sleeve of her white tunic and extended a dark-skinned hand. “Greetings, my

sister, you need fear nothing among us. It is not for the temple to pass judgment on your taking up with any gray stranger from the desert, but rather to heal your body and spirits. Our healers are as skilled in medicine as any of the priests of Sekhmet,” she added, with obvious pride.

Tiyi had released Terre’s hand but would not take the priestess’s. She knelt at the woman’s feet. “Rise, sister. In days to come you shall bow to no one.” The tall priestess lifted the girl up and drew an arm round her shoulder. Tiyi leaned into the soft white linen of the priestess’s robes, so different from her mother’s coarsely-spun garments. The contrast made her weep.

“Walk with me to the healing chambers beside the sanctuary,” said the priestess. “No evil can enter that holy place.” Her earlier banter had gone. She stroked Tiyi’s thick black hair. “No harm shall come to you. The goddess will make you well.”

The tumbler moved with them, but the priestess stopped him with her free arm. “No one but the sick are allowed within the walls of the temple proper.”

The tumbler drew his dagger down hard across his wrist. “Now I am sick.” He flicked the blood onto the nearest pillar, and the priestess, eyes glittering with anger or amusement or possibly both, motioned him forward.

“You will not be able to stay when the healers begin to treat her,” she hissed at him as they walked briskly across the sun-baked courtyard towards the brick-built healing chambers.

“I will stay for as long as I can,” answered Terre. “What gift should I leave for the temple?”

“In the child’s case, no payment is necessary.”

“And for myself? The price of a bearded Asiatic should be quite low, I would have thought.”

“I will ask and find out.” There was no doubt then of the priestess’s amusement. She was smiling.

\* \* \* \*

“Your companion is resting. She has lost much blood. It was a tricky operation to free her tongue and one painful for her.” The priestess who had met them at the gateway waited in the smallest healing chamber with the

tumbler. Now she glanced up from her dressing of his cut. “We gave her the strongest drugs we could, but the surgeon had to be slow.”

“I heard nothing,” murmured Terre. Tiyi rested in the chamber next to his. The priestess nodded.

“Yes, she was most concerned that you should not be disturbed.” Her bright eyes were oblique.

“Does she hate me for bringing her here?” He flinched as the woman poured ointment over his own wound. The priestess peeped at him from under her eyelashes.

“In time you should be able to ask that question of her, and receive an answer.” She wound a bandage over the cut. “Did you train her?”

“No—and why do you ask? I’m a tumbler, with no skills in my fingers except juggling.”

“She has learned many arts. We wondered if you were her mentor.” Though she had finished, the priestess still stared at the bandage.

“What kind of arts?” At the strained silence, Terre felt his face grow red. Then in a flash he thought he knew. The fearful yet thankful, grateful expression he had noted too often in Tiyi’s face was familiar. He had seen it before, on condemned men being dragged to torture, fearful yet grateful for the agony to come, for pain meant they still lived.... Old executioners claimed that some men even developed a taste for hurt, and were then no longer afraid.

He felt a cool hand against his forehead. “Be at peace, stranger,” the priestess said gently. “It is enough for us that you did not teach her any love of suffering. At sundown you will both be able to leave.”

The priestess rose to leave.. Terre roused himself from the shock. “Can you help her?”

“No, that is for others to do. Perhaps you yourself.” On that last word, soft as a kiss, the priestess withdrew.

## Chapter 22

Ramose leaned forward on his seat, rubbing at his breastbone. The burning beneath his ribs persisted. He was to meet Sekenenre. He would at last gaze into the face of Pharaoh of Upper Egypt. Bile stung his throat as he belched. Of all possible times, why had his body chosen today to rebel?

Ramose missed Neith. She would have warned him against eating rich food late at night. With a pang, the priest realized that he had missed her birthday. The first year they were married, he had given her a sycamore. Neith loved her garden. His thoughts fell back to those early days, when he would gladly rise before dawn to plant a little tree in honor of his wife's birthday, working in a lily-scented darkness in order to surprise her. He remembered her delighted shout. She had noticed the moment she rose from their couch. How very sweet marriage had been then. Perhaps if their second child had not died... useless to speculate. Past was past.

"Ramose? Are you well, my lord?"

Hathor's low, slightly weary voice pierced his reverie. She stood beside the threshold, one foot still on the stairway which led up to the roof. Brown light spilled into the room through the open door, the dense heat of Thebes. Hathor was now, she belonged to his present. Ramose looked up eagerly, but the past came between them in the shape of their sons. He had lost his child, but Hathor had killed her son. She was a murderess.

It was intolerable that she should keep wearing his tunics. At once Ramose felt insulted, smothered by her presence. He stared with distaste at the sun-blurred figure. "Why are you not dressed, woman?"

Hathor stepped into the room and closed the door. "My lord." She addressed him like this when unsure how he would react. Since staying with him at the High Priest of Amun's house, his concubine had gradually become more formal. "I was awaiting your instructions, my lord. Also—"

She came closer, arms pressed along her sides, slender hands clasped



tightly together before her, hiding the thumbs. Such a pose showed off her breasts. "They hurt," she whispered.

She was still in milk. It had pleased Ramose to suckle from her as he climaxed. The symmetry, the giving and receiving of life, was deeply satisfying. He had named Hathor after the goddess of love, the nurturer of kings. Yet it was perhaps the goddess's other aspect, as Sekhmet, fierce lion-goddess, immortal consort of Ptah, that he, the High Priest of Ptah, invoked in their lovemaking.

Ramose glanced at the water-clock in the corner of the room. They had an hour before they and the High Priest of Amun would go forth in the cool of evening on the brief chariot ride to Sekenenre's palace. "Where is our host?"

"Sleeping under his roof awnings, my lord, when I left him."

A little gentle, pleasing exercise might help his indigestion, especially as the masseuse was presently out of reach in the retainers' camp outside the boundaries of the temple. Ramose settled back in his chair, loosening the belt of his robe, a signal Hathor knew well.

"Where did you go to this morning?" he asked as he watched her strip from his clothes.

"To the temple of Mut, my lord." Hathor averted her face. "I left a gift with the healer priestesses for their goddess to look kindly on Tiyi, that she may perhaps one day speak."

"The mute is well enough as she is," said Ramose. "And I have not found women's speech so valuable when they do have it." He chuckled softly at Hathor's angry tug of her bottom lip. "Your other talents now—" He caught her to him.

They mated there and then on the chair, she seated astride him, her fingers a feather-tingle first across his back, later pressing his head against her breasts as she became more aroused. For several blissful moments there was only the scrape of chair legs on floor tiles, the suck of flesh against flesh, the woman's jerking breaths as he drank her down. Yet afterwards he was drained instead of filled, and the thought of his quietening heart was sad.

Neith—

\* \* \* \*

The jolting chariot ride to Sekenenre's palace with the softly-spoken High Priest of Amun was enough to aggravate Ramose's existing physical discomfort. Raw in mind and body, he went ahead of his escort, taking the steps up to the entrance hall two at a time.

Behind him, staggered like runners in a race, came the High Priest of Amun, four of Ramose's Nubian guards, chosen for their height and bearing, and Hathor, who carried the companion box to his own.

His first confrontation with Sekenenre. Ramose strode to meet it, his mind sprinting. At this meeting no entertainers would be present. It would be all business.

He had not seen his tumbler and masseuse amongst the other retainers when the chariot swept through their camp. That in itself was irritating, although not surprising. The acrobat was not a man to be confined to a ring of tents and cooking fires. Terre, or however he styled himself, would have gone out into Thebes, and doubtless taken the masseuse with him. Well, he must speak to them both later. Ramose shook his head and strode on.

Sekenenre's guards seemed surprised that he was at the head of the delegation, coming first. Ramose did not pause to tell them that the Theban palace was much like the old palace at Memphis, even to the warren of corridors which led off to the family quarters. Let the guards think it was by magic that he could find his way about. He must play any advantage here to the hilt.

Walking confidently past the blue blur of the indoor bathing pool, Ramose approached the solid golden doors of the great hall, the final barrier between him and Pharaoh of Upper Egypt. Raising his priestly staff of office, he struck the ringing metal three times.

The doors were opened from the inside by two dwarves flanked by two Kushite guards. Easy-limbed as a lion, the black priest of Ptah entered the throne room and looked down the lines of burning braziers and torches to the dais.

Moving towards the solitary figure seated on the dais throne, Ramose wove his eyes round the chamber. A few searching glances were enough. A monarch might not wear his heart on his face, but the courtiers were another matter.

Most were easy to read. In a few paces he learned a great deal about

Sekenenre. A cruel, vain king, a man of many-changing moods, suspicions and strange amusements, but brave, the kind who would never give way. Whatever Sekenenre's status as a royal vassal, Aweserre would find this Pharaoh hard to bring to heel.

The youth Kamose was a flattering mirror of his father, firmer-muscled than Sekenenre and dark as Ramose himself. He was posted closest to the dais but leaning away from it against a black spear, as if unconscious or even resentful of the honor and favor implied in his position. A warrior son, certainly, and what else?

He was opposite Kamose's sister now. The princess was clearly out of favor, standing amongst the minor court officials and not with the mother of Pharaoh or the other royal women seated along one side of the chamber. What had she done, or refused to do, that had angered her father? Ramose glanced sideways.

He intended only a quick glance, but found his head turning, eyes drawn wide with astonishment. That hair—she tugged it, showing him it wasn't a wig. Only the Northern savages had such sun in their hair.

Ramose blinked, covering the swift forward jerk of his head with a swing of his staff. The princess's astonishing coloring sparked in the rim of his vision, almost overshadowing the beauty of the face it framed. Sekenenre was unwise. Out of favor or not, he should have had the girl standing behind his throne. She would have looked like a golden-winged goddess, a divine protector.

The idea that Ahhotpe might be too dangerous to her father in such a role, that she might put a knife in him, or more likely, use the occasion to further her own ambitions, did not occur to Ramose. He considered women of small account in the affairs of state. Sekenenre's daughter was a sweet taste on an acid stomach, a pretty thing, possibly even a deliberate distraction.

Ramose coughed, amused, and scanned the rest of the chamber for proper, masculine threats to himself and more particularly to that stiff figure of silver on the throne. Two sword-bearing generals appeared openly bored. They might be interesting to speak with later, at the appropriate moment.

He was within range, no more than the height of a man from the dais. With his thumb, Ramose flipped open the lid of the deep box he carried. "A gift, divine one, from the master of the Two Lands."

The box had been searched by Sekenenre's guards before Ramose had been admitted into the palace. The top of the box was full of gold dust and lotus flowers. Several of the flowers had torn petals where the guard had jabbed in his dagger. Ramose dug his fingers into the first layer and scattered gold and lotus, the flower of Upper Egypt, in a wide arc over the floor.

Under the heavy yellow dust and the blue flowers was a small catch which, when pressed, opened a lower, secret drawer of the box. From this, the small, sandy-olive cobra, not yet grown to its full adult length, wound slowly up through the flowers and up along his arm.

The whole room stiffened and went cold. The cobra's poison fangs had not been removed. From behind the black spear, Kamose's lively eyes were busy measuring. At such close quarters to the dais and the seated king, the priest could hurl the cobra straight at Sekenenre.

Ramose let fall the box and the rest of the flowers. "My master Aweserre bids that along with these first gifts, tokens of a monarch to a loyal vassal, you heed this sacred creature. It is the uraeus, symbol of Lower Egypt.

"It is yours now, my lord," he continued after a significant pause, "that you need no longer covet any other royal cobra."

Sekenenre laughed. His eyes, shadowed as granite, were not smiling. He laughed again, hoping perhaps to startle the cobra coiling up Ramose's arm into violent action. When he spoke, his voice was as colorless as the silver pectoral hanging on his breast.

"The delta princeling is misguided. I never covet—what I want I take. I do not need his gift, nor your lesson in history, priest. It was my ancestors, not yours, the great Pharaohs Menes and Zoser, who first united the Two Lands of Egypt. Does this Aweserre think I need his permission to wear the ancient symbols of my own country? You are both mistaken."

With the turn of speed he had shown in the Heb Sed, Sekenenre came down from the throne and dais, a shooting dart of silver, and grasped the cobra's tail. As the snake recoiled, head and hood aggressively erect, Sekenenre slashed it in two with a silver-hilted dagger. The head was still alive and upright, its tongue beating the smoky air, when the Pharaoh of Upper Egypt jabbed it onto the spikes of his silver crown. The snake remained alive for the rest of the audience. Ramose saw its glittering eyes

moving restlessly as Sekenenre resumed his seat. Perhaps it was in pain. The priest did not know.

“Thus was the uraeus first worn,” said Sekenenre, his voice as toneless as before, “until a clever smith made a lifeless copy of gold. Myself, I prefer the original conception, as the goddess Wadjet herself must have worn her creatures. That is our way here, priest, we have returned to the ancient forms, the pure forms.” Smiling, Sekenenre wiped a trickle of snake-blood from his forehead and smeared it over the throne arm.

“There is blood on your robes, priest,” he continued. “That is what the Two Lands must have. This season, the waters of the inundation will not be enough. There must be much spillage of blood. Only then, after much sacrifice, will Egypt be pure again and whole.”

The man is mad, thought Ramose. No sane commander would reveal the month of his attack like that. Or perhaps Sekenenre means a double bluff. He glanced at the courtiers, but their faces told nothing. He thought of Duauf, dead, and Neith and Mose, alive and safe for the moment in Lower Egypt, yet for how long? “You cannot treat the lands of the delta, the homelands of the cobra, in such a cruel fashion, my lord.”

“Cruelty works as well as anything else,” muttered Kamose.

“Just so, infant,” said Sekenenre indulgently. Breaking the gaze between himself and his son, he addressed Ramose again. “Has the female another puzzle for me in her box? A vulture perhaps, symbol of this kingdom, which is the kingdom of the true god, my father Amun?”

There was much showing of teeth in dark faces and hollow-sounding laughter. The old queen, Tetisheri, slapped her hands on her thighs in appreciation at her son’s joke, and after a moment, as a muddled echo, the rest of the court applauded.

Hathor’s box, to the youth Kamose’s obvious disappointment, contained only jewelry and gemstones. Sekenenre waved towards the women’s side of the chamber. “You may deposit those with my mother. She likes little trinkets.” His eyes did not soften as Hathor walked hesitantly across the striped light and shadows of the torch-lit room, but he watched her to the very end. “That woman, is she your wife?”

“Not my wife, only a concubine,” answered Ramose. Hathor was the least of his concerns. The smell of smoke and drying blood was sour in his nostrils, and he had to keep tensing his guts to hold in a barrage of wind.

“Ah, a whore!” Sekenenre brought his palms together beneath the tip of his ceremonial beard-wig. “My son likes her, you see.” He thrust out a silk-lined sandal, pointing with his painted toes. “Don’t you like her, eh, boy?”

For the second time, Ramose noticed, when the father’s and son’s gazes clashed, it was Sekenenre who looked away first. “My lord.”

“Yes, O priest?”

“There will be other gifts from my master. Gifts to a loyal and prudent vassal.”

Sekenenre held up his hand. “I heard that part of your speech clearly enough the first time. And what else could I be but ‘loyal’ and ‘prudent’, with Kushites bordering the southern side of my country and Hyksos the northern? Though it is intolerable—” For a brief instant a muscle in his face twitched. “Well, let me say no more to you, first cousin to the black Kush....”

Sekenenre wiped away another trickle of cobra-blood.

“It is a dilemma similar to that your priest Duauf must have felt. ‘caught between the horns of the Apis Bull,’ as he might well have said. I am so sorry about your little *wab* priest. Did you know that he wished to quit your order and join the priesthood of Amun? That comforts me. At least he’d gained some wisdom before he died.”

“He died well?” asked Ramose stiffly.

“As well as any man can who has not yet acknowledged Amun as the first god.”

“The gods are many and various to reveal the true glory of creation. As such, all are worthy of respect.” Ramose touched a hand to his golden breastplate, the sign of his god, but the inspiration of Ptah did not come.

“I do not believe myself that the desert god is even worthy of mention, let alone worship.” Sekenenre looked round the room to ensure another patter of applause. “I am sure your master knows which deity I mean. The one so fond of hippos, vile and muddy creatures that they are.”

Ramose drew in a deep breath. This man was a threat to Aweserre. He did not admit ‘Serre’s authority, and yet perhaps he was not so dangerous as they had feared. For Sekenenre to be using this occasion so nakedly as a means to enhance his status showed that he had not convinced all the nobles of Upper Egypt of the rightness of his cause. It was time to be more direct.

“Why do the priests of Amun allow no other priests to watch at the first

Nilometer of Elephantine?”

“Why not ask the High Priest of Amun? He is right behind you.”

“Everything the priests do there is in your name, my lord.”

“No, that is where you are wrong.” Sekenenre suddenly became active again, leaping to his feet. “Everything is done in Amun’s name. It is the god, my father, and only the god.” He was pacing, spinning round each time he reached the end of the dais. “But if you think it is I....”

He did not finish. A booming drum sounded, and through it came the mingled shouts of men, the stamp of marching feet.

“Ah, it is time.” Sekenenre halted facing West and stretched his hands above his head. “Now is the city of No-Amun made still and quiet, ready to receive the spirit of the god. As the sun touches the Western horizon, the true Pharaoh shall guide him home.” He finished the chant and lowered his hands.

“You must stay with us tonight, priest.” His painted hawk’s-face fixed on Ramose, the dying cobra head trembling on his silver crown. “After curfew, only the Medjay and the gods walk the streets and live.”

“Some of my people, they may not know—”

“Unfortunate for them.” Sekenenre’s narrow lips twitched. “I must take my leave of you, priest. Soon it will be time to begin the evening ritual at the temple of Amun, the sealing of the doors.... You are aware of that ceremony?”

“It is done every night in the temple of Ptah, my lord.”

“By Aweserre? Every night by Aweserre?”

“Alas, that is not always possible.” Ramose pressed his staff against his stomach, hoping no one else had heard.

“Ah, then the ritual is weakened. Here we keep to the old ways, the true ones. None but Pharaoh, true son of the god, opens and closes the doors of the sanctuary of Amun.” Sekenenre flared his nostrils. “Except of course in the event of war.”

He turned and resumed his seat, the signal for the courtiers to begin their withdrawal from the chamber.

A madman, concluded Ramose, frustrated that the audience had been stopped so abruptly. *Curse Sekenenre for bringing up the inundation and the Amun priesthood at the very end.*

Ramose felt the High Priest of Amun plucking anxiously at his sleeve.

*Even the priests are afraid of Sekenenre.* Across the room, he watched Hathor being presented to the old Queen mother. It seemed likely that tonight she would stay in the women's quarters. In his present condition that was merely a relief. Ramose rubbed the trapped wind in his side. He needed time to think. This audience had resolved nothing.

Outside, the Medjay were lining up in ranks. The tumbler and masseuse had gone out into Thebes.... Of course there was nothing to fear. They would have already returned to the retainers' camp. The little masseuse would have seen to that. She would have gone back in case he or Hathor needed her services. For all her strange uses, the mute seemed too simple to be anything but obedient. Yes, they would be safe.



## Chapter 23

“Put your arm around him, child. He may be an Asiatic, but that fierceness is all beard and bluff. That’s it—right round his shoulders.” The tall priestess removed her arm, then leaned down to bestow a final kiss.

“Go in peace, my sister, with the blessing of the goddess who knows the wishes of your heart. Those wishes will be granted to you, ten times over.” With a last caress, the priestess released her charge.

“Master tumbler.” There was a lilt in her tone, and her wise eyes crinkled. “My thanks for your gift.” She fingered the simple wooden clappers: the tumbler used them to beat time through parts of his act.

Terre bowed. “I hope they are as valuable to the goddess as they have been to me,” he answered seriously.

The priestess touched a thumb to his forehead in blessing. “Gods delight in you, tumbler. You are full of their life. Only take care not to squander such a vital gift, or you will wear out your ka before its time.”

Terre reached out his hand and did a conjuring trick, drawing a string of beads gently from the priestess’ ear. “I think these are yours.”

The tall young woman frowned then struck at him playfully. “Go, sun-touched one, before the Medjay catch you. Go, I mean it.” Watching them leave, the priestess bit down on her lip, laughter being inappropriate within temple precincts.

\* \* \* \*

“I think it’s appalling,” said the blue god Amun to his wife. “That unshaven creature mocks me in my own sanctuary.”

Mut, wife of Amun, said nothing. She continued to fan herself with an Ankh, moving the holy sign of life lazily in her hand. The goddess was wearing her vulture head, so Amun could not know what she was thinking.

As the sun-boat tipped down the first stages of the underworld, Mut leaned out over the stern for a last glance at the city of Thebes.

“Laughter is my gift,” remarked the goddess Hathor from somewhere along the boat, “And it is good for gods and men.”

“I do not want any of my priests giggling,” snapped Amun. Hathor shrugged her golden shoulders. She did not greatly care what he wanted. In the middle of the boat, sagging on his chair, the sun god Ra dripped a beam of light from the corner of one eye.

“Old fool,” muttered Amun, his nine blue kas snapping round him. “Old dodderer.”

“Last light before sunrise!” shouted Set from the prow of the boat.

Amun took a deep breath and sent part of himself back into the world. Whatever Hathor’s claims for laughter, he felt he had been insulted, and he meant to have his revenge.

\* \* \* \*

“Are you sure you can walk?” asked Terre. He remembered the total misery of toothache, when a nagging ache in the jaw encompassed the whole body.

The little masseuse nodded and shuffled a few more steps. The healer priestess had cauterized the wound in her mouth with fire, the red-glowing end of a narrow stick. That so small a burn and cut should upset her balance was a humiliation to Tiyi. She was angry at being weak and did not want to weep. This man looked down on her when she cried.

Terre wished she would cry. Then he would have an excuse to comfort her. He did not like the look of her set, drawn face. Tiyi flinched every time she moved, and the tiniest jolt must be an agony for that raw inner wound.

There was dried blood in her hair which the priestesses had missed when they sponged her down after the healers had done their work. Her tunic, though shadowed with long sweat stains, had no blood on it: they had covered her with cloths. Terre knew that except for her skills of touch and mood-reading, Tiyi was simple, not to say slow-witted. Yet surely even the dullest person would have sufficient imagination to be afraid after such painstaking preparations? Her bravery appalled him.

“Let me carry you.” He wanted to anyway, and he knew they should

make haste. He had not liked the tall priestess's reference to the Medjay catching them.

Medjay: a citified name. They did not call themselves that. They were a separate Nubian tribe, a people within a people, black as the girl staggering alongside him, as the Theban Egyptians, but less civilized. Their weapons were the spear and the club, and they knew no mercy. Sekenenre had set these as curfew guards over his own race.

Terre whipped round. The first wild ululation echoed through the deserted streets, the call of Nubian warriors to each other. Behind, possibly close, although it was difficult to tell through the city's maze of houses, a woman screamed.

What happened to those whom the Medjay found on the streets after sunset?

Wincing at every movement, fingernails boring deep into her palms, Tiya was not waiting to find out. She lurched into an ungainly run.

One of the large houses had a garden gate: Tiya flung herself against the cedar wood panel and rattled the latch. It remained locked. She whirled about, facing the way they had come.

"This one." Terre seized her arm. Bumping against each other, they fled down a side street. Ahead of them now was another temple of Amun, part of its great hall revealed where the fronting gates had been demolished to allow for new building. Sekenenre, wishing to honor Amun above all other gods, had commanded that this temple be extended. A ragged collection of rope and wooden scaffolding scrambled up several walls and bare pillars. One column, its newly-added capital carved in the shape of a lotus flower, flashed the last rays of the sun.

With the instinct of an animal going to earth, Tiya darted inside the half-ruined, half-finished temple complex and Terre followed, knowing that they had no other choice. Outside there was nowhere to hide. He wished he was armed. He wished Tiya were not with him. He knew how guardsmen could amuse themselves with a girl as pretty as this one.

Disguising his fears, Terre grinned at his companion and sat beside her, behind a massive stone sphinx with a ram's head, Amun's particular symbol. They sat together in quiet, resting their backs against the lion body of the sphinx, listening for runners.

Tiya's foot jerked once against a workman's broken copper saw. She

smiled and shrugged her shoulders, indicating her lack of control over the involuntary movement. Her legs were trembling. She looked weary to death.

“Don’t be frightened,” whispered Terre. “The Medjay—those running guardsmen—are superstitious. They won’t linger near any holy place.”

Tiyi, her head racing, her mouth a pit of fire, closed her eyes.

She was not to rest long. A hand gently squeezed the back of her neck. “They must have seen something,” Terre whispered. “Stay low.” He slithered onto his stomach and wormed along the flank of the stone sphinx for a clearer look. Tiyi followed his example. He frowned when she came beside him but could not speak. By this time the Medjay were too close.

There were many—Tiyi could not count that high. All were dressed alike in leopard pelt kilts with a patterned sash tied round the waist and pulled diagonally across right hip and left shoulder. All carried a club and two unlit torches. A few had streaked their fine, woolly hair—fluffy as a ripe bulrush—with the white and red clays from the Theban hills, and wore tall plumed headdresses of black and white ibis feathers. These then were the leaders. Tiyi watched them.

They were searching, systematically dividing the building site between themselves and their men and scouring the whole area with frightening thoroughness. They even jabbed their clubs into the empty clay pots that the workmen had used for brewing their fermented barley-bread beer.

As three sets of bobbing ibis plumes came within a street width’s distance of their hiding place, a subtle change in the atmosphere around them, a kind of tightening across her forehead, made Tiyi glance sideways. Her eye met the heavy ram’s head of the stone sphinx. It was smiling, where it had been solemn.

“What is that?” Terre had also noticed. He clapped a hand to his mouth, but the exclamation was out.

The Medjay’s dark heads flashed up like those of hunting dogs when they disturb a quarry. In the time of four heartbeats, Tiyi and Terre were surrounded.

One of the Medjay commanders spoke. “Stand up,” he ordered in a heavily accented voice. He and the other guards leaned against their clubs as the tumbler helped Tiyi to her feet.

“A quail chick and a baboon,” said the Medjay captain. “What are you doing out so late?” He cracked his club against the tumbler’s shins. “Who

are you, gray-skin?"

For Tiyi, this mocking questioning was like stepping into the same dark river twice. The Medjay became the temple guards who had beaten her cousin to death. She remembered the same greed and cruelty on Egyptian faces. Feeling powerless, Tiyi hid her face in her hands, shutting out the eyes. Behind, for one wild moment, she thought she heard the stone sphinx give a soft laugh.

Terre answered, pitching his voice for the entire group, as though speaking to a gang of armed men was nothing out of the way. He explained they were strangers, that they meant no disrespect to the gods of the land, but had come instead to seek sanctuary for the night in a holy place.

"As you see," he concluded, waving an arm towards the foundations where the gates of the extended temple would stand one day, "We are within bounds and not on the street after curfew."

Snorts, finger-tapping and exaggerated yawns greeted his reply. The Medjay captain touched the tip of his ibis plume headdress. "An interesting idea."

He bent, as though about to untie his sandal thong, but instead scooped a handful of dirt and thrust it at the tumbler's face—the old insult of victor to defeated captive.

The other Medjay howled and leaped towards Tiyi, hands clawing for her breasts and groin.

No guardsman reached his intended target. Tiyi, in a flash of thought and action, knew that she would not go meekly as before and lashed out. Terre swerved his head, and the dust rattled against the horns of the stone sphinx. He lunged forward and sprang.

There was a meld of blacks: Medjay club and Hyksos hair. The two tangled but did not connect. The tumbler rolled over straight-armed, taking club and Medjay captain with him, the commander's face a silver gleam of wide eyes, strong white teeth. The white-plumed headdress shattered as his head butted the stone sphinx's, and then he was still.

Two guards rushed round from behind, and Terre used the commander's body as a shield. He cut the man's jugular and, clamping his hand on the dying captain's neck, directed the spurting jet of blood into the next Medjay face.

"Too strong a meat for you to feast on, eh?" he bawled as the Medjay

recoiled. "Come then, let's make some more!"

Tossing the body aside like a dirty rag, Terre wrested the club into his hands and lurched to his feet, striking the weapon repeatedly on the ground.

The newly risen moon held him trapped for an instant, black hair stood up stiffly like the ruff of a maddened animal. He chattered something frenzied in an unknown language, then pelted forward, one against many.

The many did not want to know. The Medjay scrambled away, desiring nothing but to quit this accursed spot.

As sound of their pounding feet receded, Tiyi tottered shakily to an unfinished column and pressed back against it. Her knuckles were grazed where she'd burst a guard's nose.

"They won't be back tonight. In fact I doubt they'll even make a report." The tumbler glided towards her, throwing off a somersault on the way for sheer pleasure. "Let's get rid of that." He twirled the club and tossed it aside.

He also, Tiyi noticed, passed behind the ram's-headed sphinx, giving it a wide margin. She did not think it was because of the dead Medjay.

"Two against a dozen—not bad." Terre tried to wipe the blood off his face before he came closer. "Shall we go on?"

The last breeze of twilight sighed through the deserted temple grounds. Tiyi smelled the aromas of many suppers cooking, heard the murmur of the city at night as people spoke of their days. The normal world, whom this strange wild man had asked her to join.

She looked at his hands. They were trembling slightly.

In a sudden fierce flood of feeling, Tiyi cupped her own grazed fingers around his face and kissed him with her aching, healing mouth.

## Chapter 24

The seventh Ka of the god Amun returned from the upper world to the absolute darkness of the Duat with sand in its face. Eyes watering painfully, the blue god slackened on the tow-rope by which all the immortals except Ra drew the sun-boat through the regions of the netherworld. Somewhere off in the blackness, the giant serpent which swallowed the souls of the unworthy gave a tremulous shake of its coils.

“Laugh, all of you,” muttered Amun, considering the seventy-five secret names of the sun god Ra. If he could name all of Ra’s titles, he had the right to take the old god’s place, to be Pharaoh in heaven.

Thinking hard, he reached seventy-four and then stopped. Try as he might, he could not work out the final name. Only the goddess Isis knew that one. She had charmed the name out of Ra in exchange for a rheumatics poultice. The official legend, which both Ra and Isis were at pains to propagate, was that Ra had been bitten by a cobra, and Isis cured him of its poison in exchange for knowledge of his last, most potent name.

After a few arrogant guesses—he was sure each one should be Ra’s name—Amun gave up in disgust.

“I know what you’re all thinking!” He could sense laughter, up and down the length of the tow rope. “You think I was bested by a mortal!”

“It certainly looked that way,” chuckled Set, pulling on the rope in front of Amun.

“And after going to the trouble of putting thought, a whole idea, into that Medjay captain’s mind,” gurgled the goddess Hathor. “What a waste.”

She was too far behind him and besides altogether too dangerous to cross directly. Amun vented his anger on the first speaker instead, spitting a nasty, fat blob of venom onto the back of the god in front of him.

That was a mistake. Set had mischievously thrown his voice to the next god in the line and was well out of range. Amun’s spittle hit his wife, Mut,

catching her plumb between the shoulder blades.

The goddess, blazing with indignation, twisted round in the narrow confines of the underworld chamber, her section of rope looped into a handy scourge.

“An accident, my darling! That was an accident, I do assure you....”

Backing in the dark, Amun missed his footing and stepped into the murk of the Duat, the underworld river itself. Hastily he withdrew his foot as a finned creature broke the surface of the heavy waters. He felt the rasp of the fin along his anklebone. “It was Set’s fault.”

“Really,” said the goddess Mut, pecking through the darkness towards the blue god.

“Heave, my children,” came Ra’s thin, weedy voice from the center of the sun-boat. “Just step by those two young things and let them sort out their own quarrel.”

“Yes, father,” replied Set and Hathor in unison. Side by side they drew happily on the tow-rope, smiling in satisfaction at the night’s events as behind them, growing ever more faint, Amun howled and stammered excuses.

Nephthys, working behind Set, did not smile. She hauled up close to her husband’s ear.

“Amun has sent out more than one ka tonight. I would not be so quick to celebrate, if I were you.”

Set, his part of the tow rope thrown casually over one shoulder, felt a sudden disquiet. Until the morning, and the rebirth of the sun, he could do nothing. All he dared hope was that Amun had forgotten most of his own “wild men.”

The blue god, however, had a very long memory.

\* \* \* \*

Away from the river, traveling south after Ramose’s ship had set them down on a long spar of silt, leaving them to wade ashore while it turned tail in midstream, they seemed to be going nowhere.

“Absolutely nowhere,” said Setna the thief, with his customary carefree grin. Friend or not, had he and Kasa been traveling alone he would have been eating dirt for that remark.



The rest of the gang, ex-farmers, ex-thieves, were not so happy. Kasa was their leader, their luck-charm, their scapegoat. He was not delivering the goods. Already Teta and a few chosen acolytes had developed signs known only to themselves, by which they commented on the tall Deltaman's shortcomings. Kasa knew they were only goading themselves up to bring an open challenge against him.

And why should that trouble him? What was this leadership that all men seemed to crave? What did it bring him? Yet Kasa knew he would not give up his position willingly. If Teta wanted his place, then the fellow must fight for it.

"The old village headman at the last settlement made a mistake, that's all. He meant four nights, not two," he said again.

Teta threw him a sulky look. "You told us two nights' journey by the Dog-Star to a town where we could find a ship to take us north and home to the delta. The tax men will not remember us after so long. You agreed to the plan—that we split up and go our separate ways in the town: us home and you to go on south. Yet how long have we been traveling?" He held up three fingers. "If we turn back tonight, we have sufficient water to last us back to the village. If we do what you want to and go on, we'll finish by dying in this desert."

"No burial, no mourning rites," intoned one of Teta's followers.

"Listen to the man," said another. "He's talking sense, our own good village sense. No fault of his, but Kasa doesn't have that kind of wisdom." A murmur of assent ran through the group.

Excluded, Kasa let his temper get the better of him for a moment and ignored the rest of the discussion. They could have covered several leagues tonight in the time they'd spent squatting at the bottom of a sand dip, wittering about what to do next. But then he had always known that these men were unwilling conscripts. He could not blame them for their fears.

Kasa sighed and shook the light waterbag hanging from his waistband: running water, the sweetest sound in the world. It quieted the men like a charm. "Teta is right." The words rasped like fishbones in his throat. "With so little water, we should turn back. Yet what stars do we follow? Have you noticed, Teta?"

Teta pinched his nose hard and did not answer.

"I think we should travel by those. They look kindly," said another man.

He pointed to a bright constellation. The group nodded their eager agreement, all except Setna, who grinned. Ever the opportunist, the thief was careful to commit himself good-naturedly to everyone and to no one. Thoughts of dying in the desert did not enter such calculations.

Kasa sank his head deeper into his hunched shoulders. "We must get back to the river," he said. "My mistake—yes, Teta, I freely admit this—was in heeding the old headman's advice and in leaving the river in the first place."

"But can you lead us?" asked Teta, narrowed eyes sharp and mocking.

Kasa looked up at the sky himself. "I don't know," he answered slowly. He thought himself responsible for these men. Maybe it was just pride at their calling him leader, but Kasa hoped it was more than that. "I'd like to try. Will you let me?"

Still crouched, Teta turned on his heels and showed his back. "We shall discuss it," he said loftily.

Kasa stood up and walked off, leaving them talking. He needed to think himself. He felt like a man wanting to run two ways at once.

Why had he offered to lead them back? He could leave them here and let them find their own way, while he continued south. Another half a night's march and he might find that village the headman had mentioned. From there, a man alone, he would probably be able to work a ship's passage down into Upper Egypt and so complete Ramose's fool's errand. With his sister's freedom at stake and the satisfaction of seeing the black priest's face when he finally returned to Memphis with vital information, why then did he feel torn? Why should he feel any obligation to these others?

The goddess Hathor and her mortal namesake, the priest's woman, must be laughing at him.

Kasa tried to be cynical and cold, and yet the picture of the woman Hathor which came was not the one he wanted, not a spoilt concubine in rich clothes and jewels, but an ivory-skinned woman with warm brown eyes, tugging on her lower lip. Thinking about her, about losing her—how can you lose what was never yours? mocked a part of his mind—made his dilemma worse.

The men were still talking, their breath steaming in the chill night air like those of draught beasts.

It was a good image to remember, thought Kasa. Like plough oxen, he had set them on this course. Now he must see it through to the end of the furrow. He kept his promises.

Setting his face resolutely against the bright Dog-Star, Kasa scrambled out of the hollow into the full brunt of the cold desert night, scanning the other stars under the white hanging moon. Which should they follow? He halted, deep in thought, his feet sinking into the sands. A cold breeze, chiming and shivering through his cloak and the nearby thorn scrub, beat upon his forehead like an anxious finger.

The rhythmic strumming increased. For an instant, disorientated by night, by the sheer space and emptiness of the desert, Kasa did not realize what it was.

A dozen horsemen took the place of the sky. Faster than storm clouds, they raced from the rim of one dune to another. Nearer and nearer they rode: white horses, black men. Nubian bandits.

Against a rider, a man may do two things: lie down flat and trust the horse's revulsion for trampling another living thing, or stand and wait for the mounted warrior to attack, then knock the rider out of the saddle. Never, ever turn and run.

Setna, the fleetest, broke first. It seemed he might get away until a javelin skewered him fast to the ground, his running days over.

Teta was always too slow. The horseman tracking him had time to use his sword and take the villager's head neatly.

Screaming, Kasa skidded from the top of the hollow in a wild assault, rushing for the riders at a dead run. He missed his footing halfway and fell, tumbling and rolling down the rest of the steep dune-slope. At the bottom of the hollow, his head struck a stone, and he blacked out.

That mischance saved him from a Nubian spear. Dazed, with all the wind knocked out of him, Kasa remained unconscious while the rest of his traveling companions were hacked to pieces. The Nubians had started to rein in their mounts, jabbing their spears into the twitching bodies, before he regained enough of his wits to remember where he was.

He struggled up out of the sticky sand, fighting his slack knees, sickness and numb mind. He regained his feet and lurched at the first upright thing he saw.

He came out of shadow, out from under dead limbs and broken bodies,

and took the horseman by surprise. His shoulder smashed into the Nubian's thigh guard, hurling the rider right out of the saddle. The horse shied and took off, taking him with it, half-sprawled across its neck.

Kasa had never before seen a horse, did not know how to ride. He clung round the beast's neck, one leg hooked over its back, the other dragging under its belly as the horse tore from the hollow. It plunged across the desert, away from the shouting and the stench of death, running faster as it tried to rid itself of the alien presence.

Kasa hung on for as long as he could, but finally the proud neck threw him off and he was hurled to the ground. The impact smashed his shoulder and his waterbag, and for the second time that night, he lost all use of his senses.

## Chapter 25

“You the masseuse?” asked Tetisheri, her small, wrinkled hands fidgeting with the lid of the jewel box.

“No, my lady,” said Hathor, her face burning. In the time it had taken the Queen Mother and the rest of the ladies of the court to thread the narrow maze of corridors to the women’s quarters, it seemed that Tetisheri had forgotten who she was. “I am concubine to the High Priest of Ptah.”

“Don’t mumble, girl, there’s nothing to be ashamed of. I was Sekenenre’s father’s whore first, before I became his wife. I see you’re feeding. Is your pup with you?”

Tetisheri fixed her with a pair a bright gray eyes. She looked shrewd now and anything but forgetful. Hathor found herself taking a half pace backwards under that keen gaze.

“Not any more,” she whispered and flinched at the secret understanding which animated Tetisheri’s dainty features. The old woman knew what she had done. Why should she not, when it was whispered throughout Thebes that Tetisheri had once been nothing but a peasant? Such women always knew.

“Your father throw you out of doors, did he? Couldn’t you have gone to your lover?” Tetisheri looked at her a moment longer, neither condemning nor condoning.

When she received no answer, the old woman tilted her head to one side and picked a piece of wax from her ear, flicking the blob onto one of the small perfume-burning braziers. “Ah, that’s better!” She rested her head back on her chair, flattening a fine baby-fuzz of mousy hair against the dark cedar wood.

The whole of the women’s quarters twittered with polite conversation as everyone else in that long main room worked hard at the pretence of not listening to the Queen’s remarks.

Tetisheri prodded the other ear. "Well, anyone can see that your tall black's a good picker." Her street-bred voice rose above the soft court-speech. "Myself, I think you've both done well for each other."

"Thank you." Not knowing what else to say, Hathor was still grateful when the atmosphere around her lightened as Tetisheri's public approval was duly noted.

Into this new climate of ease came a young woman, gliding barefoot over the floor tiles and carrying a basin of minted water.

"Perhaps, grandmother, your guest might wish to bathe and change?" asked this new stranger, giving Hathor a smile of genuine welcome.

"Aha, to be ministered to by Ahhotpe! Now there's an honor for you, priest's concubine." Tetisheri's eyes had sharpened, but she pursed her lips to receive her granddaughter's kiss, and her return embrace was warm and loving. Profile to profile they were much alike, and it was clear that these two knew and liked each other well.

The young woman stepped back, placing her basin on a low table. She was wearing a long, black scarf about her head, encasing every lock of hair. "What do you think, grandmother, a new robe as well?"

"Certainly, a new robe. We're not misers," answered Tetisheri, squirming her shoulders into the chair. Appearing as if by magic, a maid darted forward with cushions and a footstool for the old lady. Another two maids silently erected a wood and papyrus screen. "It gives us all a little privacy," said the princess, Ahhotpe.

Settled quite comfortably with both feet up, running her fingers through the uncut stones of malachite, cornelian, chalcedony and turquoise, Tetisheri looked up from the jewelry box and nodded in agreement. Wrinkling her nose, the old queen suddenly called out into the room at large beyond the screen. "Someone open the doors onto the butterfly garden. It's starting to smell like a dog-den in here."

"Isn't grandmother embarrassing sometimes?" murmured Ahhotpe as she stood behind Hathor, combing out the woman's hair. "Has she been embarrassing you?"

"A little," admitted Hathor, who was wary of the princess and yet wanted to be liked by Ahhotpe. They both giggled, and Hathor did not feel ashamed as Ahhotpe helped her to undress.

"Good body there," grunted Tetisheri. "You'll have to watch though that

you don't run to fat when you're older."

"Ignore her," whispered Ahhotpe as she gently sponged Hathor's breasts. "You're beautiful. I'm not surprised my brother likes you. Tell me, what do you think of him?"

Hathor gasped—perhaps because of the cool mint-water streaming gently down her thighs. When her breath was steady she knew she had to speak and had an answer ready. "Kamose is a worthy heir to his father."

Ahhotpe gave her a knowing look while she rinsed off the soles of Hathor's feet but said nothing. She guided Hathor to a couch strewn with warm towels. The maids scurried forward to mop away the spreading puddle of water.

Seated on the couch, Hathor felt it safest to study the paintings on the wet floor tiles. That way she could avoid looking at the princess.

Ahhotpe towed her back, gently kneading the soft cloth between her shoulders. "Am I doing as well as your own little maidservant?"

"I have no complaints," answered Hathor, inwardly alarmed. How did Ahhotpe know about Tiya? What else did the princess know about herself and Ramose? She tried to block off her thoughts, but he came anyway: Kasa, the tall big man who fought life back. Was he safe? Did he ever think of her? Would she ever see him again?

Ahhotpe had asked a question, and Hathor tracked back quickly. "Yes, I do think No-Amun a beautiful city. In some ways it reminds me of Memphis."

"I've often wanted to travel," said Ahhotpe. "You're very lucky."

"So it would seem," replied Hathor, who had some doubts.

"Why are you frowning? Am I being too firm?"

"No, no." Hathor smiled her assurances. She reminded herself that she was among people who were strangers and quite possibly Ramose's enemies.

"Why, if you have no child, are you still in milk? Are you a wet-nurse?"

Another fearfully direct approach: it made Hathor think of her old village, where plain speech was admired. Though she knew that Ahhotpe was probably trying to get her to say something indiscreet, she suddenly did not care.

"Yes, I suppose I am." She started to laugh. "One very special baby." Tears came into her eyes, and she blotted them quickly on one of the towels,

ashamed. She wondered if she had been disloyal.

A drink was being pressed into her hand. "It's cold grape juice," said Ahhotpe. "If you are any kind of wet-nurse, you will no doubt be thirsty."

She threw a light wrap around Hathor's shoulders. "Come into the lower butterfly garden. Grandmother will be holding her court soon. You know," Ahhotpe added kindly, seeing Hathor's bewilderment, "Petitions and delegations and such. I believe there will be a party of Kushites, but perhaps they might interest you, given Ramose's antecedents?"

Ahhotpe, smiling away any malice in her words, her different colored eyes scanning Hathor's face.

Hathor found that instead of being indignant, she felt amused. And she was curious about Ramose's true people. Would they also be like him? Perhaps she was just looking for a lever, a weakness to chip away at, a possible hold on his affections. Hathor knew that she was losing him.

Sad now, she took a deep drink from the silver goblet to steady herself and then nodded. "I would like to see them."

Ahhotpe's look of sympathy, as though she understood how matters were between herself and Ramose, almost undid her, but Hathor gritted her teeth and forced a smile. "I may learn something useful."

"Quite possibly," replied the princess dryly, beckoning servants to remove the screen. "Well, my clothes chests are in that far corner. We must get you robed and ready for the rest of this evening."

While they crossed the room, Tetisheri's waiting-women and court directed other servants in the shifting of couches and tables, in the placing of cushions and stools alongside and behind the Queen Mother's tall chair. Tetisheri, it seemed, would receive the Kushites with as much ceremony as Sekenenre had received Ramose. In this country, a woman might not only be wife, mother, masseuse or whore, she might also have power equal to a man's. Power greater than a man's, Hathor quickly realized, as she watched Tetisheri put down the jewel box and take up a beard wig, hooking it casually around her jaw line and ears as something she had done a hundred times before.

"The old ways," murmured Ahhotpe. "Mother and Son, the sacred union. Have you forgotten these things in the delta?"

Hathor was only half-listening. Her attention had already been caught by two waiting-women, turning out the chest next to Ahhotpe's to find the



Queen Mother's crook and flail. They were discussing the inundation and the flood-markers on the island of Elephantine, the very information that Ramose had been seeking for so long.

Stiff-shouldered with excitement, heart thundering in her chest, Hathor hoarded the entire exchange into her memory while somehow pretending to chose a gown with Ahhotpe. The best feeling was the sense of victory. She, not Ramose, had discovered the great secret.

"No, no, that color will not suit—"

Ahhotpe's voice warned Hathor to be careful. "What of this one?"

"Too tight in the bodice." They both put their hands upon a gown of striped linen and laughed.

Somewhere in the good-humor, the girlish pleasure of pretty things, Hathor recognized that from being lovers, she and Ramose had become rivals. The frightening thing then was that the knowledge brought no grief.

While Hathor was still puzzling over how this could be, Kamose came into the women's quarters ahead of the Kushite delegation.

He ran into the long room with a blazing torch, a tall aquiline-featured youth with a mission. Tetisheri squinted at him, Ahhotpe smiled on him. One woman seemed pleased at his presence, the other suspicious.

"What do you want, boy?" asked Tetisheri.

Kamose, torch still in hand, made no bones about spoiling his grandmother's appearance as he kissed her firmly on both cheeks. "A pleasure to see you, too, Tetisheri."

"Ach, don't pretend it's me you want." The old woman tried and failed in not glancing at Ahhotpe. "You know that one's still out of favor?"

"What, out of yours, too, grandmother?" Kamose arched an eyebrow in surprise.

"You know who I mean." Suddenly, despite crook, flail, and beard-wig, Tetisheri looked frail. "You're my grandchildren. I don't want anyone hurt."

A horn sounded through the palace, its note distorting in the winding corridors.

"Now, grannie, here are your little Kushites. Dazzle them with your power and don't worry." Kamose stepped back. With the arrogance of a king, his gaze swept the room.

In the midst of these swirling, heady currents of dynastic intrigue, Hathor felt curiously privileged. She had not been shut out, and now, as

Kamose's keen eyes fell on her, she was not being ignored. Conscious of admiration, she smiled. "My lord Kamose."

Already he had handed the torch to a servant and was striding towards her. "Lady." He took her hand, gazing deeply into her eyes.

"Let the lady Hathor be seated beside me," said Tetisheri.

"The old ways," Ahhotpe whispered to her, and then she held out her hands.

"Greetings, my father's son!" she cried aloud, her voice carrying above those of the approaching Kushites.

"Greetings, sister." Kamose would not yet look at Ahhotpe. Polite, as is fitting in a royal heir, he first graciously handed Hathor into the low chair next to Tetisheri's. He gave her hand a tiny squeeze before releasing it, and finally he turned. "Greetings, my Ahhotpe."

The room had gone silent—not only because of the nearing delegation. Hathor heard Tetisheri's harsh breathing, saw the old woman's fingers clutch impotently at her royal flail as Kamose walked up to his sibling.

Their lips met with the greedy accuracy of lovers. As they clung together, their embrace seemed to fill the whole room. A night moth from the butterfly garden wandered dizzily into the chamber and fluttered around their heads.

The world means nothing to them, they risk everything, thought Hathor, as their kiss went on and the chamber drummed with tension and the scurrying feet of Kushite heralds. A shocked little sigh escaped from the women when Kamose and Ahhotpe finally parted, only to seize each others' hands again and run outside into the falling darkness.

Hathor leaned sideways in her chair and reached for a make-up pot left on a nearby table. Using her fingers, she touched two dabs of paint to her eyelids, a detail Ahhotpe had forgotten.

\* \* \* \*

"Is it as bad as Tetisheri says?" asked Kamose, seating his sister on a marbled garden seat under a brilliant full moon.

"I fear so." Ahhotpe scraped off the great black headscarf and shook out her hair. "Each day that passes, each time I cross or deny him in any way, Father becomes more difficult and suspicious. Sometimes I think he would

like to blame me for Zoser's death."

"Well—" began Kamose, but Ahhotpe laid a finger on his lips.

"Not even here!" she hissed. "We can trust no one."

"Ahhotpe, you're trembling. This is not like you." Her brother put his arm around her shoulders.

"Kamose, he asked me again today to be Queen. His Queen. I said I needed more time." She lowered her head, shaking her hair in front of her face. "You must do something. When this war of his comes, make sure our father doesn't return from it."

Kamose sat very still on the stone seat. "I cannot believe what you are asking of me. Is my honor so little to you?"

Ahhotpe shrugged her shoulders. "I am asking what is necessary," she said, irritated at her younger brother's dimwitted heroism. "The thought of becoming his 'Great Wife' revolts me utterly. Not even to wear the double crown of the two lands of Egypt will I accede to that demand. It would be a slow living death." She pushed her hair back from her forehead. "Am I so little to *you*?"

Kamose swept a hand possessively down her back. "You know what you are to me." He kissed her on the shoulder, on the neck. "We have so little time alone. Let's not waste this." His hot breath blew in her ear. Ahhotpe jumped and for an instant made to push him away. He remembered her a few moments earlier in the women's quarters, bold and hot-blooded, ready to defy the world. "What is it?" he asked her, and again, "This is not like you."

"I always thought that when it happened to me, I would be strong," whispered Ahhotpe. "Yet sometimes I feel so sick." She smiled at him with her eyes, though her mouth trembled. "Hardly the warrior-queen that you need, my brother."

"What's happened?" Kamose felt stupid. "Is this some trick, Ahhotpe? A new way to keep me played like a fish on a line? Because if it is—"

He did not finish the threat. Ahhotpe burst into tears.

"You pig!" She seized the hand that was seeking hers, bit it and threw it back. "I'm trying to tell you, and you just won't listen."

Kamose felt suddenly as though he had been struck in the eye. First there is darkness, bewildered pain, then a great incoming blaze of sun. "You're pregnant?"

His gaze scoured her face. Certainly there seemed a new roundness there, a new softness.... "Ah, my moon, my beautiful, golden moon." He kissed her, many things becoming clear at once. "Don't worry anymore, Ahhotpe. A man looks after his own. Sekenenre will have to look out for himself."

Ahhotpe relapsed into a fresh spate of crying. "I'm not unnatural. I do care for him, and he is our father, yet what else can we do? If he finds out about me, he will have me killed. He stoned Zoser's mother. He made me watch."

Kamose, holding her against his shoulder, allowed himself a wry smile. Ahhotpe deceived even herself at times with these morbid sensibilities and guilts. Yet her fear of Sekenenre was real and rightly so.

"Put it out of your mind, Ahhotpe. I'll settle him." Another thought struck Kamose. "Have you told anyone else? Does grandmother suspect?"

Ahhotpe laughed and drew back, some of her old confidence returning. "Tetisheri? She knows nothing, or pretends not to know, which is the same thing in practice. Grandmother wants to believe nothing bad of any of her royal family."

Kamose lifted her hand against his cheek, kissing her knuckles one by one. "You know I'm pleased? About the baby?"

"Yes, I know. I'm pleased myself, except when I'm sick. I think I must be about three months along."

"Will you have a wet-nurse after it's born?"

"When she's born." Ahhotpe tapped him smartly on the arm. "I know, and don't ask me how, that this one is going to be a girl." She threw her brother a dazzling smile. "I wondered how long it would be before you alluded to the lady Hathor."

Calmly, she extracted her fingers from his and folded them smugly across her belly. "I wouldn't mind if you took her as a second wife. She's intelligent, loyal and passionate. You could do much worse." Ahhotpe's pale cheeks took on an indignant flush, visible by moonlight. "Doing that to a woman, keeping her deliberately in milk! The priest of Ptah is an unkind man."

"He's no fool though," said Kamose, feeling this to be a reasonably safe answer. So far as he knew, Ahhotpe was not jealous, but it seemed wisest not to ride his luck too far. "You saw how he stood up to Sekenenre in the

audience chamber. That took fast wits and courage. I could like Ramose.”

“That’s only because father dislikes him,” his sister observed. “Anyway, I think he’s dangerous.”

“Not as dangerous as you look at this moment, with your eyes all sparks.” Kamose plucked Ahhotpe’s long black headscarf off the ground, flinging the main part over her head and shoulders and dragging on the ends to bring her tightly against him.

## Chapter 26

Ramose, Ahhotpe's unkind man, rose before dawn of the morning following his enforced stay at Sekenenre's palace and hastened to the women's quarters. There he was informed by a sleepy maidservant that the Lady Hathor was still abed.

"Tell her she must in no way hurry on my account." Ramose knew it was unfair on his concubine, but the tall priest was not in an even-handed mood. He had slept badly the previous night, his dreams full of portents. He missed the soothing rhythms of the temple of Ptah at Memphis. Yes, it would be good to serve there again on his return from this alien city.

The maidservant made to close the door as Hathor put her foot into the narrowing gap. "My lord." She rushed out of the women's quarters, flinging her arms around his neck, pressing her head against his white robes. Ramose let her stay there a moment before taking her shoulders between his hands and stepping back.

"What's wrong?" asked Hathor.

"We must return to our retainers' camp." He tightened his grip. "I fear for the safety of your maid and my acrobat. I believe both were out in the city after curfew last night."

Hathor shuddered, but did not break down. Ramose recalled her brave progress across the floor of the audience chamber, and, almost as an afterthought, Kamose's reaction. He smiled, proud of her in that instant, and opened his hands. "It may not be as bad as we think, yet we should make haste."

"Yes." Hathor was already scampering away. Ramose caught up and pulled her back.

"Softly!" he warned, his tones harsh in the low passageway. "You will walk behind me and attract no undue attention."

"Yes, lord." She had dropped her head, but her voice rang out, clear and

accusing as a leper's bell. For a long time it seemed they could not meet for longer than a breath without some quarrel. The habit was too established. Ramose sighed and passed ahead.

Picking up his four personal guards at the entrance to the women's wing of the palace, the priest walked steadily past the indoor bathing pool.

"Lord." Hathor walked just behind at his elbow, her voice low but excited. "I learned something last night."

Quickly, she told him everything she had overheard in the women's quarters. "They said the Nilometer at Elephantine was too low, that the river is not rising as it has in other years. They said there would be a drought throughout the whole of Egypt, that the desert would invade huge tracts of the delta."

Ramose could no longer contain his amusement and laughed. "My dear girl," he said, turning about and patting Hathor's glowing face in a quite paternal manner. "Don't let any of these horror stories alarm you. These women's quarters are always full of such gossip, and none of it, I assure you, is the least bit accurate. Are these ladies priests, that they have hitched up their gaudy dresses and put off their spangled wigs to take a week's journey to a small sacred island? I think not, Hathor."

"But they gave details. The water has only risen to the fourth step—"

"The women are guessing." Not insensitive to her wounded look, he tucked her arm through his, allowing Hathor to keep pace with him. "We must be on our way. Tell me what you and Tiyi will be wearing tonight."

And that, thought Hathor in total disbelief and dismay, was that.

\* \* \* \*

Not one to be put off for long, Hathor tried to approach Ramose again at his retainers' camp. There she found Tiyi and the tumbler, in high spirits to judge from their shared smiles, although each had bruises and Tiyi for some reason was wearing one of Terre's tunics. Her dress, still wet from washing, was spread out in the sun to dry.

Laughing herself, Hathor ran up to the younger girl and hugged her. "Tiyi, ah Tiyi." With relief that her friend was still alive came reaction. Hathor buried her head against Tiyi's shoulder, unable to say more.

"on't, don't. Crying no h-now." Struggling with these new intricacies

of tongue and palate, Tiyi sometimes mixed letters and whole sentences. Feeling safer without speech, she stroked Hathor's shining hair.

Her touch loosened Hathor's words. "All the way, I was wondering what I would do if you weren't here. Did you see them, those Medjay guards?" Not expecting an answer, she lifted her head and gave Tiyi a shake. "Don't do that again. You had me worried sick. And Ramose is furious."

"He needn't be. We saw them off." The tumbler stepped up and embraced both women, tilting his head to glance into Hathor's face. When they stood together, she was the taller.

"Good day to you, mistress." He mimicked the exaggeratedly cultured voice of Ramose's house steward. "Will you be taking breakfast now? A glass of wine perhaps?"

Tiyi, catching the allusion, sniggered. "A 'ot of glass."

"A lot of wine," corrected Terre. He opened his mouth wider and showed his tongue. "L, l."

"Lll." Tiyi copied him, winced and dissolved into another fit of giggles.

"One must forgive her, must one not?" said the tumbler to Hathor, raising Tiyi's free hand to his lips. "She is of the age of easy laughter and tears. A relief not to be so young ourselves, eh?"

"Terre, you insul' both us—us both." Tiyi flicked the tumbler's shin lightly with her foot.

Hathor started, staring at one then the other in amazement. "How did this happen? Her voice—"

"My lord the tumbler. I should have guessed that I might find you with these, since you ignore my summons. Yet do not concern yourself that I have been waiting, and anxious."

Tall, white-robed body casting a shadow over Terre's face, Ramose towered over all three. Seeing the shadow, Hathor thought unaccountably of Kasa. She edged closer to his sister, wishing to protect her from the cold blast of the High Priest's anger.

Terre the tumbler grinned. "My thanks for your concern. How is it with Sekenenre at the palace? I trust they are plying you with more than just rich food."

Hathor was staggered at the man's insolence, yet she was even more amazed when Ramose accepted it without a murmur.



“The meat is very tough at the palace, and it is hard to chew,” he answered. The priest’s dark eyes ranged over the women, flashing a clear signal of dismissal.

Hathor, knowing from the first that there was more between the two men than any man/servant relationship, sensed the unfolding or revelation of great events. While Tiyi meekly and silently withdrew—the girl’s earlier speech now seemed as unreal as a dream—Hathor held her ground. She too wished to play her part.

“My lord, the meat may be hard as you say, yet it is not indigestible. We have learned something.”

Ramose shot her another leave-us look. The tumbler cocked an inquiring eyebrow. “The inundation, my lord—the news concerning its extent.”

“What’s this?” asked Terre, shifting his weight from one foot to another as though he could not bear to be still.

Where had she seen such gestures? thought Hathor. A small, red-cheeked man, kicking his heels while seated on a throne....

“You are our—” she blurted, then bit down hard on the rest, humiliated at her own stupidity. Of course the tumbler was bearded, but she should have known. Had Tiyi guessed the man’s special status? He is our god on earth, the thought thrust out from a spiral of others and brought Hathor to her knees.

“You do well to remember who and what you are,” said Ramose in a voice of terrible calmness, putting out an arm to draw the tumbler aside.

As they walked away, Hathor heard him explaining. “She meddles in matters too deep for her concern, but means well. You may rest assured that her ‘news’ is nothing of significance.”

The smaller man, turning back, smiled and rippled his fingers, indicating she might rise. Hathor remained where she was, facing down and denying the look of complicity he would have shared with her. She had no wish to have any intercourse with gods, mortal or otherwise.

\* \* \* \*

“Foolish child,” said the goddess Hathor fondly. “And after I am trying to help you.”

“That’s how it is with mortals,” said Set. “No gratitude.”

The goddess touched the sam amulet at her breast, stroking her thumb along its suggestive shape. “I shall at least make sure that my namesake is not without the consolations of the flesh.” Leaning from the sun-boat she dazzled an eagle.

Set ran an admiring gaze across her body. “Will she thank you?”

“That ultimately depends on your man, my dear.” Hathor took the god’s hand, firmly encouraging it to follow where his eye had been. “First I intend to tease her a little.”

“Ah, to make it sweeter in the end?”

“Just so,” said the goddess, moving as she spoke. It was not until sunset that she and Set looked out of the sun-boat again.

\* \* \* \*

Feeling unlucky and out of favor, the mortal Hathor had not followed Tiyi but had taken herself off to the quietest place in the retainer’s camp, close to the high limestone wall of the temple of Amun. It was there Ramose found her, playing hounds and jackals with a few impromptu pieces made of bits of stick and pebbles.

The priest snorted and hauled her to her feet. “Have you no consideration, woman? Your little servant has been keeping your bathing water warm this past hour.”

“And how was I to know that?”

Thus established, the angry mood remained between them. Hathor could take no pleasure in being dressed for the banquet in Ramose’s tent, in Ramose’s presence. Tiyi displayed gowns and make-up, and the priest chose for her. Even in such petty matters it seemed he no longer trusted her judgment. Hathor allowed herself to be put into a robe of patterned linen, a stiff heavy thing which chafed under her arms, and made no protest when her eyelids and lips were painted with a garish red ochre.

Once, in that dismal, silent dressing, Tiyi tugged on her arm as though trying to show her something, but Hathor would not attend. She felt by then like a *shabti* figure, an object useful to others but with no separate life or will.

Ramose’s chariot was brought round and Hathor handed into it beside

the priest. With Tiyi and Terre—if that was the man’s true name—walking behind and Ramose’s honor-guard striding in front, the light car creaked into motion.

Hathor noticed nothing of the journey to Sekenenre’s palace, nor anything of the chambers they walked through on the way to the great banquet hall. There, she silently took the place assigned to her on a certain couch and did not move from it.

After Tiyi, Ahhotpe was the first to realize that Hathor had not taken up plate or cup. The Theban princess came down from her brother Kamose’s couch and, weaving between two oiled wrestlers that were part of the evening’s entertainments, offered Hathor one of her own perfume-cones.

“I fashioned it myself from a good cooling base, cucumber and lettuce. Is it because you are hot that you do not eat?”

“Forgive me.” Hathor let the waxen cone slip through her fingers. “I am not myself.”

Tiyi tried to rub the back of her neck. Hathor jerked away.

“Go back to your tumbler friend,” she ordered sharply.

“My dear, what is it?” Motioning Kamose to remain where he was, Ahhotpe clicked her fingers and mustered a passing servant. “Here, at least drink something. You look like a shrine without its god.”

“There are too many gods here.” Hathor would not enlarge on that cryptic remark. Her chin shivering slightly, she brought the goblet to her lips and downed a draught like a child taking medicine. “Your father the king is staring at us.”

“Yes, I know.” Ahhotpe seemed to tremble slightly, but then the moment passed and she was once more the gracious lady. “Will you share a basket of *nabk* berries with me? I fear there are rather too many for just one person.”

At her signal, a shallow reed tray containing a tasteful arrangement of saffron flowers and the small red *nabk* berries was brought. The two young women reclined companionably together on the couch, feeding each other. The sharp-sweet taste made Hathor genuinely hungry and seemed to do the same for Ahhotpe, so that it was not long before they were sharing a roast duck.

Hathor became less distant and relaxed, although she sensed Kamose’s and more particularly Sekenenre’s needle-sharp eyes flitting over herself

and Ahhotpe.

As the feast went on, the Pharaoh of Upper Egypt also began to be interested in Tiyi. When three Theban dancers had finished their routine in the center of the great hall, Sekenenre rolled over on his couch to address Ramose. He pointed at the tiny masseuse standing towards the back of the hall with the tumbler, Terre.

Ramose gave some answer which made Sekenenre smile. He lowered his head and, speaking behind his fingers, whispered to the dwarf posted as a living footrest by his couch. The dwarf shambled to his feet and beetled across the floor tiles.

The dwarf returned, bringing Tiyi. He was clutching her arm, although without force, for the girl had smiled at him. She did not smile at Sekenenre.

"Delicious," said Pharaoh, "and with the true coloring and modesty of our race. Escort her forward, good dwarf, and let her feed me sweetbreads."

From the side of her eye, Hathor saw Sekenenre ask something more of Tiyi, and the girl shaking her head.

"Father will not like that," said Ahhotpe under her breath.

"She's a mute and sometimes simple. She may not have understood what he said," answered Hathor without adding that Tiyi was now learning to speak. Hathor hoped, for Tiyi's sake, that Ramose would explain these facts to Sekenenre.

It seemed he must have, for the king's face cleared, and he accepted a slice of nicely-cooked meat from Tiyi's hands, taking it from her with his teeth and chewing on it slowly.

"The best confidant. What secrets we can share with such a one and know them safe, eh, priest?"

Hathor heard this, for Sekenenre made no pains to keep his voice low. Foreseeing what weave might follow from such a skein of thought, she shifted uneasily on her couch.

A clear horn sounded, and the musicians laid aside their instruments to help the other servants clear the remains of the banquet's first courses. Before the arrival of the cheeses and sweets, Sekenenre and Ramose were to exchange gifts.

The High Priest of Ptah, anticipating this moment, had already left his divan and summoned his escort. Hathor saw him discussing final details with the tumbler. The two men looked strange standing side by side, one tall

and dark, the other a full head shorter and bearded. She could not catch their murmured conversation.

Away on Ramose's left, Kamose yawned and tipped the dregs of his cup onto the floor for one of the pet monkeys.

Still resting on his elbows, licking grease from Tiyi's fingers with the delicacy of a cat cleaning its fur, Sekenenre raised his eyes to heaven.

"You have no manners, my son." He pushed at the masseuse with his head. Tiyi obediently moved to one side, and Pharaoh knelt upright, drawing her close.

"Master priest, I have a request to make of you."

By then the banqueting hall was almost silent. Ramose and the tumbler had stiffened, Terre frozen in mid-gesture. From opposite sides of the room, Kamose and Ahhotpe stared at each other. Throat pricking, Hathor breathed the mounting tension of the chamber. She knew what Sekenenre would ask. So did Tiyi, from the fearful look on the girl's dark face.

Sure of his audience, Sekenenre slowly turned the masseuse to face his guests, keeping both hands hooked onto her shoulders.

"I would have this woman," he said.

## Chapter 27

His fingers, biting into her like nails, were those of a cruel man. Tiyi wanted no more. Her tongue was free. She need no longer echo others' wishes or be all that others wished.

"I will not," she said, remembering how she had served Bakht and he her. When the tongue is bound, the body must use different voices, some clumsy and half-formed. Blaming herself and her silence for her parents' deaths, she had welcomed hurt. Now she sensed that it was time to change. Sekenenre represented the past, Terre the future. "I cannot," she said, with her new voice.

It was not Tiyi's tongue which failed her but men's ears. Her softly-spoken, slightly blurred denial was not what they heard.

"Ask again, my lord. Tiyi is not Ramose's to give away like a parcel." White with anger, ignoring Ramose's extended hand, Terre lunged towards Sekenenre's couch. By the time the guards had moved, he stood within spitting distance of the god-king himself. "Are you even ready to murder a guest for her?" he bellowed, as the armed men made ready to cut him down.

Tiyi felt Sekenenre's fingers dragging on her arms. She moaned, not daring to struggle in case the soldiers hurt Terre.

"Father, this is too much!" protested Ahhotpe. "Is it to be said abroad that the Hyksos are more courteous than we are?"

"Let the little mute go," observed Kamose, gesturing to the guards to stand easy. "The priest's woman is the greater prize."

Kamose leaped down from his place and whirled in on Hathor, seizing her wrists and tearing her from her couch as she tried to fend him off.

"What do you say, priest?" demanded Kamose, with a wink at his father. Several courtiers did not know where to look. The gift-exchange was becoming little more than a peasants' brawl.

Ramose banged his staff on the floor. The torches in the great hall

flickered, as though stirred by a giant breath. "Enough!" he called out. "Let us remember what we are!"

Tiyi and not a few others trembled. Never before had they heard a priest speak with the resonances of a god. Stealing a fearful glance through lowered eyelids, Tiyi thought Ramose seemed even taller. Feeling Sekenenre's grip loosen, she twisted away and ran to the priest's side, tugging urgently at his hand. Without even looking, Ramose swept her behind him, his white priest-robos enveloping Tiyi for a moment in a dazzling cloak. She felt as though she had been caught up in a cloud. All speech deserted her.

"Hathor," said Ramose, his voice steady. "Come here to me." He stared solemnly at Kamose. "Let her go."

The Theban prince released his captive as though she burned him, and Hathor began to cry.

Tiyi wondered what she had missed. She could not understand it. She watched Hathor stumble across the room, sobbing and clutching one hand to her mouth.

"This concubine, does she please you, too, my lord?" Ramose asked Sekenenre, looking Hathor up and down.

"I've seen worse," replied Sekenenre.

"Then, my lord, it pleases me to give her to you. She will be sent to your Majesty's chamber, or if you prefer, that of your son."

"Oh, send her to the boy," drawled Sekenenre.

The courtiers tittered obligingly. Ramose was silent. Impressive, impassive, he gazed down at the woman who had shared his bed. Tiyi's breath lodged cruelly in her throat when she saw that he would speak again. Perhaps he would withdraw his offer?

"Shall we continue with the rest of the gift exchange?" asked the High Priest of Ptah.

\* \* \* \*

"You are leaving me," said Hathor numbly.

She had gone beyond bitterness and pain when she heard Ramose and the tumbler arguing over her future in low quick voices while Tiyi combed her hair and pinned her best dress for the last time. Now Tiyi and Terre had

gone, and she and Ramose were alone, waiting in the house of the High Priest of Amun for the arrival of Pharaoh's guards.

Ramose said nothing. On returning from the palace he had dragged a chair up to the high table under one of the torches and settled down to study his papers. There was a loud click as he opened his pen box on the table to scribble a few signs on one letter, brief notes to form the base for a longer reply. When Hathor ran weeping into the corner of the room furthest from him, the priest laid aside his burnisher with a sigh.

"What do you want from me? You should know I have only your best interests in mind, Hathor. You have already settled into the ways of the women's quarter, it seems to me, and Kamose is clearly infatuated with you."

Ramose fiddled with the tip of his pen. "It has not worked between us for some time," he added softly.

"That was not my fault." Hathor rubbed at her eyes, smearing the last vestiges of her make-up beyond repair. "You have always been distant, I suppose because of your wife."

"You will not speak of my lady." Ramose snapped the pen onto the table.

"No—I suppose you think I am not worthy." Hathor turned in her corner, head in her hands as she wept with a violence which appalled the priest. At length he felt compelled to go to her.

"Why are you behaving in this way? I am giving you a second chance. Kamose is young, handsome and a prince. You should do well with him."

"And he is cruel," sobbed Hathor. "And harsh." She lifted her face, lurid by torchlight. "Ah, he has sent Medjay for me! There is no escape!" She beat her hands against the wall and keened like a funeral-mourner.

Ramose strode in, administering a hearty slap. "Do not think you can move me this way, woman. There is more at stake here than your petty concerns."

"I know." Hathor was quiet again, her brief panic over. She edged past the priest and stood close to the open door, staring down the stair. "It is for policy and good manners that you turn me over to a murderer."

"By Ptah himself, what does it matter what kind of man Kamose is? He will treat you well enough."

Hathor shook her head, feeling the helplessness of defeat. To Ramose



she was only a living toy. In that moment, she pitied his narrow-sightedness. Life, she guessed, still had much to teach the priest. "I wish you good fortune, my lord." She came to embrace him. At the last instant he jerked away, and her kiss met the air.

"I wish you well," he said curtly, returning to his table and rustling its strewn papers, the smooth skin of his skull glistening with the faintest trace of sweat. The flames of approaching torches cast shadows over the roof.

"Three Medjay captains, with tall white egret plumes," said Hathor, who by then could see them. "The Theban prince does me honor."

"Goodbye," muttered Ramose, without raising his head.

"Farewell." At the end, pride came to her aid and Hathor walked from the chamber to greet her escort.

Halfway back to the palace, her tears began afresh. As well as Ramose, she would never see Tiya or Terre again. Or Kasa....

\* \* \* \*

Hathor was not vindictive, yet it might have given her satisfaction to know that she was not the only ill-used woman of the evening. Ramose's own wife was being driven to tears of frustration and rage by a man. Even as Hathor went forward to meet her uncertain future in Thebes, the lady Neith of Mazghuna was locked into an increasingly deadly conflict with her husband's steward.

"Our vines are dying and you say there is no one to work the *shadufs*, to raise the water for our crops? How can this be, Hori, now that the sickness has passed?"

"Perhaps the gardeners no longer wish to take orders from a woman," replied the steward. "Especially a violent, intemperate woman. My lady," he added, as an afterthought, a deliberate insult.

Feeling her insides knotting in anger, Neith glared from her couch. He had not yet taken his insolence to the point where he would sit down in her presence, but that only meant that she had to look up to him. "The house is filthy, and the vases full of dead flowers. Why?" Neith knew she should not allow a servant to abuse her to her face, yet she was very much aware of being alone with the man.

"The maids are busy," answered Hori, twirling his staff in a slow

complete circle. There was nothing of overt threat in the movement, but Neith found herself wiping her palms nervously on her robe.

"How is that? What are they doing? I have seen no-one weaving or spinning."

"A little less of the mosquito, if you please," said the steward, taking the goblet from her low table and sampling its contents. "A pleasant vintage, a good choice. Yes, what are the women doing?" He tilted his head on one side and smiled. "Helping Bakmut to redecorate our chambers, I believe."

She should have known, thought Neith. The man's arrogance had always been breathtaking, but it was nothing to the new airs which Bakmut had given herself. Partly as consolation after Kasa had been sent away and also as revenge on a spiteful mistress, Bakmut had become the steward's lover.

The result of this alliance was that Neith's orders were ignored or perverted. Even within the palace, she could no longer trust any of her servants except for her old nurse.

"Where is my son?" she asked.

"In his chamber sleeping, I presume."

"Bring him here to me."

Hori the Steward shook his head. "I don't think it is a good idea to disturb the little lord at this hour. I'm sure you will agree that he is more comfortable where he is."

The menace in his words closed in on Neith like the barbs of a trap. Whatever her previous arguments with the steward, never until this moment had she felt that she and Mose were not safe. Now it seemed in this dark, heavy evening that any outrage might be possible.

"My husband returns tomorrow." She managed to say it without her voice cracking, but the steward only smiled.

"Wine has addled your wits again, my lady. I remember reading in Ramose's latest letter that he would not return for another month. And he plans to worship at Ptah's temple before he comes home."

Neith gasped and jerked back. Suddenly she understood. Ramose's "unexpected" appearances at the palace had been nothing of the kind. He had always sent word, but the steward had never told her. "You read our private messages!"

"That and more, my lady." Hori tossed both goblet and staff aside and

fell onto her couch, catching her skirts. "Leaving so soon? But I want us to share a cup. We all know how you like wine." His fingers tightened and he pinched her stomach. "I like you fat."

He was going to kiss her. "Don't!" Neith thrust him back.

"Don't fight me. We can be good together." His mouth trailed hers as a dog follows a bitch in heat. Neith brought her knee up hard, his own leg parried it and then he dropped on her, pinning her fast.

"I could have you now and put a child in you. What then, my lady? What tale would you tell your lord when our son was born?" He rocked suggestively against her, laughing at her disgust. "Won't you do it for beer, like any good whore?"

"Ramose will have you impaled for this!"

"Oh, I do not think so. Not when I've gone to the trouble of bribing his retainers with produce from this estate. They are loyal to me, now."

No wonder then, that Ramose had never believed her, thought Neith bitterly. Whenever he questioned their servants about Hori, her husband had been speaking to people already in the steward's employ. As for her own complaints.... Neith began to realize how they must have sounded to Ramose: the drunken ravings of an intemperate woman.

While she was reflecting, Hori's fingers had strayed near her breasts, but the man was not yet shameless enough to touch. He resorted instead to the thrust of words. "Had you been a little less drunk, Neith, you might have realized that the stores have been running down."

"I did notice. You were not so clever." The missing wine and meat: it all became clear. How long had Hori been stealing from them? "What else do you want?" Anything to keep the man talking.

"I have this estate and its servants in the hollow of my hand. There is nothing more you can give me here."

The steward boosted his weight on his elbows, laughing as Neith instantly squirmed away from him. Laughing until she tried to drop from the couch. He snatched her back then, his long face set like a stone statue's.

"I have all I want except for one thing, Neith: yourself. Divorce Ramose and come to me of your own free will."

"So that you can seize my estates and bleed them dry as you have done already with this one?"

"No, to avoid scandal."

Abruptly Hori let her go and quitted the couch, walking a few steps to recover his rod of office. He had his back to her and his voice was as silken as a spider's web. "I have in my possession certain papers, letters from a general to a noble lady, written only a week or so before the lady was betrothed to another man. What do you think Ramose's reaction will be when I show him those happy little notes?"

Neith minutely examined her fingernails. "It was all innocent, Hori. My lord already knows of the letters."

"Even the final one, where the general writes of his 'great son and heir' that the lady will bear him?"

Hori reached up to one of the torches and plucked it from its stand to light his way out. "I have seen how much Mose enjoys playing soldiers."

Neith forced a smile. "All boys are the same at his age."

"Are they?"

Before he left, Hori turned to face her. "You will divorce the priest either by your own will or by mine, but you will do it, Neith. You will, or I send that last letter to your precious black husband."

"If you do so, Ramose will certainly kill you. My husband does not like the bearers of bad news."

Hori touched his fingers to the tips of his blue wig. He was enjoying himself. He had been waiting for a long time for a moment such as this, his ambitions growing as more and more power was devolved to him. The Governor of the Oryx Nome, the man Bakht, had been his final inspiration. If a man like that could rise in these uncertain times, then why not Steward Hori?

He had not forgotten, either, the time when Ramose had so rudely struck him. Hori had decided then that no man would ever do that to him again.

His gaze narrowed as he smiled at Neith. She looked like a blown rose, but the hatred in her eyes was sweet.

"Oh, I am prepared to take that risk. Ramose thinks me so honest that he'll never suspect I am anything more than a shocked and trusted retainer." Hori shrugged. "Of course, your husband might not be so forgiving of you. Do you know the punishment for a woman taken in adultery? She is burned. Well, I shall take my leave of you now."

He gave a mocking half-bow and strutted from her chamber, well pleased with himself.

Neith huddled on the couch, her throat dry and tight, her eyes burning, her whole body craving the forgetfulness and release of wine. Her affair with the general was ancient history, a part of her past she had forgotten. That, strange to say, was why she had kept the letters. She had merely never thrown them out. Bakmut must have found them in one of her boxes and handed them to the steward.

How incriminating were these letters? Had she really written to Ubaoner that she might be pregnant? And had the general replied as Hori said? Yet Mose was her husband's son....

"Hathor, golden goddess of love, it is all so long ago! I cannot remember. I cannot, I cannot."

## Chapter 28

The world was full of strange colors and sounds. The colors were pretty, but the sounds troubled him. When they grew more insistent, Kasa hit out. In his mind he was fighting the Nubians who had murdered his companions.

Around him the swirling movement stopped for an instant, hovering rainbow-winged close to his face. Out of the color burst a soft rain, a stream running across his body in gentle sweeps. A trickle seeped into his mouth as something stroked his throat, encouraging him to swallow. Kasa drank, his head full of purple feathers. The quills pricked his eyes, and he rolled and thrashed, back arching in convulsions. More water poured over him. It seemed he was all of water. He sank into the yielding medium, grateful for its silence.

Sound brought him to life again, a sound Kasa knew well from his village. He opened his eyes and stared at the woman slapping out bread dough between her hands, beating it into narrow thin pancakes that would later be cooked in the ashes of a fire. “Who are you?” he asked bluntly.

The woman did not start at either his hoarse voice or his fierce scowl. Instead she threw back her head and laughed. Her deep bosom strained against her low cut tunic. A lock of smooth black hair fell down between her breasts into a warm, voluptuous fold, half-hidden by the gold-spotted purple cloth. Weak as he was, Kasa’s head spun.

“You are safe with me and mine, Egyptian, so put those hot black eyes back in your head. We do not murder our guests.”

The language seemed easy for her, though she spoke it with a strange accent. She smiled as she spoke, showing perfect teeth.

“You have had fever for six days. We carried you to your river Nile and laid you down in her embrace until the sickness left you.”

“The Nile is a god, not a goddess,” answered Kasa, not knowing why he said this, except he was embarrassed. A foreigner had tended him with the

care of a lover.

The woman wrinkled her nose and shrugged and laughed. "I think of all rivers as female, for are they not fertile and sustaining?" Deftly, she added another pancake to the growing pile. "I am Anat, named for a goddess. You are in my caravan. What is your name, stranger?"

"I am Kasa." Kasa watched Anat sitting cross-legged in the sun before him, flattening and throwing another piece of dough. She sparkled in the light, her rich purple robe painted with lines and spots of gold—the bright colors of his fever were now explained. "Should I thank you?" Kasa was not certain what fate this woman intended for him. Perhaps he was being borne away to captivity.

"No thanks are required, Kasa." Her features were longer and cruder than most Egyptian's, but her unpainted light brown eyes were kind. "You would have done the same for me, would you not, had you found me lost and feverish in the desert?"

"I hope so." Suddenly he felt hot again.

"I know so. I am a good judge of men."

Her dough was finished. "We shall have beer." Anat rose to her feet. Shielding her eyes with her hand, she gazed down at Kasa. "I expect, now you are well, that you are also hungry. What meat is permitted to you? What food do you eat?"

Kasa dragged his eyes away from the rounded hips and flanks which were seeming to strain every seam of the woman's tunic. "Whatever you see fit to give me, Anat," he said quickly.

Abruptly, his left shoulder began to sting. Until then, Kasa had forgotten he had been wounded. He tried to move, and a wave of agony broke over him, pain so intense he could not keep silent. He opened his eyes to find the woman bending over him with a gourd, eyes dark with concern.

She raised his head. "Drink this. It will ease the pain. I had hoped you would need no more of it, perhaps in a day or so that will be true."

"What's wrong with me?" croaked Kasa, when he had swallowed some of the bitter liquid.

"Nothing which will not heal in time, my guest. Your left shoulder has been very badly bruised and you have broken two of your ribs. That is what hurts you so much." Anat's fingers lowered him gently back onto the goatskins. She or one of her people had built an awning of brushwood and

black cloth to shade him from wind and sun. Kasa lay where she had placed him, weak as a baby. It was clear that he was nothing but a drain on the caravan's time and resources. Kasa opened his mouth to tell Anat to go about her business and leave him for the jackals.

"Do not speak any more. It will sap your strength." Anat leaned forward to press her hand to his lips. "I tell you, Kasa, the guest is sacred amongst my people. You need not be concerned about us while you live in our camp."

The close-up sight of her breasts defeated him. It was all Kasa could do not to touch. As though she knew this only too well, the young woman laughed and turned from him a second time, hastening away before he could regather his wits.

She returned quickly, bringing several men who between them carried firewood, water, beer, cooking pots and a live kid. Anat drew the knife strapped to her calf and cut the kid's throat.

"We shall eat soon," she told Kasa. She spoke to the men in another language. Kasa assumed she was telling them how to prepare the kid, but when Anat knelt beside him under the awning she said in Egyptian, "I would feed you myself, but meat-cooking is not one of the skills my mother taught me. These men are the finest cooks in my camp."

They were dressed as brightly as Anat, although their tunics were longer and looser. Many wore beads and earrings. Anat, Kasa noticed, wore no jewelry.

"You are wondering why I do not like trinkets." Anat broke into his thoughts. "Amongst my race it is not the custom for the caravan leaders to adorn themselves. The stature of a person should come from within."

"How is it that you are a leader?" The moment Kasa spoke he blushed, knowing he had made a blunder. Anat, though, took it in good part.

"You mean, why is it not a man talking to you?" She beckoned one of the cooks and took a ewer and two shallow dishes from him, pouring beer for herself and her guest. "We of Canaan obey the gods and trust them to choose well. I was the first-born of the leader before me. I know how and where to find water for the caravan. I know what routes are good and which are bad. I know when storms are coming." Anat bent towards Kasa with a basin of beer and allowed him to sip from it.

The beer, or Anat's presence, was intoxicating. Kasa drank long, to keep



her close. She made him forget the pain and the horror of the Nubian bandits.

“Enough, Kasa. The meat is ready.” She broke the roast kid into small pieces and fed him.

Her own portion of kid she ate with the same delicacy. Afterwards she thanked the cooks. They took away the pots and remains of the kid to share amongst the rest of the caravan.

“The bread I shall bake later,” Anat said, catching Kasa eyeing her pile of uncooked pancakes. “You cannot gorge yourself. Men in your state die if they feast after starving.”

She lay down on her back beside him. “We shall talk instead. I have something I want to ask you, although not yet.” She flashed him another smile. She was as beautiful as Hathor.

“Why are you scowling?” Anat’s breasts rose and fell quickly as she breathed.

He could smell her hair, baked by many desert suns. Her eyes were steady and keen, traveler’s eyes. What wonders had she seen, what troubles had she already defeated? Kasa’s memories of Hathor slipped away. He had made no promises to her. What could there ever be between them?

“Nothing,” he answered, twisting carefully to admire his savior. “A foolish thought.”

\* \* \* \*

Anat. She filled Kasa’s mind and days. Her kind eyes drew him out so that he could speak of Nakht’s and his parents’ deaths, of his own and Tiyi’s enslavement. When he told her of the loneliness and frustration he had felt as “leader” of the farmer-thieves, Anat let him know without words that she understood.

On the third day after his fever, Anat judged Kasa strong enough to see her people. She had kept them back before, she explained, because after what he had been through at the hands of the Nubian bandits, crowds of pressing hands and faces might have been too overwhelming. “My race is a friendly one,” she said. “We like to embrace.”

So Kasa saw the rest of the caravan. The number of men, women and children surprised him: over thirty people, as many as to a small Egyptian

village. They shook his hands and stroked his hair and face and asked questions of Anat about him, gesturing and smiling. To Kasa they seemed childlike, yet their warmth and interest were engaging.

By then he had learned from Anat that she and her people were Canaanite traders, traveling down from the Red Sea to Egypt to trade. They now had the natron, spices, papyrus and cloth to continue across the desert to the land of Punt.

“A very holy place,” explained Anat. “Its people are both the most beautiful and also the ugliest that I have ever seen.” She wrinkled her nose at him, a most un-leader-like gesture, but one Kasa found increasingly endearing. “There, too, the leader is a woman, a queen.”

Next day, the caravan made ready to move. “We can delay no longer and your litter is now ready,” said Anat. “On your return from Punt, you will be a wealthy man, I promise you.”

It seemed that his future for several months had already been decided for him. In any other circumstances Kasa would have been furious, but Anat had a way of speaking which precluded argument. Part of him, too, was relieved. The matter was out of his hands, and as he was he could scarcely travel alone to Thebes or Elephantine to complete Ramose’s mission.

Whenever he thought of Tiyi, still in the High Priest’s hands, Kasa consoled himself with the thought that soon he would be rich enough to pay any price Ramose set for freeing his sister. In the meantime Tiyi was being fed and protected, two things he could not do for her at this moment.

“That is not selfish, that is sensible,” said Anat, when he spoke these thoughts to her. “From what you say, this Ramose might have withheld your sister from you even after you returned with the news he wanted. Gold from Punt will make a better appeal for her.”

She is right, thought Kasa, and any lingering doubts he might have had were buried by Anat’s answer.

“You had a question for me.” He reminded her of their first conversation.

“You are not yet ready to receive it,” said Anat mysteriously. She rose from her usual place beside his goatskin bed—there was an imprint of her body in the sand next to his sleeping place which, when he was alone, Kasa sometimes touched. “You must rest, my guest,” she said, looking down at him. “The caravan will set out before tomorrow’s dawn.”

\* \* \* \*

The worst part of traveling for Kasa was when the Canaanites lifted him in and out of the litter. Made of new sandalwood, with floor and roof, the litter itself was luxurious. He lay on goose down cushions, shaded by linen and carried by four smoothly-stepping donkeys ridden and controlled by children. The youngsters shouted to him whenever the caravan drew past a marvel which he would be sorry to miss. It was in this way Kasa began to master the rudiments of the Canaanite language.

Once traveling, Kasa saw little of Anat. As leader, she seemed to be always busy, always asking or answering questions.

“Do I need an appointment to speak to you?” asked Kasa sourly when they met again after two days. He rapped on the side of the litter. “When can I come down from this coffin?” He was growing stronger and more bored.

“Tomorrow you can walk for half a day,” promised Anat. “You shall walk with me.”

That night Kasa could scarcely sleep for excitement. He felt like a young boy again. It is only that at last I can be of some use to these people, he told himself, but he knew that was not the truth.

Stirring under his shelter which was erected and taken down each evening and morning, Kasa found new clothes had been put out for him. Blessing Anat’s foresight and generosity, he peeled off the remains of his loin cloth and tunic and wrapped himself in the fringed woolen kilt of a Canaanite warrior. A waistband and dagger accompanied the kilt, and a slim shell armlet. No need for him to raise his arms above his head and aggravate his healing ribs.

The clothes fit him well, the jewelry the first he had ever owned. Kasa tore away his bandages and rose bare-chested.

Anat must have been waiting for him somewhere close, for she appeared out of the half-light at once. “Come,” she whispered. “We must walk to the head of the caravan and be ready first.” She nodded approvingly when Kasa thanked her for his clothes. “It is very little. You are a man to dress.” She took his hand in hers. “Dawn is coming.”

All the way through the maze of tents, tent-ropes, rough animal pens and smoldering fires which made up the camp, Kasa was aware of Anat

beside him, of the small, narrow hand holding his. The double need to be touched by and touch more of this Canaanite woman hummed in his veins.

"Look before us," Anat said, pointing his gaze away from her. "You will know this place." Reluctantly, Kasa obeyed.

The first rays of the sun lit the valley of the Nile, pouring into his eyes and throwing up a world both terrifying and strangely familiar, a land Kasa had passed through in dreams. He knew at once here was a holy place, a place of the spirits. Here, somewhere, perhaps following the masses of dead souls which would come through the cracks and gullies of the brown cliffs like the moaning of the wind, were the ghosts of his parents and Nakht.

A rook, a black speck drifting on a breeze he could not hear above more steep cliffs—these whiter than bone—was Kasa's guide. His eyes followed the bird's slow, swooping flight.

"I have seen Abydos, the birthplace of Osiris and his burial-place." Never in his life had he expected to look upon this scene. It moved him with a sweet sadness, almost to tears. "Enough," he said softly, and Anat squeezed his hand.

"Now you can leave your country without grief," she said. "I know this because I traveled to the greatest shrines of my land, before I left it."

"You understand so much." Kasa lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. The scent of her skin mingled with his melancholy. Abydos was working its magic in him, even more than Kasa guessed. Out of himself, he swept the woman off her feet into his arms. "Sweet Anat, her people's leader and my savior."

"Your ribs!" cried Anat, but Kasa only laughed. Nothing could touch him in this moment.

"Let me look at you. I have not seen you properly for days." He turned with her into the light.

Today she wore a simple linen tunic, fastened over one shoulder with a narrow gold clasp and painted with blue crisscross lines and red spots. Her long, loose black hair she kept out of her way by a white headband. Her feet were bare and already sandy. Kasa nuzzled her bare shoulder. He didn't care if her nose was too long or her chin too square, Anat was beautiful. She lay still in his arms.

"It is time for me to ask my question," she said solemnly. "Set me down."

Kasa did so at once, though he could not help noticing one of his chest hairs curling between Anat's breasts and tunic top.

"Kasa." Anat made him look at her. For some reason, his heart began beating very fast.

She cleared her throat twice before she attempted to speak.

"I am leader of this caravan and may mate with no one in it. For three years, I have waited in vain for a sign, and at last the gods have sent it. You, Kasa, whom I found by their grace in the desert, you are my choice. Will you marry me? Will you give me strong, tall children?"

And now Kasa's ribs began to ache, but it was a sweet ache. He touched the top of her head, feeling the trembling within her. "If you want me, then yes," he said doubtfully, amazed how that could be possible, "Yes, I will marry you, Anat."

## Chapter 29

“Kamose, are you certain?” asked Hathor, smiling. “Ahhotpe has said nothing to me.” She tapped one of his long earrings. “Are you suggesting I play truant?”

They were sitting by the outside pool, dangling their feet in water which reflected the blue of the sky. Kamose had made them an awning of a bed sheet stretched between two bushes and had brought food and wine. Hathor wondered how it was possible that she should be so happy after being so afraid.

“Are you not going to answer?” She tickled Kamose’s stomach, delighting in teasing the youth. His mock roar did not disappoint her, nor did the rest of his reaction.

“Into the water with you!” He pitched her forward, and somehow both of them finished up in the pool. Hathor shrieked as two strong brown arms wrapped about her waist and lifted her.

“Kamose, don’t! No, no, not my wig...” Of course he didn’t submerge her and she didn’t get her new headpiece wet.

“Kiss me, old woman.” He bared his teeth. “I’m the snake of the underworld and I’ll gobble you up.” He hissed in her ear, and she laughed.

“Surely that should be gobble down?” she murmured, before their lips met. As always, their embrace left her slightly dizzy.

She felt Kamose press closer. “Shall we?” he asked.

Hathor reopened her eyes. Kamose’s shining face was so young yet so regal. His purposeful, masculine beauty had moved her from the beginning, when she had been led to his apartments by the Medjay. Then she had been angry and heartsick, not looking at him when he greeted her. Throughout the brief interview which followed, Kamose had treated her with courtesy.

\* \* \* \*

"Please be seated," he had said, giving up his own chair in the sparsely furnished chamber. He walked to the balcony and stood looking out. The river framed the back of his body in a strong, black line. "You must not be frightened. I will not bed you until you are ready."

Ahhotpe had advised Kamose to say those words, and they had the desired effect. Hathor sighed and relaxed.

"I will make you my second wife, after my sister," he continued, still watching the city below and its river. "Your Queen-name will be 'The Loving One.'"

This title was not something Ahhotpe had suggested to her brother. Rather Kamose had thought of it himself. Cruel in battle, he found himself genuinely tender towards Hathor, who carried herself well despite having a red palm-mark printed on her right cheek and being obviously stiff with fright. Impending fatherhood had softened the youth in ways unknown to anyone except his sister.

"Thank you, my lord," whispered Hathor, who felt more confused than grateful. Kamose had always kept her down. This stranger—this handsome stranger—was offering to raise her to astonishing heights of power and status.

Kamose walked in front of her chair, his hands covering hers on the chair-arms as he brought his head down to the level of hers. "Does that not please you?"

His eyes were as steady as a falcon's, but a muscle in his chest jumped, and now Hathor noticed other more human details: how his hair was as fine as a baby's, how he had newly brushed his teeth.

She nodded. "Yes, my lord." She saw him brighten, sensed him tense and hesitate. His thumbs stroked the back of her hands.

"I'm sorry, but Ahhotpe must always be first," he said in a low voice.

Rather against her will, the youthful admission and apology touched Hathor. It was true, then. All that he was offering was real.

"What is it?" asked Kamose.

He did not lean closer, but Hathor drew herself up towards him. She worked a hand free and almost touched his chest before a memory, flashing along her nerves like silk, made her flinch and stop. She said a name.

"Who is Kasa?" asked Kamose sharply. He saw her cringe and laughed,

laying his fingers against her bruised cheekbone. "I command that you forget this man, Loving One," he said softly. "I shall make you forget him."

Abruptly, he spun away from her chair and stalked back to the balcony. "For now, I take my leave of you. My servants are within call. There is wine and fruit on the table by the bed."

He bowed: a youth with the beauty of the god Horus himself. "Sweet dreams, Hathor." Leaping over the balcony wall, Kamose disappeared.

Crying out, rushing from her chair, Hathor heard him drop the two-man height to the ground below and then his running feet. He did not return until the following morning, when he presented her with a gift of flowers.

Once begun, so his strange courtship continued. He would stay with her all day, and then at night Kamose would slip away.

"Where do you sleep?" Hathor asked on the tenth night. Once nervous of the warrior-youth, she now found herself talking with him until long after sunset. Kamose hid nothing from her. She could speak to him of battles and politics and the great affairs of the Theban court, and he would not shut her out. He answered her now with the same familiar candor.

"I don't sleep much. I sneak into the women's quarters and visit Ahhotpe." He smiled. "We used to make love, but she's been sick of late with the baby growing inside her, so now we just talk. I like to speak with her at the end of each day. Ahhotpe clears my mind."

He tipped up her chin. "What is it? Tell me what I've done wrong."

"It is nothing. Let me go." Hathor jerked her head aside and tried to push past him to the door. Kamose blocked her way. "Wouldn't you like to know what I would like to do with you?" He ran his eyes slowly over her body.

Hathor held herself taut. "You wouldn't be the first. Ramose was there before you. Is that all I shall ever be to you men, a rutting tool?" She stepped back and yanked the gown over her head, throwing it into a corner. "Isn't this what you want, prince?"

"Only most of the time." He sounded amused and yet also uncertain. She was reminded of how young he was. "I like walking and dining and bathing and yes, even talking with you. Do you wish me to praise your good sense, Loving One?"

"Only if you will stay tonight," Hathor snapped.

Kamose gave her a lop-sided smile. "Can we talk, too?"



The heat between them was shimmering in the room like the torchlight, crackling as the midday sun. Hathor put out a hand and tugged him against her, their limbs molding together like the interlocking petals of a lotus. "Later," she said, and brought her lips to his.

\* \* \* \*

She was remembering, too, thought Kamose, anticipation rising like sap in his loins. He loved to hear her laugh, as openly as a young boy. Not that anyone could mistake Hathor for a youth, even though her breasts no longer gave milk. He stroked over her flanks. "Firmer than ever. You've been doing Ahhotpe's exercises."

"Of course." Hathor ground her hips against his, the pool water adding a further delicious tickling caress. "I value her advice most highly." She wagged a finger against his bare chest and said more seriously, "Speaking of Ahhotpe, I do not like the idea of deserting her this afternoon. I am fond of your sister, Kamose, and would not hurt her."

Her loyalty pleased him as another minor triumph over Ramose and the priest's Hyksos masters. "There's no question of desertion, or playing truant, as you call it." He hastened to reassure his new love by telling Hathor the full truth. "Ahhotpe will be with her grandmother all this afternoon, in one of their private family discussions. She told me to take you out somewhere."

"I see." All the laughter died out of Hathor's face.

Kamose cursed under his breath: despite Ahhotpe's lessons and prompting he was still making basic mistakes when it came to other women. He snatched Hathor back against himself and kissed her fiercely, but the mood between them had been checked.

Reluctantly, Kamose admitted defeat and drew back. "Now to the car-track," he said.

As he spoke, one obsession replaced another, lovemaking ousted by war-making. Suddenly in an eager rush to be out and doing, Kamose shot out of the water and, kneeling by the poolside, held out both hands. "Catch hold!"

Looking up from the sun-tranced water, Hathor still made no move. Kamose forced himself to slow down and be kinder. "Come, Loving One. I

cannot wait to see you standing like a queen in my chariot.” He rippled his fingers, beckoning.

“My robe is wet,” protested Hathor, but her features now held the shadow of a smile, and she took his hand.

Kamose drew her out of the water, tempted very strongly to delay his chariot lesson even more. She was a beautiful, full-bodied woman, his second-wife-to-be. He straightened the wig on her head.

“We’ll steal a new robe for you from the women’s quarters as we go down,” he said, putting pleasure aside for business. It was time to learn the tricks of the Hyksos.

\* \* \* \*

The acrobat Terre, the man whom Hathor had recognized as being more than a simple tumbler, was waiting for Kamose at the entrance to Pharaoh’s stables. The guards had not let him near the valuable horses but the small, wiry, black-bearded man did not seem concerned. He was sitting on top of a high feed bin, drumming his legs against its sides.

“Hallo, my lord, I see you have brought me another beginner.” Terre slid down from the bin and bounced a jaunty bow to Hathor. “Madam, I am pleased to see that you are well, but my lord,” the tumbler went on without a pause, “is this wise? The lady may learn more rapidly than you. Amongst my people, women riders are much sought after. Their hands are more sensitive, you understand.” He winked a twinkling blue eye.

“It’s all right,” Kamose told the bewildered guards. “This fool is with me, or we are with him. Either way you can let us through.” Concerned to be a man among men, Kamose ushered Hathor on ahead of himself and Terre.

They passed out of the shadows of the guardhouse and its adjoining workshops, quiet now through the noontime heat. Terre was talking rapidly to both, his head swiveling forward and back so rapidly that Hathor was amazed he was not dizzy.

“Your horses are the thing. They are your engines of war. You must never forget, Prince, my lady, that good horses are what makes a chariot, and the handling of them is what makes a charioteer. Coax them, tease them, above all spare their mouths and rumps, for these are your friends. In the

fields, you might see a peasant flogging his donkey. Never do that to a horse, for he is the equal of man. Look!”

He pointed to one of the open stable doors. Stamping for attention, spilling the bowl of mash, a gray mare whickered and tossed her silver mane. “Magnificent,” said Terre.

Pleased, Kamose lengthened his stride, meaning to go into the stable and bring out the mare. The acrobat touched Hathor’s arm.

“Tiyi is asking after you. She has been worried. What should I tell her?”

So he got them alone for a moment to ask that. Hathor did not know what to say. In the last three weeks, between the severing of one relationship with Ramose and the beginnings of another with Kamose, she had almost forgotten Kasa’s sister—and that, in spite of their earlier closeness.

In a rush of confusion and regret, Hathor admitted to herself that she had been unkind to the little masseuse at the banquet, the last time they had been together. That was how Tiyi would remember her.

“Let your mind be easy. Ramose has not taken her to his bed.” With disconcerting accuracy, Terre anticipated the flow of the rest of her thoughts.

Hathor brought her hand up to her mouth. “I did not mean—”

“I know.” Above the black, horrible beard of an alien, Terre’s eyes were kind. “I know too that you wish Tiyi well. Do not fear. She will be safe with me. I will guard her even from herself.”

Hathor bowed her head. “I see you understand everything, Lord,” she said, the title of respect coming easily. “Will you say to Tiyi then that I am happy?” She gave her bottom lip an anxious tug. Kamose was returning, leading the mare by her long silky mane.

“Thirteen hands high and a filly! Isn’t she amazing?” The youth urged the mare into a trot so that Hathor and Terre could admire her smooth paces.

“Have you more like this glorious creature in your stables?” Watching the horse’s moving shimmer, Terre whistled softly.

“Ninety at least.” Kamose brought the mare to a halt and scratched the pale gray star under her forelock.

“And cars to match?”

“Naturally.”

Kamose’s features lengthened and grew harder. Here, thought Hathor, was the warrior who had already sent men to their deaths. She felt afraid for

the tumbler and yet at the same time was becoming angry and confused. Terre seemed intent on drawing Kamose out, and Hathor, a northern Egyptian, did not know whether to cheer his efforts or expose Terre as a spy—and more than a spy—to the Theban Prince. Yet did she wish to be involved at all? If there was to be war between the two kingdoms.... Where did she stand? Hathor rubbed the back of her neck, feeling the beads and ornaments of the wig heavy against her skull. She wished Terre would get on with the lesson, that they would move out of this head-splitting heat.

Kamose was no fool. “How is it that an acrobat knows so much about chariots?” he asked, releasing the mare’s mane and folding his arms before his bare chest. Terre responded with a shrug.

“My people invented them, lord,” he answered guilelessly.

Kamose laughed with genuine amusement. “Oh, I like you, Hyksos, and not only because you irritated my father so much. Shall we proceed to the track?”

The acrobat gave a merry grin. “Better than that, I’ll drive us there.”

\* \* \* \*

Whatever else Terre was, he was a wonder with a chariot. Who was he really? thought Kamose, sliding his gaze from the moving car to the man standing beside him. A warrior?

Despite his mission to rid Egypt of foreigners, Kamose liked Terre. Even as he waited for flaws to appear, for a vital piece of information to fall unknowingly from Terre’s lips, Kamose kept praying to Amun that he would meet the Hyksos in battle. No one was worthy enough to kill this man but himself.

Unaware that he was being mentally measured for his tomb, Terre was bellowing encouragement and instructions. Hathor was driving the two-horse chariot by herself.

“Loose wrists, less stiff! That’s it, flow with them! Keep it there.... Hold the car now—steady!”

Horses and chariot swept round, taking the slight slope and the deep right-angled curve of the track without slowing. Terre ran forward into the stirred flies and dust, going down on one knee to check the freshly-made chariot grooves.

He shook his fist at the retreating car. "Slow down. You're too reckless!" He raised his eyes to heaven.

Quite unabashed, Hathor, who until an hour ago had never touched a horse, snapped the reins lightly against the leather wrist guards which Terre had provided for her and called to her team. Reacting to the noise, the horses plunged forward, tails whirling in excitement.

Riding straight and easy in the bucking car, proud as her immortal namesake, Hathor was arrowed towards the two men through a tunnel of golden light.

"I knew you could do it." Terre caught the lead horse for Hathor to jump down. She did so with fast little skips, darting round, kissing Kamose and the horses.

"That was marvelous...like a bird...so fast." Terre was also given a kiss. "Can we go round again?" By we, she meant the horses. Hathor was a quick learner.

Terre gave his student-charioteer an indulgent look. Oh yes, thought Kamose, you certainly have a way with people. "One final circuit, Hathor, after the Prince." Hathor beamed a blissful smile and stepped back.

Now it was his turn again. Why am I nervous? thought Kamose. I've driven one of these things over a hundred times into battle. Never, though, before so exacting an audience.

Terre missed nothing. The slightest loss of rhythm, the tiniest tug on the reins at the wrong moment and he would know. "Breathe with the horses. You'll run quicker!" the tumbler shouted.

"How will I know that?" bawled back Kamose, sweat running like blood between his fingers with the effort of holding the reins as Terre wanted him to—a new method, much lighter than the grip he had otherwise employed, but giving greater control. He completed another circuit.

"That's right. You're doing it!"

He was going faster. Exhilarated by the speed, the rushing in his ears, the thrumming of the car, the feeling of having not one spirit-force but three, Kamose sent up a roar of pure delight.

"Lash the reins round your waist!" came the next command. Kamose by then was so confident that he did exactly what Terre said, although none of the Theban drivers had ever tried to do such a thing. In Sekenenre's kingdom, the chariot was still a new wonder.

Instantly, he saw the advantages of having both hands free for weapons. The horses, he realized, were almost as sensitive to the movements of his body as to his fingers. Bearing down on Hathor and Terre he shot them with an imaginary bow and arrows, and the tumbler obligingly staggered. Showing off, Kamose brought the horses to a slow stop without touching reins or car with his hands.

"Come down." Terre drew a knife and began hacking at the frame of the chariot.

"Hey!" Kamose grabbed for the man's arm, but it was no longer there, the acrobat was viper-fast. Rolling right under the car, he surfaced at the other side of the chariot and began jabbing at the wicker front. Hathor was begging them both to stop. Bits of reed and wood flew in all directions.

"The rim's too high!" shouted Terre, fending a blow with his free arm. "Trust me. It'll be better balanced."

A few more swipes and the job was done. Flicking chippings from his hair, Terre stepped back. "Try it now."

"I want to come." Hathor picked up her long tunic and held onto her wig.

"Yes, both of you ride, why not?" The acrobat handed her up and Kamose, still frowning at the chariot's battered, splintered basket, set the horses running.

Hathor laughed. The wind they made plastered her robe against her body as revealingly as though it were wet. "Terre's right!"

"I know!" Kamose slapped the reins, urging the horses to a flat-out charge. They were moving so quickly when they completed the final turn that one wheel left the track altogether, but Kamose was lucky, the chariot did not overturn. Using all the strength of his arms, the youth was able to bring the team to an untidy, skidding halt, and he and Hathor escaped with nothing worse than a shaking.

They were still slightly dazed, giggling weakly with relief, when a new voice said coldly, "I shall require some explanation for this."

Ramose walked from the shadow of the stable buildings, his white priest-robos stained with dust. His movements were languid as he took in every detail of the scene, but his black eyes were keen and sharp. "Well? And who is going to answer me?"

\* \* \* \*

Ramose waited until he and the tumbler had returned to the High Priest of Amun's house. He strode on up to the roof, deliberately choosing the hottest part in which to stop and look across to the massive temple of Amun. He wanted the man with him to sweat a little.

"Good house," said the tumbler, who had not been inside it before now. "I should think you've been comfortable."

Ramose's fingers clenched the golden pectoral round his neck. "When Tiyi told me where you were, I did not believe her."

Terre vaulted lightly onto the roof parapet and put an arm across Ramose's broad shoulders. "Don't you think it a wonder, how quickly my little plum has learned to talk? I insist you leave her with me when we go back. You need not be concerned. I shall provide you with a masseuse to replace her."

"A kingdom is at stake, and you are concerned with the fate of a sometime mute—" Thinking of that ridiculous scene at the stables, Ramose was too angry to go on. He felt his arm being squeezed in a warm grip.

"I shall let you into a secret, old friend. That is what a kingdom is: not land, not boundaries, but people. Tiyi is my subject, as are Sekenenre and his boy, Kamose, as you are and your ex-concubine. Tell me, Ramose, is Hathor's newly-found happiness another reason why you are so aggrieved?"

Ramose's anger grew colder. "Stop riding me, 'Serre," he said under his breath. "I think you've already said and done enough." He could no longer be silent. The situation was intolerable. "We leave tonight. Couldn't you have held off from your more outlandish antics for just another day? Did you have to show Kamose how to improve his chariots, as well as how to drive them?"

Maddeningly easy, his companion grinned. "I like an equal fight." He shrugged, as though what he had to say next was of no great concern. "Kamose is very quick, you know, and he'll probably beat me in the end. But then we all have to go sometime, even Pharaohs."

Ramose put a hand up to his forehead and closed his eyes, glad that he was soon to return to Memphis and the temple of Ptah. These four weeks in Thebes had been to no purpose. He had heard no real news concerning the inundation, nor had he been able to intimidate or awe Sekenenre into even

the briefest submission.

“The inundation is going to be bad.”

Ramose sighed and opened his eyes. “How do you know that?”

Terre-Aweserre scratched his beard. “I have the same reliable sources as Hathor,” he replied. “Tomorrow, after we set sail, we must make plans. First against famine and then against war. Neither can be avoided, I fear.” Again he spread that white-toothed grin. “At least I know now that young Kamose has less than a hundred chariots. That’s a useful thought to keep in mind, don’t you think?”

Ramose did not answer.



## Chapter 30

The god of the inundation looked up from his calculations in surprise. “You wish the flood to be less? It is already going to be low.”

“I wish it to be less,” answered the blue god Amun.

As he reeled off instructions, the invisible presences of Set and the goddess Hathor frowned.

\* \* \* \*

As the first month of the inundation drew on, so its meager flood grew smaller. Fields starved of the Nile’s rich silts changed color from black to red, good earth to desert. Men tried to plough and till, but the ground was too hard and barren. What crops were planted grew stunted and died.

Grazing herds of antelope and game vanished, wild fowl migrated to other feeding places. In villages, farmers began to go about their business with improvised shields and weapons. It was a time for men like Bakht, robber-barons who would terrorize the country and steal what stores were left.

A land without water is a land without hope. Little by little, growing weaker as their food and seed corn dwindled, people began to give up. Men and women sat around in doorways, aimlessly brushing at flies. Babies who were born were no longer put to the breast but left to die.

In the towns, those who waited at the temple gates for food were turned away. Even the largest temple granaries were empty.

Children suffered worst. While their tired parents squabbled over scraps once fed to pigs, the young ones grew thin and large-bellied. When they died, their bodies were dumped in the river.

Upper Egypt suffered least. Sekenenre had prepared for a small flood, laid by many stores and traded for more. Aweserre, unsure for too long

whether to plan for a low or high inundation, had built too many flood-barriers and not enough low-water canals. The flat, open country and marshes of the delta dried up quicker than the more rugged terrain around Thebes. The Nile's seven mouths into the sea were choked by dust, until only two were open.

Even at Mazghuna, more than fifty leagues from the delta, everyone knew hunger. Gangs roamed freely in the country up to Memphis, stealing everything they could lay their hands on. It was a lawless time, as Neith, Ramose's wife, discovered.

The day of the riot had begun for Neith like any other, with a drink. She knew what her liking for *shede* was doing to her, yet what did it matter?

Hori had followed up his threat and sent to Ramose a copy of the general's letter, the one in which Ubaoner expressed his love for her and his delight that she might be carrying his child.

Ramose had stopped briefly at Mazghuna on the way up from Thebes, and Neith had been in a frenzy of dread each time she saw her husband and Hori together. Ramose had seemed genuinely pleased to see her and had left fifteen more guards for her and Mose's protection—too many, in Neith's opinion, since somehow she must feed them.

She and Ramose parted as they usually did, with cool politeness. Neith resented the time he spent at the temple of Memphis, the month-long span of duty serving in the sacred sanctuary of Ptah. Ramose had managed a full month at Mazghuna only four times in the last two years.

Yet that was all irrelevant. Hori, devious as ever, had not shown Ramose the general's letter, but had waited until her husband was well out of her reach before dispatching the letter with a runner and five of the fifteen extra guards, to make sure it reached him.

Now it was only a matter of time before her husband left the court and temples of Memphis, to which he had bolted after Thebes, and returned to Mazghuna to take their son away from her.

What would Ramose do to Mose, her one treasure, if he believed the letter and disowned him? She had moved Mose from the nursery weeks ago, after that evening when the steward—

Neith shuddered at the memory, at the thought of the man's hands on her. He had not touched her since, but she remained uneasy. Were it not for the dangers of traveling, she would have bundled herself and her son off to

another of her estates the very next day.... Poor little Mose did not understand why he had to go hungry, why the river was not rising as it always had before.

Ramose's extra guards, as she had expected, turned out to be useless. Within three weeks of her husband's departure, Hori had corrupted them. They took his orders only. Food is a powerful currency when a man is hungry.

Neith poured herself another cup: one tiny drink.... Yes, she could handle it. She must fortify herself before meeting Hori, or Bakmut, or any of the other servants. She trusted none of them. They smiled at her now, letting their insolence and contempt show in their faces. If they did any work, it was for themselves and their own comforts. She trusted no one.

Beside her in the bed with its crumpled, grubby sheets that had been left unchanged too long, Mose came awake. His child's love-lock flicked against her arm as he sat up, rubbing his eyes. "I'm hungry."

It was no more than a whisper. Both of them knew they would have to wait until evening before they were fed. That was another of Hori's tricks, to try to starve her into submission. Though he was now behaving correctly towards her, with only occasional mockery, Neith knew the steward still wanted her and her land. He was merely allowing the letter to Ramose do its work.

Absently, Neith caressed her son. Yes, they would eat today, but not yet. Yes, they were safe. What else could she say? "Up we get." She lifted him down and squinted around for his clothes. "Today you must look like a prince's son."

"Is Daddy...?"

Neith quickly shook her head. "No, dear one, not yet. We are going out." It was time, she thought, that they braved the outside world. It could not be any worse than their lives here.

The sun was high when Neith and Mose, walking hand in hand, passed through the dead garden to the riverbank. Neith had chosen that way so that no one at the palace would see them leave. After a scramble over a wall and the crossing of one field, she found a small track running along the riverbank to the village.

It was a new thing for both of them, to be walking instead of riding. Neith picked some long leaves from the tamarisks growing up to the river

and wound two hats for herself and Mose. The boy tasted his, then made a face and cried and would not wear it. Sighing, Neith walked on, holding her nose. The stench of the river, smelling as it did of rotten meat, offended her.

Farther upstream, she discovered the Nile's horrid secret. People were using it as a burial ground. Tipped into its green and red slow-moving stream, near to an ancient fording-place, were the gaunt and hollow dead, their eyes already picked by crows.

Neith trembled violently, the shock puncturing the slight feelings of well-being fostered by the wine. Mose, gods be praised, had been lagging behind and so had not seen. Blocking the scene with her body, she ran back towards him.

"Come, darling, and you shall have a ride." She swept him up onto her shoulders—Mose was light enough to do that now. His thin little fingers tore at her rough cap.

"I'm hungry, Mummy."

Neith patted his leg. "We'll be at the village, soon. I'm sure someone will give us...something." She blinked, wondering whether she should have raised Mose's hopes. Yet why else had they set out, if not to find food?

"Why is there no smoke from the houses?" Mose asked, after they had jogged along in silence between standing clouds of flies. His innocent question squeezed Neith's heart like a vice. What if the villagers were dead?

Almost as though in answer to her fear, shouts rang out. Sixty-one people—all those who were left alive in Mazghuna—had gathered at the village threshing floor. There next to a small fire they were butchering the dogs. Neith and Mose entered the village in time to watch the last dog being knifed through the throat. It gave a single agonized yip, then gurgled and slumped onto the bloody cobblestones. With a horrid sense of ceremony, several men cheered.

Neith quickly swung Mose down from her back and tried to cover his eyes. "I want some!" Mose was shouting, his face a glow of anticipation and greed. He clawed free.

"Mose!" Neith started after him. On the threshing floor an argument had already broken out between three men over shares. Even as she moved, Neith caught in the corner of her eye the glitter of a copper knife. Two men fell, one after another, both stabbed in the chest. As they lay dying, a woman smashed a water crock into her neighbor's face. Neith was too far away to

catch what the man had said to the woman. The neighbor's wife lunged at the woman's daughter, shrieking that she would beat the girl's head to a pulp. People began scattering, running.

Running riot. Neith had not understood what those two words had meant until then. Now in moments from a few squalid acts of violence rose a scene like the fall of a city. Buildings were being set alight, doors smashed in and houses looted. From behind one of the empty cow byres came the sound of scuffling, a desperate struggle.

"Mose!" A stone struck her back. Neith staggered under the impact and for a vital instant lost sight of her son. Where was he? Another boulder grazed her arm. "Why?" she screamed. On the threshing floor, the dog-meat lay forgotten and ignored.

A woman ran past, her tunic torn, her long hair on fire. Two men were rolling in the dirt, each with his hands locked on the other's throat. Behind them, someone—man or woman, Neith did not care—was worrying its teeth like a dog into the thin arm of a tiny figure.

"Murdering bastards!" With the strength of rage, Neith dragged the ragged creature back, kicking it repeatedly in the ribs until it was still.

"Mose, my son." She flew to the smaller crumpled body, tenderly lifting the hands from the wrinkled, cringing face.

It wasn't him. Neith struck the old woman in sheer frustration.

"Mummeey!" The terrified cry drifted from one of the alleyways, a street lit with the leaping prongs of flame. Heart pounding, Neith ran in the direction of the scream, pelting down the twisting path, falling once full length over a corpse and scrambling up again. At the end of the street were two more alleys—*which way, which way?* Neith whirled and twisted this way and that, shouting and sobbing.

"Mummy!" There was a crash, and then Mose smacked himself against her, clinging with a grip which she could not dislodge.. Neith wrapped him tightly in her arms and rocked them both.

The joy was not to last. At the top of the street came three men, two armed with clubs. Neith felt Mose freeze with fright, and she slapped him harder than she'd ever done before in her life. "Run, or I'll beat you!" She pushed him in front of her.

No children. In all of the riot, in all of the village, no children. Realizing this, Neith knew at once that if they were caught, the villagers would kill

Mose because he was still alive. Why should a nobleman's brat live, when their children's corpses were rotting in the river?

"My lady!" Was that voice shouting to her? And again, hoarser now, "Lady!"

A new guard, one of Ramose's Nubians, came running towards her. So not all were disloyal. Had he seen her leave and decided to follow? There was no time to ask. Neith would never know.

"Here, take this." He pressed his heavy spear into her hand. "Go." He stepped behind her, ready to face the three villagers. Neith hesitated. She knew the man would die here, and knew he knew that, too. "Can't you...?"

"No!" The Nubian pointed at her son. "Go for him." Then, with a yell which lifted the hairs on Neith's scalp, the black guard went to his death as a warrior, attacking his enemies.

Sight blurring with tears and weakness, Neith picked up her son and stumbled away.

\* \* \* \*

She remembered nothing of their return to the palace. Reliving the senseless destruction over and over in her mind—a violence she had embraced as easily as the villagers—Neith moved without thought. Slow and stiff as a laden ox cart, she passed through the main gateway to her home.

Hori, freshly washed and robed and cool in the entrance hall, stood looking out at Ramose's domain with the pride of a new owner. He was eating a piece of fruit.

\* \* \* \*

The sight of the food was too much. Raising the spear, she ran the steward through. She glimpsed Hori's startled eyes, his look of reproachful horror, and then it was done.

Open-mouthed, the man fell back without a sound. Neith gave the rest of the pomegranate to Mose.

## Chapter 31

It was the hour of midday, a holy time throughout the Two Lands. Within the inner sanctuaries of the temples of Ptah and Amun, Ramose and Sekenenre attended their gods.

Ramose, standing alone in the windowless stone cell at the center of the great temple complex of Memphis, lifted the arm-shaped censer and lit the incense he was offering to Ptah. As the costly myrrh, frankincense and other perfumes burned, their colored flames casting strange, lifelike shadows over the wooden statue of the god in his golden shrine, Ramose began to sing. His deep voice filled the dark chamber.

“Ptah! Maker of the flood, of the green crops. Dweller-in-the-Duat, hear the prayer of your king, Aweserre. Let not my people starve, Ptah. Let my people go free, Ptah, free of hunger and free of fear....” The song went on for many verses, rich in magical formulae to please the god, to make him wish to help, to make him obey Aweserre.

In Thebes, in the temple of Amun, Sekenenre was invoking exactly the same spells to his god. His voice was not as good, and he sweetened his requests with an offering of honey.

“Let all the workshops prosper, Ptah....”

“Give strength to my army, Amun....”

“Be merciful to the people, Ptah....”

“Let me vanquish the false usurper, Aweserre....”

The small gilded figures within their shrines seemed to shift slightly. At first both men thought it was a merely a trick of the lamplight, but then at Memphis and at Thebes, the statues of Ptah and Amun each raised their right arms.

In two separate chambers, hundreds of leagues apart, there was an explosion of light, a swirling, moving array of colors that were emanating from and centered on the two sacred statues.

Out of the flashing vortex in Ptah's shrine at Memphis, Ramose felt a voice. It spoke not to his ear but directly to his heart, saying his name. The priest dropped his censer and stepped forward. "Here I am, Lord." He was afraid, yet also exultant. Never before had Ptah spoken to him so directly.

*Come, look upon me more closely.*

Resisting the impulse to step over the beams of luminous color, Ramose walked into the glowing ball of light. His skin turned red and green, like the waters of a good Nile inundation. His mind was both enlivened and yet at peace.

His reaching hands touched an animal's muzzle somewhere above the head of the statue: thick hair as bristling as a pig's, a long snout which was neither that of a bird nor a dog but somehow both. The priest cried out and hastily withdrew his fingers.

*Good, you can still feel surprise. You will need that wonder of the new and of the old made new where you are going.*

Ramose sucked the tips of his fingers, they had begun to smart. "Why are you here in Ptah's sanctuary, Lord Set?"

Above the outlines of the statue, the god's ghostly head appeared to smile. *You are polite, priest. I like that. Your god too is courteous, and he has given me leave to dwell for a brief space within his own likeness.*

The lights dimmed and Ramose could see the god more clearly. Set had the body of a tall strong man, the head and tail of a beast. As the priest watched, Set's dark shape poured itself down into the confines of the shrine. The narrow, grinning animal head wiggled its long ears and then settled and melted into the calm benign features of Ptah. Only the glowing eyes showed that an immortal other than the god of Memphis now inhabited the sanctuary.

*Ugh, how does my brother bear these nasty little funeral wrappings?* After it had spoken, the statue, in the shape of the mummified Ptah, shook within its shrine. *No matter, I shall not be here long.*

"What do you wish of me, lord?" asked Ramose uneasily. As a protection, he muttered a hasty charm and touched his own golden pectoral. The lights rasped against his skin.

*Find out what I am. You mortals have been worshipping me wrongly for centuries and I am tired of it. Your forefathers knew me better - seek amongst them for your answers.*



“Lord, I shall do as you command.” Ramose crossed his arms reverently across his chest. “Yet the land is suffering famine and drought—”

*Nothing to do with me. That’s one of Amun’s tricks. Now, if you do as I bid, I may be able to bend his arm. Or I may bring you rain. I am the god of storms.*

Thunder boomed throughout the temple, its iron-winged noise shuddering the deepest foundations. When Ramose lowered his hands from his ears after the final reverberations had died away, a still small voice said to him, *Sekenenre is also going to look for me, and if he finds me first—if Sekenenre understands my nature and discovers my true role, I shall give him power over the whole of Egypt.*

In a final leaping flash, the god vanished.

\* \* \* \*

Set had been in two places at once—easy for a god. He spoke with Ramose and Sekenenre simultaneously.

Where the priest had watched Set emerge from the light, Sekenenre’s meeting with the god was in darkness. The statue of Amun, lifting its right hand, had knocked the oil lamp standing on the shrine onto the floor.

At once all the other lights went out. Sekenenre was pitched onto his knees, and a wailing din of animal cries—squeals of pigs, roars of hippos, howls of jackals—blew round the sanctuary in a mad whirl. The granite base of Amun’s shrine shivered and then cracked from top to bottom.

*Mortal, you have offended me.*

Sekenenre felt his mind being stretched like a bowstring: he yelled and tried to beat off the invisible hands.

*Mortal, you have mocked me.*

Sekenenre, clawing into the soft sand of the sanctuary’s sacred earth-mound in his agony, was horrified by this accusation. He wanted to answer that he worshipped Amun above all other gods, but the pain within him was so great that only a single shout burst from his lips. “How?”

*You speared my creatures, killed my followers. You have denied me a priest, and you speak my name with loathing. Yet I say to you that the Delta of Egypt lies within my gift, not Amun’s.*

Abruptly, like a lid being put back on a bottle, Sekenenre’s suffering

and the vile animal calls were stopped. The Pharaoh of Upper Egypt slumped full length on the floor in a hollow silence, gasping in air. He knew whom he was dealing with now. Yet why had Amun not protected him and the shrine from this abomination?

The immortal read his thoughts. *Your blue god is with his wife at her own sanctuary— do not look to him.*

Sekenenre, biting his lower lip, dragged himself upright. He would meet death on his feet, as a king should. “What do you want?”

Ah, the differences between men, thought Set, listening at the same time to Ramose’s question. “What do you wish of me?” As a god, he was bound to Aweserre through love and tied to Sekenenre by hate. To both he owed something. He saw the lines of the future mapping out from this tiny room, yet could not see exactly where they ended. No one, not even Ra, could do that. Endless beginnings: that was one of the gods’ functions. Once begun, events in the mortal plane were determined by mortals.

It was time to set the two Pharaohs against each other, like pieces on a *senet* board. *Hear me, Sekenenre. I swear by the Duat, the river of the underworld, that if you can understand my question, I will make you ruler over the kingdoms of Egypt and drive the Hyksos into the sea.*

Sekenenre stepped forward in the darkness. “Tell me!”

*What am I?*

“Power ...storm...desert...”

*Go to the most ancient sacred places. Worship me there. It may be in one of these, you will find the answer.*

Even as he spoke, Set was gone.

## Chapter 32

The city of Avaris was young. Aweserre's grandfather had laid its foundations. Aweserre's mother had rebuilt its walls and the royal house which fronted one of the Nile's seven delta channels. In the heart of the city, this redoubtable woman had begun work on the great shrine to Set. Aweserre, the third generation of Hyksos, was extending both temple and palace.

"I cannot show you the holy of holies yet, but soon you will be able to ride with me in a chariot from one end of this temple to the other," he said proudly to his companion.

Tiyi ran her fingers gently along the strong arm interlocked with hers. She had changed hands again: Bakht to Ramose, Ramose to 'Serre. And 'Serre had asked her to marry him.

"Tell me why you won't be my wife," said Aweserre.

"You must ask my brother for me," answered Tiyi patiently. "That's the custom."

"Except we don't know where he is," said Aweserre, who had alerted his entire network of men to find Kasa, so far without result. He put his thumb under her narrow chin and ran a finger along her spear-scar, exasperated yet touched by her limited piety. He himself had come from a clever, less conventional family. His father, seeing a potential threat, had murdered his own brother. This little girl might not give him bright children, but they'd be loving sons and daughters. Less messy all round.

As for the rest, ministers would help them rule. Maybe Ramose's boy, when he grew up. Aweserre smiled at the idea.

"You're laughing at me again," said Tiyi.

"Guilty as charged." Aweserre wet his finger and rubbed at the spear-scar as though it were a dirty mark. "If I had the man who'd done this to you, here now—"

A pure wave of hatred overwhelmed Aweserre. Hot, boiling and satisfying, he let it simmer in his veins, anticipating events.

"I've a surprise for you at my palace. You're good for me," he added, for no reason. Refreshed by her serenity, Aweserre waved aside an approaching priest.

Tiyi kissed him, her newly freed tongue lingering over his teeth. "My brother?" Tiyi had learned to speak as quickly and clearly as a child, yet now her voice blurred.

Aweserre mentally cursed his own stupidity. "Not quite that, my ka, but something almost as good."

Tiyi brightened again. "More offerings to the spirits of my parents?"

"Of sorts." Aweserre brushed aside her hands. "Don't caress me there, not here. It's not seemly."

"But why can't I? The gods know that people—" Without so much as a stammer, Tiyi supplied a term which Aweserre had thought unique to barracks. He blushed. So much for her being conventional.

"You continue to surprise me." He stepped back, disturbed by his own response. Suddenly, he more than Tiyi, needed what was waiting for them back at the palace.

Hate is a purer emotion to indulge in than love.

\* \* \* \*

Outside the doors of her palace, Neith sank to her knees. The man was dead, no doubt of it. "Don't touch him!" she cried to Mose, who had finished eating the pomegranate that Hori had begun. The boy skipped back a few paces from the body, curious but not frightened.

Neith glanced at the spear fixed in her hand. Her fingers were sticky with Hori's blood. She licked her dry lips.

"Mose, come here." With her son behind her, shielded by her body, Neith looked again at the steward. His chest and left side were a bloody gaping mess. She must have stabbed him many times. Strange that she could not remember doing so. "What am I?" she whispered in disbelief. *First the riot, and now this.*

Reaction arrived at last. Waves of sickness and heat. Neith threw up her breakfast wine, her body clammy and sweating. "It's all right," she told

Mose, wiping her mouth. "Everything will be well."

A woman dressed in one of Neith's gowns appeared on the threshold. The maidservant screeched and hurried down the steps, hurling herself at the dead man, knocking the steward's blue wig from his staring features as she frantically tried to revive him.

Neith could not find it in her heart to pity Bakmut. She regarded the girl's weeping and beseeching that Hori be still alive as so much noise to be stopped. Springing into action, she administered a stinging slap. "Don't be such a fool, girl. He's dead."

Bakmut scrambled up, screwing up her small, pig-bright face. "Paibes, Sinu, to me quickly! The old woman has gone mad!"

"Yes, and you're next," said Neith, waving the spear.

The threatening gesture had the desired effect. Howling, dragging her wig half over her eyes, Bakmut ran away from the house towards the garden.

"Mose, stay behind me." A fly settled on the body, and another buzzed close to her ear. Neith batted it away, her entire attention piercing the still shadows of the entrance hall. The next few moments would determine her fate and Mose's. If it came to death, she hoped her son would go to the Field of Reeds before her, that he would not have to watch his mother die.

The shadows moved. They were coming. At least they were two men she knew, not the new guards. Neith tightened her grip on Mose's skinny scrap of a hand. "Don't move or make a sound!" she hissed.

Two thin guards toiled into the sunlight without their shields. The first had a curved sword, the other a spear like hers. Throwing a single glance at each other when they saw that Neith was armed, the two men locked shoulders and moved forward.

She must make them speak to her. "You don't want to hurt me," Neith said, falling naturally into the singsong speech she used to soothe Mose when he was ill or peevish.

The taller guard waved his spear at her as she had done at Bakmut.

"I am your master's wife." Neith lifted one bare foot, showing off the gold anklet bangle. "You were a boy, Paibes, when Ramose gave me this. Do you remember how he gave you a copper armlet on the same day?"

The Nubian shrugged. Ramose's not here when it matters, his gesture implied, and Neith could not disagree with him. Lowering her foot, she

prodded the body and appealed for herself. "Bury him. His stink offends."

"Why is he dead?" It was the second Nubian who spoke, making that first vital contact.

"The steward attacked my son." The words came easily, and were they really a lie? Hori had certainly threatened Mose. "What would you have done in my place, Sinu?"

The guard said nothing.

"Paibes?" Neith shifted her gaze to keep him included, to force him to answer. They must talk to her.

"I don't see any bruises," observed Sinu, peering round Neith at her son.

"What about here?" Neith lifted her tunic. The bruise on her calf, the result of one of her many half-tipsy falls out of bed, was fading but sufficient. Neith knew she still had shapely legs.

Behind her, Mose, sensing that she was gambling for their lives, sensing too that his mother was inviting the guards to share something with her from which he was excluded and did not understand, bit down hard on his tongue. He tasted blood mingled with saliva, and tightened his face so as not to cry. He squeezed his mother's hand and a surge of love and pride passed between them.

The guards were not so sure of each other. Paibes muttered a phrase in Nubian that it might have been a prayer.

"You do believe me, don't you?" asked Neith softly, her voice adding to the already proffered invitation.

Sinu cleared his throat. The tension by this time was almost unbearable. No one seemed sure how to resolve matters.

Behind Neith, Mose began to squirm, thrusting his free hand down between his legs. He whispered urgently and Neith listened, then raised her head.

"My son needs to relieve himself. Can we not go inside?" She smiled and added the other necessary word. "Please?"

The two men would not look at each other. Neith felt her smile droop and caught it back. If dark-skinned Nubians and black Kushites had certain characteristics in common, then the one which united these guards with her husband might be a strong dislike of sulking. She smiled again, sweetly.

"I would have acted as you have done." Frowning in concentration,

Paibes spoke abruptly. He jogged the body with the butt of his spear. The flies buzzed and rose and settled again.

Sinu lowered his sword. "Should I take that?"

"Thank you." Neith held the spear stiffly out to him. When he took it, she managed not to flinch but spun round and lifted Mose up into her arms. Paibes touched her hand.

"We'll bury him."

Neith nodded, and stepping over the dead steward, climbed the four stone steps and went into her house.

As she walked through the dark, cool rooms with her son, the woman heard the distant sound of voices. They seemed to be all shouting at once. Finding Mose a pot, it was several moments before Neith realized what the shouting meant.

The villagers of Mazghuna were marching on her home.

## Chapter 33

Kamose jumped down from the charging chariot and finished off another bound, cringing captive with a variation of his own “Horus Snatch”. Spurting blood, the body crumbled to the yard floor and was dragged away by the grooms.

“Save me the head!” Kamose sheathed his sword and ran to catch the chariot. This time, the driver did not have to slow the horses for him to leap back on.

“Amun! Amun-Ra!” Seizing the reins from the driver, Kamose gave the horses their heads. The two grays completed a foam-snorting sprint along the long retaining wall of the garrison, accompanied by cheering from the ramparts. All the young noblemen of Thebes had come to watch, each eager to win a place in Kamose’s new chariot corps.

For it was Kamose who was the leader now. In a strange fit of piety, understood by no one who knew him, Sekenenre had relinquished the generalship to his son “for a higher purpose”.

To Kamose, there was no outcome better than this. He wished his father good fortune in whatever vague thing he sought and ran from the palace to the royal barracks.

In one day he inspected all the full-time infantry and at night remained in the barracks until long after moonrise, dictating letters to increasingly stiff-legged and cross-eyed scribes. Letters to South and North, the ancient enemies of Egypt: the Nubians and the blue-bearded, pale-skinned Tjemehu.

To all these, Kamose sent a warning: he would crush the Hyksos ruler, Aweserre, and they would be wisest not to interfere lest they too be destroyed.

The sun was just tinting the great river when he found his bed and tumbled into a joyous sleep.

In two hours he was up again, summoning the army’s quartermasters



and stable masters. No warrior would go short of his daily rations of beer, bread and onions under his command. When he outlined his plans, the quartermasters' eyes grew round with fear.

"But majesty, we cannot do that," an older man stammered.

Kamose fiddled with one of his earrings and yawned. "You can, and you will. The temples hold what lands they have and the produce from those lands symbolically for Pharaoh. It is time the priesthood was reminded of it. Take what men you need and go. I want every grain of barley, every ear of wheat that is in their stores."

Dismissing them, Kamose took a standing breakfast while issuing more orders. He composed another set of letters, these to men such as Bakht, Governor of the Oryx Nome, who in any civil war might be wondering which side to join. For these, Kamose sweetened his threats with the promise of great riches and power. To all, as well as the letter, he sent gifts.

The calling up of conscripts, he had decided, should wait until the last moment. Such vast numbers of raw, semi-trained troops were always a problem to feed and house and their usefulness in battle was limited. Against the modern warfare of the Hyksos, Kamose was developing an elite group of infantry and charioteers.

"Sound the battle horns for general formation, Per-hor." He addressed one of the veterans from his own border raids. Per-hor saluted sharply and disappeared outside to marshal the troops.

The gathering-together took too long, Kamose thought, and so for that day the royal barracks rang with trumpet calls and running feet. By the end, the men were almost too weary to stand straight, but they obeyed the summons much more quickly. That night, Kamose rewarded them by allowing the whores back in through the barrack gates and rewarded himself with Hathor.

"I'm taking them out into the desert tomorrow." He stroked over the woman's smooth limbs. "Do you want to come with me and watch maneuvers?"

Hathor considered the request, which she knew was a mark of the youth's continuing favor and genuine affection. It would not do for her to be seen to turn it down too quickly, although she knew Kamose would never let her drive their chariot with the whole army watching. She remembered a previous engagement.

"I'm sorry, my lord," —she called Kamose that to tease him— "Ahhotpe wants me to visit the temple of Mut with her."

Kamose raised his gray eyes to heaven. "Another sacrifice for a safe delivery?" There had been over a hundred already.

"Not this time, I think. The priestesses have some rather fine cloth in their workshops, and Ahhotpe wants to barter...."

"For more baby clothes?" interrupted Kamose. "Our child, when it comes, will be suffocated under a mountain of tunics. She'd do better finding sufficient cloth for my troops' new colors. Are all women like this when they're pregnant?"

"I think," said Hathor quietly, "that your sister is also trying to escape the women's quarters. Things have not been easy between her and Tetisheri, especially since Ahhotpe is still out of your father's favor. I think," added Hathor in an even quieter voice, "she is acting wisely."

Hathor did not say the rest: that to protect her unborn infant Ahhotpe had allowed the rumor to reach Sekenenre that the child was Zoser's. Ahhotpe, well aware of her brother's preoccupation with the coming war, knowing also that Kamose might be away on campaign for many months, was conscious that she was vulnerable. This smokescreen of women's interests was the result.

Yet it wasn't all a ruse on Ahhotpe's part. She was well along into the fifth month of her pregnancy and, like many women, had taken on a bloom. Kamose when he saw her, could hardly keep his hands off her and she, recovered from her earlier bouts of sickness, responded with a fuller, riper passion.

"My brother says I wear him out," Ahhotpe told Hathor proudly, two days after Kamose had returned from his desert maneuvers and spent both nights with her. She balanced a cup of fruit juice on her bump and folded both hands below it. "You're going to be as beautiful as he is, aren't you, my darling?" She often spoke to the baby.

"Would you like me to comb your hair?" asked Hathor. "I have put out a new robe for you. Tetisheri is meeting the wives of the local governors this afternoon and she cannot prevent you from appearing."

Once, Ahhotpe would have been full of plots for such a gathering. Now she looked momentarily startled, as though she had forgotten it. She smiled, doodling a finger over herself. "Dear Hathor. I don't know what I would do

without you.”

The praise might be meaningless, yet Hathor was warmed by it. Impulsively, she embraced the young woman sitting beside her in the lower butterfly garden, surprised by the fierce feeling of protectiveness which welled in her as she touched Ahhotpe. Why had she never felt such feeling towards her own child, the one she had killed? She was grateful that Ahhotpe had never asked.

“I can’t breathe!” The golden princess laughed and kissed her. “You mustn’t keep worrying, Hathor. You’ll get wrinkles. My grandmother’s already invited me to this afternoon’s little party. She wants to show me off: the perfect brood sow.” For an instant, Ahhotpe’s eyes flashed with some of her old fire, then she relaxed. “Besides, I want to see what teething gifts they bring for my daughter.” She pushed herself from the seat, tottering slightly and laughed again. “You can help me choose the best. I trust you.”

If Ahhotpe had her child and Kamose his war, it was from words such as these that Hathor drew her own contentment. Finally it seemed she was equal. She belonged.

\* \* \* \*

On the same afternoon that Ahhotpe charmed the governor’s wives and Kamose sweated his men in training at the royal Theban barracks, Aweserre revealed the final part of his surprise to Tiya. This, the climax in a long series of gifts to her, was where he meant to enjoy his hate and to have his revenge.

He scooped back the filmy, veil-like curtain and then the thicker hanging which shielded Pharaoh and his favored courtiers from the masses and looked down from the balcony. Most of the city of Avaris had gathered in the forecourt to witness the coming spectacle.

With a regal gesture of one hand, Aweserre acknowledged the barbarian leaders packed onto the smaller balcony alongside his own, Kushites and Canaanites whom he had summoned to his capital to remind them of their war-duties to him. Such men would do well to remember this lesson, he thought.

Aweserre gave his rare, grim frown. From his spies he knew of Kamose’s preparations and Sekenenre’s strange withdrawal from the world.

So far, no one knew why Sekenenre had done this. He himself, who had seen the man and thought he understood him, had no idea.

Perhaps Ramose would throw a new light on recent events. The priest had finished his month's duty at the temple of Ptah and was traveling down the Nile tonight to meet him. In two nights they should be drinking *shedeh* together, if all went well.

Two warm hands covered his eyes. Ah, for a moment he could forget he was Pharaoh. Aweserre let fall the curtains, the frown on his lips softening into a smile. "Tiyi." Her chuckling laughter was as soothing as running water.

"You looked!" She was not yet bold enough to stamp her foot.

Aweserre shook his head, jangling the golden cheek-pieces of his headdress. "Only Tiyi can creep up on me like an assassin." He had already instructed his guards to let her come and go as she pleased. The palace was under strict command not to tell her who he was.

In her slow way, Tiyi was beginning to suspect that he was more than a general or even the wealthiest of noblemen. She was staring now at the crowds—never before had she seen so many people—and at Aweserre's headdress, which bore no royal symbols and was in no way as large as the crown the King of Thebes had worn, and yet—

Tiyi withdrew her hands carefully from Aweserre's eyes, wondering.

"Listen, there's the fanfare." Aweserre pointed to the camp stool posted slightly behind his chair. "I remember when you told me the creed of your old village, Tiyi. 'Hit back at those who strike at you'. Well today you will."

"What do you mean?"

"Watch."

He waited until she was seated and then motioned to the guards standing just off the balcony to draw back the heaviest curtain. They would see without being seen.

Immediately in their line of sight on a raised wooden platform erected especially for the occasion stepped two score royal guards, walking in pairs. Between each pair of guards staggered a prisoner.

Aweserre spoke from behind the second curtain. At the voice of the living god, people fell silent.

"These criminals abused their office and used the power which I had given them to condemn an innocent man. Now it is they who will suffer.

Take them, my men, and cut off their noses and ears. Then slash their throats.”

As the guards withdrew with their burdens, their captives seemingly too stunned to speak, Aweserre turned on his seat to Tiyi. “They dragged your brother Kasa to the dirt quarry,” he said mildly.

Tiyi said nothing. Her lips trembled.

The next bound captive was dragged onto the platform. “This was one of the guards who beat your cousin to death,” said Aweserre. “He escaped the massacre of the other temple officers by pretending to be dead and was thrown into the river with the bodies. This time he shall not escape.”

Tiyi found her voice. “What are you going to do with him?”

“The same as he did with Nakht. Only more slowly.”

Tiyi did not protest, but her face was drawn as she watched the man being pinned down to the platform. Her dark eyes did not blink once as the men with clubs carried out their work.

Finally the shrieks and then the whimpering stopped. A hum of excitement ran round the crowds, but Aweserre held up his hand to the guards on the balcony, indicating a pause. “Does this not please you?” he asked Tiyi behind their curtain. “I have acted with justice.”

Tiyi shook her head. “Have you, my lord? I once heard my lord Ramose, my former master, say that ‘Serre was a man who could hate for years.’”

The sarcasm in her voice was something new, and Aweserre actually flinched from it. Had he imagined that because she was simple this girl would never criticize him? It seemed in his desire to please, to impress her and yes, to have his revenge, that he had made just such a mistake. And now, with the crowd’s appetite wetted, it was too late to stop the final execution.

“Tell them to get that last man up there.” He snapped at the balcony guards. The order was relayed and there was a cheer as the prisoner was heaved up onto the platform into general view and turned towards the royal balcony.

Tiyi gasped. The man was Bakht. She had not recognized the burly robber-baron from his back, so thin and ravaged he was now, but his face, with that squashed boxer’s nose, was still unmistakable. He tottered between his guards, mouth hung blankly open, eyes bulging, staring at nothing. It

seemed he could not believe what had happened to him. His hands, those fingers which had given Tiyi so much secret pleasure, were shattered and broken by torture.

The girl gave Aweserre her own tormented look. "Why is he here?" she asked, in a low, gaunt whisper. "How is he here, Great House, Ruler of the World?"

The pain in her eyes stopped Aweserre's ears. He did not hear her give him the formal titles reserved for Pharaoh. "He is here at my command. The man is a traitor, and he will die a traitor's death."

"And what is that?" whispered Tiyi.

"The executioners will hang him upside down and cut him in half with a bronze saw." Thinking of everything his spies and torturers had told him concerning Bakht, Aweserre clenched his fists. His hatred was enough for a thousand Bakhts. He would never let it go. "Those who divide their loyalties deserve to be divided themselves."

Tiyi slewed sideways on her stool, dry coughing as though she would vomit. She clapped her hands to her mouth and kept them there, and all the time the terrible retching continued.

Tell her you're doing it for her, beat a voice in Aweserre's head. Tell *her you know about Bakht's tricks with powdered anise. Tell her it's revenge.* But he could not inflict that knowledge on her, betray her last innocence.

"Don't—" He reached for her as Bakht was suspended, legs apart, head down and screaming, from a bloodstained wooden frame, but he was too late. The little masseuse hurled herself at the balcony, tearing away the final veil, and leaped into nothingness.

## Chapter 34

“Tell me of this god,” said Sekenenre. “Is the Hyksos right to call him Sutekh?”

Not expecting an answer, he nodded to the *wab* priests of Amun. Responding to this signal, two white-robed priests knelt at the foot of the life-size figure of the scribe Senmut which had been painted onto the largest cave wall and, using small copper chisels, began chipping away the man’s name at its base.

Four *wab* priests tightened Senmut’s bonds and performed similar actions on the living man.

The scribe’s shrieks were muffled by the gag in his mouth, but his tears spattered like rain onto the cedar wood boards of the make-shift torturing table. Sekenenre watched them fall without interest or remark.

Beside him the High Priest of Amun shuffled his feet, staring fixedly out of the cave mouth into the sunlight. Because of the numbers pressed into this tiny area, Pharaoh had decreed that the scribe must not be questioned with fire, or by heated bronzes. The priests must make do with simple tools and cunning.

They and Sekenenre were inside one of the many narrow caves which pitted the red hillsides above Thebes on the Western bank of the Nile. Suitably enlarged and tunneled with underground chambers, these were used by the wealthier classes to bury their dead. This cave belonged to Senmut, and the scribe had already spent many years preparing it as a tomb for himself and his family. Now Pharaoh’s agents were destroying his work.

They were not only wrecking his tomb. Without a proper resting place for his embalmed remains, Senmut could not hope to enter the afterlife. Not only that, but by obliterating the scribe’s name and features from the walls of the cave, the priests of Amun were murdering his soul as surely as their tortures would kill his body.

Sekenenre allowed the scribe to dwell within this double death for a space and then snapped his fingers. “That is enough for now. Remove his gag. Give him wine.”

He heard the man’s teeth chattering against the flask, the snorting as he drank. Senmut was the oldest scribe in Thebes, claimed by many to be the possessor of archaic wisdom. If any man might hold the secrets of the gods, it must be this one.

“Answer me this time,” said Sekenenre. “Is the Hyksos right?”

Senmut gave a violent shake of his head, then as a priest’s shadow fell across him, said breathlessly, “O Most Noble, this divinity has many names, but not Sutekh. That is a barbarian corruption.”

Sekenenre shuddered slightly at the scribe’s common accents. This entire enterprise was distasteful to him, grubbing out information on a god he despised. But Set’s two-edged promise and threat to make him or Aweserre king over the whole of Egypt was too seductive and dangerous to ignore. “Continue,” he commanded. “Give me these titles. Tell me the god’s antecedents.”

“His names, merciful lord—May it please you to be so!—are written as follows. Set or Seth, The Demon without a Head, Conqueror of the Great Green Sea, Thunderer-hillshaker. Rock-trembler, Great Roarer, Destroyer of the Disease from Asia—”

At this name, so inappropriate given the Hyksos conquest of Lower Egypt, Sekenenre began to laugh. “Things have changed since that title was written down in your texts, scribe.” He fanned away the stink of blood with his gold and turquoise flail. “Go on.”

“He is lord of the desert, and master of the land of the lotus. He baptizes Pharaoh with the god Horus.”

Sekenenre started. “Set is lord of Upper Egypt, of my country?” He had never heard of such a thing. Its implications were deeply repugnant to him.

The scribe’s frightened silence was merely irritating, and Sekenenre snapped his fingers. “Give me his parents.”

“Geb, the earth god. Nut, the sky goddess—”

Two of the elder gods, thought Sekenenre. “Is this Set creature more ancient than Amun?” he demanded, addressing the occupants of the cave at large.

None of the priests dared answer. Their eyes slid away from his. The



scribe's tongue flickered in his wrinkled mouth.

"Sweet lord, I swear...I beg you.... Set is an old god, far older than Amun."

"You're lying!" In a sudden fury at the idea, the second new piece of unwelcome information, Pharaoh snatched a knife from one of the priests and made to stab the scribe. Senmut screamed like a wounded hawk.

"Majesty." The High Priest of Amun hovered close, though not too close. Lifting from his belt the censer which he always carried, he sprinkled incense to purge the King's violent emotions. "For what purpose are you having this man tortured, Great House, if you do not believe what he tells you?"

Sekenenre stood in reflection for a moment. "You are right, of course." He leaned over Senmut and spoke.

"Look round at your house of eternity, scribe. See how it is being erased a finger-width at a time, even as your body is being destroyed, and think well before you answer. Is it true that Set murdered his brother and seduced his nephew?"

Senmut swallowed and closed his eyes. In a wavering, cracked voice, he began to recite the ancient texts, the words and letters passed down from scribe to scribe.

"Osiris the good once ruled over the Two Lands. His rule was just and all men were happy, but his younger brother Set was not. He was jealous of Osiris and wished to be Pharaoh in his place.

"By evil magic then, Set measured his brother god's body and fashioned a cedar wood chest to Osiris' exact proportions...."

"And Osiris was persuaded by a trick to climb into the chest. Set then threw the chest into the Nile, where it floated out into the Great Green Sea and was finally recovered by Osiris' wife, Isis," interrupted Sekenenre impatiently. He knew this tale already. If they were gathered here merely to hear the same old stories, then what was the point?

"I want to know about Horus and his uncle Set," he said. The priests had always been reluctant to dwell on that frank piece of cosmology.

Senmut, a man with nothing to lose, was less discreet. "When Horus, the son of Osiris, was a boy, the evil god Set desired him. The desire made Set as wild as a bull...."

Sekenenre's hard gray eyes blazed. Several of the gods of Egypt had the

spirit, nature and form of animals as an aspect of their divine nature. As a devotee of Amun, a rival god to Set, Sekenenre had learned the conventional wisdom that Set's 'beasts' were the wild pig and the hippo. He had not heard of a bull being linked with the god before now, and yet when he thought of it, Sekenenre knew it to be fitting. A bull's strength, a bull's thunderous charges and noise, a bull's stupidity. What could be more appropriate for a god of storms? One part of Set's riddle, "What am I?" seemed solved.

"Where has Set been worshipped longest?"

"Ombos," gasped the scribe. "Called in ancient times 'Golden'."

"Only half a day's journey from here," put in the high priest of Amun. "The priests of the shrine should have their own records." He and Sekenenre exchanged a knowing look.

"I wonder where the oldest texts are housed?" mused Pharaoh aloud, looking down again at the scribe.

Bewildered and in mortal agony, Senmut made one final effort to save himself. "The Pure Ones. Beautiful are the places of..." His voice melted into a hissing whisper and then his mouth sagged open.

One of the priests touched a vein in his neck. "He is dead, Majesty." The priest sounded surprised.

"Pity," said Sekenenre, "but then he was old, wasn't he? What did he mean by 'The Pure Ones'?"

The priest of Amun scratched his forehead where his shaved eyebrow had been marked by paint. "I cannot say, lord. Perhaps Senmut was speaking of the ancient burial grounds."

"Well, that is a start at least," said Sekenenre. "Now let us leave him to his tomb and return to Amun's temple. Tomorrow there will be much to do."

\* \* \* \*

It was evening before Sekenenre and his followers reached Thebes, an evening which found Ramose walking in the palace of Avaris. Traveling downriver with the current in a fast oared ship, risking even a night sailing with its attendant dangers of being capsized or running aground, he had come straight from the temple of Ptah.

If soldiers had not assured him that Aweserre was indeed inside,

Ramose would have doubted that anyone was at the palace. The court of Avaris was one of the largest, and every room should have been thronging with people. Instead a terrible quiet hung over the place as though there had been a death. Ramose strode along echoing corridors in the dark, through room after deserted room.

In the oldest part of the palace he found the remnants of a court of sorts: a few officials, four scribes, a harassed-looking chamberlain tending a sputtering brazier. Ramose recognized the chamberlain and spoke to him.

“Where is everyone?”

“He’s sent them away,” said the chamberlain, and in case Ramose should not guess who he meant, added, “Great House. They were waiting to see him, the nobles, the generals, the great ladies, but last night Aweserre drove them out. He wants to see no one.”

“What has happened? No, let it be. I’ll go and find out for myself.” Ignoring protests, the priest strolled round the guards.

Three rooms on, in a tiny chamber painted with stars, there shone a single light. Ramose, hearing voices from within the room, slowed and listened.

“I promise.” That was Aweserre.

“There must be no more.”

Was that Tiyi? thought Ramose, craning forward for a cautious look. Her voice sounded firmer than he remembered, but then he had believed that she would be mute for all her life.

“As I have said already, I promise, and if a vow will content you, then I swear it by Sutekh.”

Sitting side by side on a narrow bed, resting their backs against the wall, the Pharaoh of Lower Egypt and his masseuse stared at their interlocked fingers. Ramose caught only snatches of the quiet conversation.

“Why did you do it?”

“The screams.... I could bear it no more...my fault.”

“No, not your sin, Tiyi. Mine.”

“It’s like a dream now. But I can remember thinking when I jumped that the crowd should have my blood, too. All those deaths—terrible.”

“The government of kings, Tiyi.”

Then a sigh. “I do not believe you, ‘Serre. Even I am not so stupid as to think that what you did was any kind of justice.”

The girl really was a fool, thought Ramose, feeling a spurt of jealousy at her casual use of Aweserre's nickname. No one talked to Pharaoh in that manner.

After that, more whispering and then, "No!" and again more quickly, "No, I cannot. At night when I close my eyes, all I see is blood. All I hear is the screams of dying men. Bakht made me what I am. Perhaps to you that is no better than a whore. Sometimes I believe so myself—"

"Was that why you took me to the harlot's quarter of Thebes?"

"That was why." There was a silence as the two glanced at each other, sharing memories of which Ramose had no part. The priest became uncomfortably aware of lives going on without him.

"Yet he was kind to me, too," Tiyi went on. "Bakht was kind."

Aweserre muttered something. It seemed he was asking the girl's forgiveness—an astonishing piece of self-abasement. It was surely time to end this painful interview. The priest loudly cleared his throat.

"Ramose!" The Hyksos Pharaoh made an undignified scramble off the bed and in another instant was wrapping his arms round his old friend. Typical Aweserre, but Ramose knew that the joy had gone.

It was time to be direct. "What's going on? This court is like a grave where it should be busy. Do you not know what Kamose is doing?"

Tiyi appeared in the doorway with the lamp. She was carrying it awkwardly, for she was limping. Her right arm was fastened in a sling and her face was badly bruised. At the priest's expression she smiled.

"No, my lord, it was not 'Serre, or Great House, or whatever you wish me to call him, who used me this way. I did this to myself." Without looking at Pharaoh, she held out the light to him. "I will leave you together." She was as calm and cold as water.

"Tiyi! For pity's sake—" Forced to take the light, Aweserre thrust it at Ramose. A drop of hot oil splashed on the priest's hand and as he juggled with the lamp, masseuse and man disappeared into the shadows. Only Aweserre returned, dragging his hands distractedly through his hair.

"For the first time tonight has she spoken to me, otherwise she has been like she was before. Oh, I thought I would go mad in that silence! And now, 'It would be better if you left,' she says, 'Go'."

"In that the girl is right," said Ramose.

"What am I to do? What?"

“Be a man, my lord,” answered Ramose harshly, alarmed at how little grasp Aweserre had on essentials. Never had he seen his friend like this. It was as though the man was bewitched. “No, ‘Serre, I don’t want to know. Stop thinking with your member and start thinking with your mind. From what I have learned, we must move quickly and pray to Ptah that we are not already too late.”

Aweserre shook his head. “I can’t do anything with this quarrel between us. Don’t you understand, Ramose? I might lose her.”

“Don’t be absurd, ‘Serre. You are Pharaoh, and she’s just a slave.” Ramose grasped Aweserre’s shoulders as though he wished to shake the smaller man. “Listen, you have no time for this! You have a kingdom to protect, thousands of people! That is where your first duty lies.”

“Do you think I do not know that?” Aweserre gave a deep sigh and took in a long breath as though gathering himself. “Give me the news, then, and I will try to be King again.” He straightened and raised his head. “But it is a bitter thing, Ramose, a bitter thing.”

## Chapter 35

Finally he found her in a part of the palace which was no longer used, huddled in a corner beside a broken-down stairway. Aweserre stretched out his hand, then took it back. "Tiyi."

She raised her head from her uninjured arm and knees.

It was early morning. Ramose had been talking to him most of the night and had only just left to snatch an hour or two of rest. Aweserre, who could go without sleep for three days and nights and still be as fresh as the newly-opened lotus, gazed down into the girl's swollen face. Looking at her, he realized for the first time in his life what it was to be exhausted, drained in both body and soul. His bride to be, his love, had gone away. What lived now behind those dark, tear-blind eyes?

"What I have done to you?" He knelt on one knee, wishing and yet afraid to touch her, even more deeply ashamed as he saw how she was shaking. "Am I such a monster?" he burst out.

Tiyi rocked herself but said nothing.

"What is it?" asked Aweserre, desperate for any answer, even an accusation. He noticed that she was clutching something in her injured hand.

"Nothing. It is all nothing now. You are not the man I thought you were."

She opened her hand, and Aweserre's heart turned over within him. A ragged piece of twine dropped through her fingers onto the floor, a scrap of the cord which had linked them together through the streets of Thebes. She had kept it until now.

"I can be an acrobat again, watch me! See me, Tiyi!"

The girl tilted her head sideways. "Your dances will not be as pretty as Bakht's were on the execution grounds."

"Bakht, Bakht. Why this concern for a robber baron who murdered your parents?"

"I don't know!" Tiyi's cry of bewilderment was genuine. With the cruel insight given at times to the simple, she knew there were answers, but did not know how to find them. Still she tried. "Bakht killed my mother by accident, but you...."

"It was my pleasure to have a man tortured and put to death," snapped Aweserre. "Is that what you are saying?"

"I don't know," repeated Tiyi. "I suppose so, yes." She sat looking down at the discarded cord. "It is not Bakht I grieve for so much, but you, 'Serre. Until two days ago, I believed you were different from Sekenenre." Tiyi had found her answers.

By that comparison she had also found the surest way to wound him. Those quiet words, and the disillusionment behind them, cut Aweserre to the quick. How could he contradict Tiyi? Murdering Bakht that way—yes, it had been murder, not justice—had he been any less cruel than Sekenenre had been to Duauf, the priest whose hideous death had shocked him so much?

"I have to go with Ramose," he said. "On a journey which I do not wish to make, to a place which fills me with dread. Will you not bid me farewell?"

"Tell me what words you like and I will say them."

"Tiyi, gentle one...." He could not go on. The coldness in her features struck at him deeper than any blade. Can you not forgive me? he asked her silently, with his eyes.

Tiyi hid her face behind her bandaged arm and sling.

"Can you at least promise me that when I am gone you shall not...that you will not..." Aweserre's flesh crept at the question which he felt compelled to ask. "That you will not leave or do harm to yourself?" he finished.

He waited until he could bear waiting no longer. "By the gods, can you not understand? I must have an answer! Or how am I to know that you are safe?"

Tiyi drew in a long breath. "If I promise, will you leave?"

Aweserre set a foot upon the stairway.

"I am not one to destroy another's property," said Tiyi. "That is my vow, now go."

Her cheek was grazed and an eye half-closed. Her left arm hung limply

in its sling. That pitiful image of Tiyi Aweserre would take with him into the desert.

“Farewell.” His heart was too full for him to say more. They had not even mated yet. Tiyi had wanted to, but like a fool he had been waiting until she agreed to marry him.

Giving her the salute due to a Queen, Aweserre forced himself to walk away.

\* \* \* \*

The giant cedar wood doors at Mazghuna shuddered, splintering on their stone pivots. The villagers outside yelled, some punching their fists into the air before adding their eager weight to the ram. The trunk of the date palm, which that morning had been growing in the palace garden, crashed into the doors for a second time.

“Back to the roof!” shouted Neith above the yowling of the mob. “Quickly! Take the water and food!” Her old nurse Gemny and her son were already up there and now if the doors would hold for just a few more moments—

“Heave!” Used to working in royal labor gangs to pay off their taxes, the villagers moved as a single animal. In their hands, an improvised date palm ram was deadly.

“Heave!” Their cry was as loud as the sound of the impact. One of Neith’s people dropped a water jar and stood watching in frozen horror as the doors buckled inwards.

“Hurry!” Neith pushed the remaining servants up the stairs. The Nubian Paibes passed her with an armload of weapons. “Is that all of them?” she shouted to him.

“Yes!”

“Heave!”

One door was ripped completely from its hinges and crashed into the entrance hall. Trampling over the fallen door, through the raised dust clouds, the villagers poured in.

Neith ran up the stairs to the roof. “Now we wait,” she gasped, gathering Mose for a swift embrace before sinking down into Paibes’s shadow to catch her breath. “The villagers will be tiring as we are. It may be that after their hard work ransacking my palace they will not bother to visit the roof.”



She looked around, seeing faces more clearly than she had done for months. The enforced curtailment of her drinking was having its effect. "Everyone here?"

There was a general murmur and nodding of heads.

"Bakmut, you're bleeding. Come here and let me see." Bakmut, Neith knew, was the one servant who might defy her. The girl's reaction would show how far she was in control.

Bakmut, listless and confused, tottered across and held out her grazed forearm. Reeling from the double shock of her lover's death and the attack on the only home she had known, she was as obedient as Neith wanted her to be. Only once did she flinch.

"Ignore the sounds. You're safe here." Neith finished binding up the maid's arm as the house below them was sacked. The smell of broken perfume bottles and wood smoke drifted up the stairwell.

"There." Neith rose to her feet, starting at a sudden crash. From the room just under her feet came the sound of ripping cloth. "What do you think they are looking for?" she asked, turning to Paibes.

"Anything they can carry away," answered the Nubian guard with a shrug.

Conscious that she might be making herself a target, Neith took a cautious look over the parapet. The yard was littered with the remains of seed, dried meat and fish, lentils and beans. In their hunger, the villagers had raided the corn bins and kitchens first. A few still lingered, picking over scraps.

"Pity we had no time to move all the stores up here," remarked Sinu.

"We did what was possible," said Neith. "And although I admit I would have preferred none of this rabble be fed at my expense, it is perhaps for the best. With their bellies stretched, the villagers might return to their hovels."

As if to contradict her, a village woman ran halfway up the stairs. "Up here!" she shouted, turning back in a flash of ransacked silk. "The nobles are on the roof!"

That should make the servants and the new guards loyal, thought Neith. *Now they understand there will be no exceptions and we shall all live or die together.*

Neith reserved part of her irony for her husband, who with a typical lack of consideration was not here to share in their fate.

The village woman's shout was taken up throughout the palace, growing until it became a chant. Running footsteps drummed along the corridors. The four vines growing through the open roofed section of the great hall were being set alight.

Neith held up her arm, and thirteen guards and the youngest gardeners came forward in a line, armed with bows and quivers. "Do not strike until I give the word," she warned, as Nubians and Egyptians took up their positions side by side.

Several of the new guards glanced inquiringly at Sinu.

"Do as she bids you," said Paibes roughly. In the space of less than an hour, these two men had made themselves Neith's lieutenants. Neith was grateful for that, but she was very much aware that the rest of the guards and gardeners were uneasy at the idea of a woman in command. In countering this first assault there must be no mistakes and no losses amongst her own people.

"Paibes, get everyone else back behind the stores and shield wall." Shield wall, she thought and almost laughed aloud. Ten old shields held by three frightened cooks, two cowherds, three weeping maids and their children, her old nurse Gemny and Mose. If only Mose were not...but Neith did not bother to complete the wish.

She heard her own and then Ramose's bed being smashed to bits against a wall. I hope Bastet's safe, she thought suddenly, glancing round in the wild hope that her pet might already be up here for her usual afternoon sleep on the palace roof. There was no sign however of the little jungle cat.

In the room immediately off from the stairway there was a brief shuffling, followed by silence. Then four black shapes, shadows of figures, came gliding up the steps ahead of the men themselves.

"Wait!" Neith hissed through gritted teeth, hearing the creak of a bow. Unarmed herself, she wished she had the spear again which she had used to kill Hori.

Unaware of what awaited them on their blind side of the stair, the villagers shouted and ran forward.

"Now!" cried Neith, as three heads and backs emerged into the sunlight.

The Nubians' bows twanged. A gardener howled as his bowstring snapped against his unprotected wrist. Two villagers staggered—the other had already fallen. Neith heard the fourth man rolling down to the bottom of

the stair, dead or alive she did not know.

With an angry roar, as though it was impossible for any of their number to be dead, the villagers came pelting up the steps.

The stair, walled in on both sides, funneled what would otherwise have been overwhelming numbers. Presented with such easy targets, all jostling in a confined space, even gardeners could not miss. Within moments fifteen villagers were hit, the remaining forty tumbling over the sprawled injured and dead to regroup under cover.

“We’re breaking them!” Neith used the pause to check the position of the sun. In two hours it would be dark. If they could hold out until then they might have a chance.

Unless of course the villagers decided to mount a full attack at night.

## Chapter 36

"I'll drive," said Aweserre, checking the horses' harnesses.

"From the look of you, you'd better let me." Ramose folded the paper between his hands one more time, slipping the narrow strip into a leather wrist guard. Today he was wearing heavy sandals, a linen kilt and a dark head cloth. The journey would be long and arduous.

"What's that?" The blue eyed Hyksos Pharaoh scratched at his blue stubble and pointed.

"Nothing important," replied Ramose absently. "A letter from Hori, my steward at Mazghuna." He fingered the flattened, folded roll of papyrus in an abstracted way, folding it one final time before tucking it out of sight.

Peering across the horses' flanks, Aweserre could not see whether Ramose had broken open the seals on the letter or not. "What does Hori say?" he asked, his ready curiosity quickened.

Ramose's wave of a hand suggested a reply, but the priest would say no more. The letter, it appeared, was proof that everyone was alive and thriving at Mazghuna, and that would have to satisfy Pharaoh's curiosity.

"We should be going. Sekenenre will have wasted no time."

Aweserre sprang into the chariot beside him. "The last I heard, Sekenenre was at Ombos, threatening the priesthood of my lord Sutekh." He tugged at one of the many hanging ornaments on his car, bits of metal and glass sparkled and flashed. "The thing I still do not understand is why my father should appear to you, and in your god's house. Have I not built him temples enough?"

Ramose smiled. "That's gods for you." He unwound the reins from their hook. "But tell me this, 'Serre, do the priests of Set carry messages between each other by power of thought? I keep wondering how you always know so much."

"Carrier birds and good sense," came the crisp reply. "I know my vassal

of Upper Egypt, Sekenenre, as I know myself.” Aweserre grimaced, as though at an unpleasant recollection.

“We must hurry,” Ramose reminded him. “Time is short.” That was why they were using the roads instead of the river. Traveling upstream against the current from Avaris would take too long.

The plan was to ride hard to Heliopolis, take a ship from there to cross two mouths of the Nile and then drive the short distance with rested horses to their destination.

Muttering a charm for a safe journey, Aweserre flashed his companion a hard look. “I hope you’re right about all this.”

Ramose signaled for the other chariots to fall in behind them. “I am. Whatever answers there are, we shall find them at the end of this journey.” He set the horses going.

\* \* \* \*

They swept out of the main gateway of the palace of Avaris in a churning eight-car column. Speed was everything. The two Pharaohs, Sekenenre and Aweserre, had been pitted against each other, and the prize was Egypt and Egypt’s gods. Who would be the final victors, Sekenenre and Amun or Aweserre and Set?

“Your forefathers knew me better—seek amongst them for your answers.” Set’s words had sent Ramose on a hurried search through every temple in Memphis.

Studying the ancient texts and questioning the priests, he had discovered nothing new and had begun to doubt his abilities.

Trudging disconsolately through Memphis, he overheard a conversation between two embalmers. Such men were being kept busy by the famine and low inundation.

Ramose knew who they were from the smell of natron and spices which came with them as the embalmers padded wearily up the street. The taller man carried a wooden jackal’s head by its long painted muzzle, the mask he wore in the embalming process.

As they passed Ramose one said to the other, “When is the Opening of the Mouth to be performed for this latest batch?”

The Opening of the Mouth, Ramose recalled, was a ceremony to

reanimate the dead for the afterlife.

The second embalmer yawned. "Outside the tombs as usual, I suppose." He spat. "God of the Underworld, but my mouth tastes like the Duat. Do you fancy a beer at my house?"

"Good idea. A man gets very thirsty poking around people's insides all day. Mind you, if the job was good enough for my forefathers, it's good enough for me."

"Quite right. Those old embalmers knew a trick or two. Ever seen any of their work in the city of the dead?"

"No doubt they could teach us a few things."

"Ah, we're amateurs compared to them. They had knowledge we've lost."

"Maybe we ought to go out into the desert and study what they've left us."

"Maybe we should."

With that last thought, the two embalmers disappeared down an alleyway. Ramose was already hastening in the opposite direction.

\* \* \* \*

"Where are we going first?" asked Aweserre. He had in the end allowed Ramose to take the chariot reins. The column had paused to rest the horses and so they could talk.

It was the only time Aweserre had spoken in two hours. Since riding a speeding chariot did not usually stop him chattering, Ramose knew the Pharaoh's heart was not in their journey. Sure enough, the man's next words proved him right.

"She told me Bakht was kind to her. Kind! How can a man who treated her the way he did be kind?" Aweserre's red rimmed eyes seemed to sink deeper into their sockets. "I keep thinking of them together in his stinking hide-out, playing their tainted games." He tugged on another chariot ornament and peered up into his friend's black face. "Did you know she liked anise?"

Taken unawares by the question, Ramose almost dropped the reins. Sucking in a large mouthful of air and chariot dust, he sneezed. Aweserre clapped him on the back and kept talking. Once started, it seemed he could

not stop.

“The worst thing is that when I knew, when they told me what he’d confessed to, I felt ... not disgust. Tempted. She has shown me the darkness in my own soul.”

“Pah!” Irritated by this orgy of remorse, Ramose jerked on the reins and started the horses, running them in a gallop right off the road and straight at a dune.

“By Astarte’s tits—” The smaller man tumbled sideways to balance the bucking car. Wrenching the reins off Ramose, he gave the horses more slack, whistled and yelled at the lead and somehow dragged team and chariot back from the looming wall of sand. He brought the two blacks round smoothly onto the road.

Somewhere in these efforts, Aweserre knocked his teeth against the rim of the chariot, an accident which did not improve his temper. “Are you sun-mad? What in all the names of Ra were you doing?”

Ramose gave his rumbling chuckle. “I thought you needed a jolt.”

Aweserre’s chest swelled as though it would burst. “You had us within an ass-width of disaster!” He swatted an angry hand-signal to the rest of the column to carry on watering the horses. “What’s got into you?”

“A little touch of Hyksos mischief, ‘Serre. A very necessary device when one’s king is bent on beating his breast to a pulp over something he can’t change.”

“Humph! Don’t bother with the rest of the lesson.” Aweserre’s scowl, the hand dragging through the unruly mob of curls, was more himself. “Just tell me where we’re heading.”

“As I explained to you last night, when you were obviously not listening, The Pure Places—burial grounds, to you.”

“Refresh my memory.”

“The Pure Places hold many ancient secrets and writings.”

“My generals, when they ask me two days from now what I was doing in the desert, will naturally be delighted when I tell them that.”

“I thought this was a secret mission, ‘Serre.”

“It is, for the moment. But my generals will demand explanations for my desertion from the army which, I need not point out to you, we are in the midst of mustering.” Aweserre blew down his nose. “No, they will not be pleased.”

“They should be, for what we learn out in the desert may save your kingdom.” Ramose pointed over waves of sand and heat into the distance. Aweserre studied the priest’s distorted reflection in a piece of hanging glass.

“I’ll tell the grooms to finish with the horses,” he said abruptly. Within seconds the column was moving again.

\* \* \* \*

“What happens now?” asked Astarte-with-the-moon-in-her-hair.

The eastern goddess of love was paying another visit to the sun boat of Ra. She thought the climate good for her complexion.

The blue god Amun, casting an admiring glance at the silver-haired goddess’s shapely long legs, mumbled something about a race. He ran his hands through a thick fleece of cloud, parting it with his fingers. “Look below us. There is my Pharaoh, a true Egyptian.”

“Ah yes. Sekenenre. The king who toils like an ant. He certainly looks to be making haste.”

Astarte leaned forward, the corners of her eyes crinkling at the sight of Sekenenre and his retinue of priests running their chariots again and again at the same high dune instead of doing the sensible thing of going round it. At her high vantage point, the fifteen chariots moving with such fanatical haste from the small water course where they had hidden their ship looked bizarre, like weevils.

No one on the sun boat reproved or remarked on the goddess’s comments. Those long, shapely legs were even better when she bent over the gunwale. From the middle of the boat came a muffled exclamation as the soul of the long dead Pharaoh Unas dropped the sun god’s fan.

“Fool of a mortal,” said old Ra sharply, squirming on his throne, crossing hands over thighs.

Astarte looked round over one shoulder and smiled, but she reserved her warmest look for Amun. “He is a long way from Thebes, your Sek-en-enre. Did you send a dream to instruct him? Does this true Egyptian know where he is going?”

“Pay no attention to anything Amun says. Sekenenre’s dash into the desert is due entirely to me.” Set materialized at her elbow. He directed Astarte to look over the other side of the boat. “Here’s my man.”



Aweserre's chariot scuttled jauntily along below them.

"Why, they're going to the same place. How sweet! Will they make love to each other when they meet?"

Amun's face went almost purple at that idea.

"No?" asked the goddess, looking from Set to Amun and laughing. "But that is what interests me, lovers and loving. Your Theban Ahhotpe, now she is very good. I would like to see her and her brother...."

"The Theban Princess is great with her first child," answered the blue god primly, "and should therefore not be so inclined."

"If that were true, then she is changed indeed." Astarte winked a silver eyelash. "Perhaps it needs a follower of Set to arouse her, as my Anat is by your Kasa."

"Not my Kasa!" spluttered Amun.

"Maybe not, but still my Anat. A Canaanite woman, very devout in her attentions to me. She and Kasa worship me every day, within their house in Punt."

"They do well together then?" put in Set, partly as a means to annoy Amun, but mainly because he wished to know. Kasa was his man.

"They do very well," answered Astarte. "Kasa is a trader, rich in gold and silver. He is not the wild man he was."

Only in bed, thought Set to himself, content for the moment to allow Kasa this happiness. It could not last forever.

"So there are only these horsemen to watch." Astarte yawned and stretched her arms above her head, touching the crescent moon in her hair. "How drearysome." She glanced over the boat side again. "Who is that handsome black man?"

"Another accursed foreigner, a dung ball," said Amun darkly.

"Ramose, priest of Ptah of Memphis," answered Set, wondering if Amun would have been quite so free in speech if he had realized that the creator god of Memphis could hear them.

"Ramose, Ramose. I know that name." Astarte pinched the tip of her nose in thought. If she chose, she could turn even such a gesture into an invitation. "Isn't that his palace, the one being attacked?" She wagged a finger at a half-ruined settlement close to the river. Smoke from its burning buildings curled into a suggestive shape around her thumb. "Sekenrenre's men will pass close enough to save it."

“They will not stop,” said Set. “Not when they have the whole of Egypt to save.”

Astarte threw him a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

“It was Amun’s idea to begin with. A sacred war between his true Egyptian and my Hyksos—”

“Battles! Is that all you gods think about?”

“I’ve added another element. A few simple questions about my own past. The first Pharaoh to obtain the best answers will have the satisfaction of killing the other.”

Astarte hugged her forearms and Amun scratched his head.

“Sekenenre has learned much from my priests at Ombos, enough to convince him that the words of a dying scribe hold the key,” continued Set. “He has realized that if he breaks into a certain dead Pharaoh’s House of Eternity, then he will obtain everything he desires.” Disclaiming false modesty, the god smiled.

Astarte watched the two moving dust clouds, both converging on one point. “It is a chase, is it not? Aweserre has learned the same secret.”

“Not exactly the same secret,” answered Set.

“It will make no difference,” said Amun. “Sekenenre is winning.” He smiled on the goddess, who glanced at Set.

“Amun may be right,” said Set.

“But where are they going?” asked Astarte.

## Chapter 37

“Our final goal!” shouted Sekenenre.

To a man, drivers and priests stumbled from their chariots and prostrated themselves in the chill white sands before him. Sekenenre scarcely heard their feverish praise to his wisdom, courage and nobility. His gray eyes feasted on their first sighting of Khufu’s House of Eternity, the largest stone building in the world. Future generations would know it as the Great Pyramid of Cheops, the biggest of the three pyramids at Giza. Sekenenre had been driving since dawn to reach it.

It was the first time he had seen so much dressed stone in one place. Sekenenre fastened on his long beard-wig, the best he had, and adjusted his royal headdress. Not that he was intimidated by this triangular gleaming mass, bigger in breadth and height than his own fortress at the First Nile Cataract. No missed detail should spoil his final approach. The spirit *ba* and *ka* of Khufu should know that a king greater than himself demanded entrance to his final resting place.

Sekenenre stepped down from his chariot, flicking his flail at the gecko sunning itself by the last rays of light on the broken, uneven roof of a tomb. With a puff of dust, the lizard disappeared through a long crack in the half-buried building.

Sekenenre motioned with a hand.

“These are the houses of the dead for the courtiers, O divine one,” said the High Priest of Amun, crawling into Sekenenre’s presence on hands and knees. “I have read in ancient books that when Khufu died, many of his nobles committed suicide so that they could travel through the Field of Reeds with him. Do you wish the priests to begin searching here?”

Sekenenre gave a bark of laughter, showing his long teeth. “Are we tomb robbers grubbing for trinkets? No! It is divine knowledge we seek.”

He pointed upwards. “These are the Pure Places, the pyramids of my

ancestors. When these were built, men were closer to the gods. For a thousand years they have stood here, half-forgotten and robbed, but always with their profoundest mysteries intact. What temple can make such a claim? Think of those foolish priests of Set at Ombos!”

The High Priest of Amun, remembering other things carried out by Pharaoh’s order at Ombos, trembled. It was growing cold in the pyramid plain.

“There have been too many mischances with our sacred books, even in the temples.” Sekenenre had warmed to his theme. “Fire, flood, earthquakes, texts lost or garbled in the copying. That is what the scribe Senmut meant.”

Sekenenre threw back his head, taking in a deep breath. The dying sun lit a pair of vultures—a lucky sign—perched on top of the massive stone headdress of the man-headed sphinx. Looking at the back of the massive sculpture from where he was standing, the lion body of the sphinx, buried to the shoulders by the desert’s perpetually shifting sands, could only be imagined. “All works of man are mortal,” said Sekenenre. “Yet I know for a certainty that within the pyramid of Khufu is the final secret which will destroy Aweserre.” He closed his eyes to picture the Hyksos’s death.

The High Priest of Amun glanced at the blood-red shadows creeping towards them from the horizon.

“Yes, priest, it will soon be dark. Yet it is always dark in the center of a pyramid.” Sekenenre opened his eyes. “Tell the guards to bring torches. We must make haste to find the entrance while there is still light.”

\* \* \* \*

“Any other time than this and I would agree with you, but not now, ‘Serre,” said Ramose. “We must keep going.”

After their smooth river crossing at Heliopolis, the column had halted on a ridge, an exposed position which Aweserre disliked intensely. He took a swig from his flask, pulling a face at the hot, sour taste of flat water. “Even Sekenenre’s not mad enough to travel through strange desert country at night.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Sekenenre is precisely that mad. Listen to me!” A black fist stopped Aweserre unwinding the reins.

Ramose looming above him in a narrow chariot was bad enough.

Ramose in serious mood in a chariot seemed ten times worse. Aweserre resigned himself to his people being kept on the ridge for several more moments. "Go on."

"Sekenenre is traveling through a country which, whatever he claims, owes him no direct allegiance. If as I suspect he's only a small force of men with him, then he'll be relying on stealth and speed. As far as he's concerned, you know only about the army which Kamose is calling up and training with such energy. All your attention, he thinks, will be on that."

"I'm beginning to regret that it isn't."

"No! That would be playing into his hands." Ramose struck the wicker chariot side for emphasis. "Why do you suppose Sekenenre has relinquished the generalship of the army to his son? Because the gods are more important. And what is to stop him—with your subjects laid low with famine and sickness, and his son gathering a vast army which you must try to match—from sneaking into this country and stealing the secret from under our very noses?"

"All right, all right." Aweserre threw up his hands as though he had just been hit by an arrow. "I suppose the horses are reasonably fresh and the moon will be bright."

As though in rivalry with the rising moon, a small yet brilliant light flared in the distance and then seemed to wink out. Aweserre's stomach clenched in on itself. "What's that?"

Ramose, after his passionate plea, was as calm as milk. "It means that Sekenenre has reached the pyramid plain and is lighting torches to move among them."

Cursing, Aweserre whipped up his horses.

\* \* \* \*

The guard threw himself on his face. "I beg to inform your glory that several chariots have been sighted moving in this direction."

Sekenenre beckoned to another guard. "How long before they reach us?" The pyramids of Giza were built on part of a vast plain where, even by moonlight, men could be seen from far off.

"The Kushite scouts say one hour, Majesty."

"When they come, you will hold them off. You will do whatever is

necessary. You will not be alone.” Sekenenre put out a hand and touched one of the granite blocks of the pyramid which had so far denied them entry. “The *wab* priests of Amun will be with you.”

Seizing a burning torch from one such priest, Sekenenre turned and stalked away from the soldiers, forgetting them. An hour. He had an hour in which to discover a way into Khufu’s pyramid before the usurper’s forces overwhelmed them.

“I will win. By all that is sacred to Amun, I will win.” He broke into a run, bearing the torch aloft. “Do you hear me, Aweserre?” Sekenenre yelled, the echo ringing in his ears, “The race between us begins!”

\* \* \* \*

Aweserre was glad it was a race. No time to think, no time for fear, and Tiyi buried deep in one of the recesses of memory, finally out of mind as well as sight. A race, clear and simple, with a single end: that he understood, he could lose himself in it. Had he not done the same thing since childhood? Since that day when his father had murdered....

“Uncle Pepi,” muttered Aweserre, without realizing he had spoken. “His own brother.”

He had adored his Uncle Pepi, a long-haired bull of a man, big as Ramose but brash and loud where the priest was dignified. He had taught six-year-old Aweserre how to laugh off childhood scrapes, how to fish with a line in the Nile and how to love another human being. Aweserre’s parents, deep in affairs of state, had farmed their son out to a succession of nurses and tutors. Uncle Pepi, bursting into his nursery with the noise and brilliance of a thunderbolt, had rescued him from that crowded yet solitary life and taken Aweserre out to the royal stables.

Aweserre still remembered his first chariot ride. Now, driving the horses at full gallop over dew-shimmering sands, he dipped back into that sweet exhilaration. “Use all of your body to drive, little monkey,” Uncle Pepi had told him, pressing a big hand against his shoulder blades to keep his childish body from overbalancing in the bucking car. Aweserre missed that hand, warm and solid as a sun-baked wall, encircling and protecting him.

Even as an adult, when he could see that Pepi had been using him, the royal heir, as another tool to threaten the existing king, Aweserre begrudged

his uncle nothing. He had been an easy man to love.

He was kind to me, my Uncle Pepi, he thought.

*As Bakht had been kind to Tiya?*

“No! It’s not the same!” Aweserre burst out, but he knew that in some way it was.

“Serre?”

Ramose’s voice, but Uncle Pepi’s nickname. Aweserre had trained himself to speak lightly of his uncle’s murder, to set it aside in his heart and rarely think of it. Now memories beat about his head with iron wings, too strong to resist.

To the relentless roll of chariot wheels, time turned back and he was again seven years old.

Uncle Pepi. The King had greeted him in one of the many palace corridors, called him My Royal Brother and embraced him. Aweserre, climbing a date tree in the palace grounds, heard Pepi’s booming laugh and scrambled along an overhanging branch to peep through one of the narrow high windows. Mouth stuffed full of dates, he squashed his nose against the window frame and pulled a dreadful face.

Uncle Pepi saw him. Of that Aweserre would always be convinced. “No!” he had shouted, flinging up his hands as though to catch his nephew. Or perhaps he had been trying to evade the knife.

The King stabbed him through the heart. There was little blood. Afterwards, when Uncle Pepi had fallen, the King, the Pharaoh of Lower Egypt, sat down in the corridor, hands on knees, and waited. Sometimes he talked to Pepi, recalling their boyhood fights.

Uncle Pepi was a strong man. He had taken time to die. He spoke twice. “Tell the little monkey I love him.” Later he said it again, as though he was choking on something. Not long after, he died.

It was nightfall before the royal nurses found Aweserre, and the youngest climbed up to fetch him down from the date palm.

Aweserre’s father had never spoken of Uncle Pepi, although he spent more time with the boy. He never knew that Aweserre had seen him kill his brother. No one, not even Ramose, knew that.

From then on, Aweserre hated narrow spaces and closed-in corridors. He never visited his own royal tomb. Thoughts of entering the pyramid plain were not to be entertained, for they filled him with an unspeakable dread.

Aweserre whipped his horses to go faster still.

\* \* \* \*

Twilight. Cool skin. Smell of jasmine on hand and wrist: a forgotten perfume from the morning. An evening star shining brightly. The rustle of a snake sliding from its day-time resting place. The rattle of a scorpion dispatching its prey.

And bats. Bats that roosted in caves and other hidden places, emerging in great squeaking clouds at sunset.

His torch had burned down, but Sekenenre could not miss seeing the thousands of furry bodies and leathery wings as a massive colony of mouse-tailed bats shot in a whirling black mass from Khufu's house of eternity. More and more followed, pouring out like smoke from a seemingly smooth side of the Great Pyramid.

It was easy. The limestone facing of the pyramid had many hand-holds. With an unlit torch tucked into his waistband, Sekenenre climbed four times the height of a man and found a ledge that was invisible from ground level. Kneeling on the ledge, which turned out to be as wide as his outstretched arms, he struck a spark from his knife and lit the torch.

Bats still fluttered from the pyramid, and Sekenenre beat them off with fire.

"They are stupid when first awake," remarked the High Priest of Amun as Sekenenre stamped on his third squealing and confused victim. The priest spoke breathlessly, having just completed his climb.

"Tell the others to stay where they are for the moment," warned Sekenenre. "You hold the torch."

The bats had established their colony in what had been the original entrance to the pyramid. This had been breached by tomb robbers in the time of Khufu's son. After the tomb robbery, the entrance was supposedly sealed by a solid block of granite.

Except the granite had either never fitted properly, or had shifted in some way. Or perhaps another group of thieves had come with their metal tools and fire and patiently chipped a way through the softer limestone above. Whatever had happened, the end result was the same. A gap near the top of the granite block, foul with bat droppings, but just wide enough for a



man.

“We shall need ropes.” Sekenenre stared into the gap while he stripped off beard-wig and royal headdress.

Amun had not let him down. The way into the pyramid was open.

## Chapter 38

Great armies never moved successfully at night. Kamose was determined that his forces should do so. Each captain of chariotry, and every “Chief of Fifty”—as the commanders of each platoon of fifty infantry were known—was given a huge clay lamp which could be hoisted aloft on a pole, a beacon for men to march by. Kamose’s own chariot had three such lamps fastened to it. His triad of bobbing lights was known throughout the army as the eyes of Horus.

He had made his plans carefully and now a crack force, no conscripts as yet, were marching through the desert on Memphis.

They had a journey of less than three days to make. Kamose’s letters to the nobles and self-styled governors of the Nomes or provinces between his father’s capital and the northern city of Memphis had borne fruit. Due to their “co-operation”, he had been able to bring his armies by river from Thebes all the way up to the Twentieth Nome.

This region, called Ta-she, Land of the Lake, had been a good place to stop for a few days before what was likely to be a fierce and bloody siege. Allowing his men to make their own entertainments with local women, Kamose went on hunting trips with the governor of the Twentieth Nome. Ta-she was famed for its game.

Kamose, who could be charming when he wished, also hunted with the governor’s three sons. When it was time for him to leave, the youths insisted on going with him. Kamose allowed it.

As a further guarantee of the governor’s continued loyalty, he left two platoons behind on the lakeside. Ta-she would be their escape route if the unthinkable happened and the Memphis campaign went wrong.

Kamose had other compelling reasons for remaining on the friendliest of terms with the governor of the Twentieth Nome, and their names were Ahhotpe and Hathor. His sister had begged him to let her and Hathor take

ship with the rest of the force from Thebes.

“Why not?” said Kamose, as the three of them rested in the day’s heat inside the women’s quarter at Thebes, and Kamose played the beats of war-music on a pigskin drum. He was very pleased to grant this request, for as he observed, “Thebes is as hot at the moment as dung from a cow’s backside, and as ugly.”

Reclining on her couch, his golden sister slapped his wrist at this vulgarity. She thought the baby would hear it. Kamose smiled indulgently. “Besides, this trip will get you out of grandmother’s hair.”

“What’s left of it,” replied Ahhotpe, shaking her own long locks. She and Tetisheri had been on each other’s nerves for some time.

“Won’t this be your first long voyage?” asked Hathor, tactfully distracting the princess. Hathor frequently found herself in the role of intermediary, a position she enjoyed. Her weeks within the women’s quarters at Thebes had changed her into a skilful courtier, with the manners and accents to match.

Smoothing an oily lily perfume over Ahhotpe’s taut belly to prevent stretch-marks, Hathor chattered about what they would see on their journey. “There’s Ombos, which your father lately visited. I’ve heard it’s the place for eye paints, practically every color one can imagine.”

“I wonder what father is doing,” said Ahhotpe, examining her hair. “These ends are even more split than yours, Kamose.” She pushed at her brother with her bare foot.

Kamose grunted and moved away. It was his fear that he might go bald in later life. He strode to the door. “I need to talk to Per-hor.”

“Ahhotpe, that was unkind,” said Hathor when Kamose had gone. She took care not to look directly at the princess, knowing that if she did they would both be in fits of laughter.

Ahhotpe yawned, showing a mouth as pink as a cat’s. “I’ll make it up to him tonight. It’s you I want to talk to at the moment—and not about baby clothes.”

Seeing the gleam in Ahhotpe’s pregnancy-rounded face, those marvelously strange eyes bright with intelligence, Hathor felt a rush of affection that was also mingled with fear. Ahhotpe had not looked quite so alive, or devious, for weeks.

“What is it?” Nervous, she spilled some of her oil.

Ahhotpe ran her gaze over her companion's features, which in their way were as distinctive as her own. Hathor's long hooked nose, wide full mouth and deep brown eyes were shown off to great advantage by a thick black wig and a few cosmetics. It struck the princess that Hathor had grown more beautiful.

The princess was selfishly glad that Sekenenre was away from court. Seeing this new, confident woman, her father might very well be tempted to make Hathor his Great Wife, and Ahhotpe had no wish to become Hathor's enemy.

She stroked her friend's hand. "I've heard that there have been riots in Memphis," she said quietly. "The country there has been very badly hit by the low inundation. It could be that your priest's estates will also have been affected."

Hathor's warm eyes narrowed. "Ramose cast me off—"

"I know," said Ahhotpe. "And I do not say this to torment you, but we could help Ramose if you wish. My brother could be persuaded to send men and provisions to—where was that palace?"

"Mazghuna."

"Just so. To send men to Mazghuna to protect it. I thought that for old time's sake...."

"Would you act for old time's sake?" asked Hathor bluntly.

"Ramose would be forever in your debt," said Ahhotpe, smiling but not answering the question. "It would be a nice lever to have under him, when all of this," she gestured towards the pigskin drum that Kamose had left behind, "has died down."

"You're very sure that he will survive."

Ahhotpe rolled over on her couch, feeling the baby kick within her. "Men like Ramose have a knack of surviving. Whichever Pharaoh eventually wins, he'll hang on somehow and make his appearance in either Thebes or Avaris to congratulate the victor.

"My brother likes him," continued Ahhotpe. "Ramose should do well in his reign." It seemed she had already decided who would finally be king over the Two Lands of Egypt. If everything were down to Ahhotpe, Hathor had no doubt that she was right.

Yet to send troops and stores to Mazghuna, the place where she had been so unhappy? Hathor pictured Ramose's wife, his drunken, slatternly

Neith, lolling in luxury in her palace, eating the food and drinking the wine which she, Hathor, had provided.

“I don’t want to save him.” She was instantly ashamed of herself.

Not because of Ramose or Neith. Unaccountably, Hathor thought of Kasa, remembering the dream where she had tended his wounds. She would know if he had died, wouldn’t she? Yet why consider Kasa after so long?

Hathor sat down on the couch beside Ahhotpe. “Wait until you have seen Abydos,” she said, resuming her earlier conversation as though nothing else had passed between them. “It’s eerie.”

Kasa’s deep-set, hooded eyes....He had seen Abydos.

Hathor flinched, not knowing how she knew that. She wondered why she was so upset by his memory. It was not as if there had ever been anything between them. She should tell Ahhotpe about Kasa, laugh with her over his thick limbs and untidy hair.

“I once knew a man—” It was all on the tip of her tongue, but for some reason her throat would not work.

“Oooh,” said Ahhotpe, rubbing between her breasts. “I’m hungry. What are the cooks making today?”

“A peasant dish.” A small smile hung around Hathor’s full lips. “Lentil and garlic stew.”

\* \* \* \*

That had been twelve days ago. Since then, at odd moments, Hathor found herself thinking about Kasa.

Sailing by Abydos, she breathed a prayer for her own dead son. His ghost would be there, listening. She knew a sense of peace and valediction from the act, as though an old wound had finally been closed.

\* \* \* \*

If Hathor was distracted, Kamose did not notice. Saying goodbye to Ahhotpe had grown harder with each campaign. It was hardest of all now that she was pregnant.

“Which of us will be in the greatest danger, I wonder?” mused his sister aloud. “You in your campaign or me in my confinement?” She laughed.

“Oh, you need not be afraid for me yet, brother. My time will not come for three months.”

The length of a siege, thought Kamose. “I wish we could change places,” he said, not knowing how else he could help. “Perhaps we should not have—”

“Regret nothing,” said his older sister. She drew her arms, as far as her bulk permitted, about his broad shoulders.

They stood a moment, leaning their heads together. Neither said anything about the other dying, although that fear was in the room with them, clinging to fingertips and mouths like a sticky perfume.

All at once they were kissing—nothing more, just kisses, but with all the passion of full lovemaking, holding nothing back.

How can I leave her? thought Kamose, hiding his face in the flowing sun of her hair. Ahhotpe touched one of his earrings.

“You must win your war, as you always do, and come back to me.” She started to laugh. “Look at us! We can’t even hold each other properly!”

“I’m proud of you,” said Kamose.

“I’m proud of you, too.”

\* \* \* \*

So they made their goodbyes. Leaving Ahhotpe and Hathor to enjoy the hospitality of the governor of the Twentieth Nome and the general comforts of Ta-she, Kamose set out for Memphis.

Soon, as commander in chief, he had a thousand calls upon his attention and time. He was so tired that once he almost fell asleep in the officers’ mess tent and only a sudden trumpet blast saved him from an inglorious slump into his dinner.

Yet for all the discomforts—the leather-tasting rations, the bugs, the racket, the endless headache over how to get the horses on and off the ships—it was a marvelous life. Kamose loved every hectic moment of it.

He thrived on cruelty and challenge, hence the overnight march through the desert. It had never been done before, not with a full war host. On the first night there were many deaths from scorpions and snakes being trodden on in the dark, but then men learned to avoid the loose stones and outcrops of rock where such creatures usually hid.

Marching at night, sleeping in the day, meant that it was always cold on the move and always unbearably hot when at rest. During the day the horses sweated under makeshift awnings that could be put up and taken down quickly. The men had to devise their own shade. Kamose slept under his chariot and drank his daily water ration in the evening before the next night's march. Even so he was constantly thirsty.

His subordinates, promising great gifts to the gods if they managed to reach Memphis alive, dared not suggest that Kamose's tactics might be wrong. They were in strange territory now, unknown even to such raiding veterans as Per-hor, and marching by the familiar stars was some comfort. In some ways easier too, for the stars were not changed by shifting sand or lost in featureless landscapes.

On the third night Kamose saw a strange red glow on the horizon. "Memphis," he said with satisfaction, as his officers broke into applause and the soldiers into ragged cheering.

But Kamose was mistaken.

## Chapter 39

They were too far away and too many to have been made by the villagers. “What do you think?” Neith whispered to the tall Paibes.

“Those are army campfires. See the way they are arranged in rows?” Deep in thought, Paibes scratched his bushy eyebrows, one after the other, with his spear. “Two war hosts, I would say, at a rough guess. A thousand men.”

Neith lowered herself below the parapet as another jet of flame burst up from the courtyard. It was a cold night, but she and her people were in no danger of freezing, not with the villagers burning every door and window frame in the palace. Had she been in the villagers’ place, she would have stolen the wood for her own house. But the villagers were stupid.

Neith closed her eyes, recalling the events of the afternoon. Several times the villagers had made exactly the same assault, running up the narrow stairway with their stones and clubs, always so surprised when they were shot.

Her people had done well. The new guards and gardeners had even managed to retrieve a few arrows from the dead when the bulk of the mob withdrew.

“They’re barricading us up here,” said Paibes, listening to a fresh burst of shouts and crashes. “Perhaps they mean to starve us out.”

“Or keep us safe for tomorrow morning,” replied Neith dryly.

Now that the immediate danger was past, she switched her mind to her son and the other children, hungry, bewildered and frightened.

They should have a feast. “It’s no more than you deserve,” she told the five children, smiling on their mothers and the cooks and the two old herdsmen. “Let’s see what we’ve got, shall we?”

Using her cloak as a cloth, she spread the food before them.

Ten triangular loaves, six of them unbaked—in the attack, the pastry



cook had seized what he could. A roll of dried meat. A handful of figs. Two jugs of oil. Two basins of dates, snatched in a rush from a low table in the great hall. Five large water jars carried by the gardeners, who had done well today.

And, wonder of wonders, a fruit cake made with goose eggs.

"It was lying in the middle of the kitchen yard," explained the meat cook shyly. "So I took it."

Neith called to the guards and gardeners to come and eat.

"What about a watchman?" Paibes asked.

"Don't bother," answered Neith. "The villagers won't."

They sat down with the setting sun and stared in awe at their riches.

"Eat everything. Drink everything," said Neith.

"Might as well die with full stomachs," remarked a gardener, reaching for a loaf.

"We're not going to die," answered Neith sharply. "We're breaking out of the palace before tomorrow's dawn and crossing the river to Helwan." She had a small estate there, groves of fruit trees where they could shelter and hunt game, a spring of fresh water. "Two days' walk and we reach it."

"How are we going to get out of here?" asked Paibes, after a long period in which in no one had spoken.

Between swallowed mouthfuls, making sure that Mose ate slowly so that he would not to be sick and waste his feast, Neith told them.

\* \* \* \*

The feast, as Neith had intended, lasted well into darkness. Her people, satisfied in their hunger and thirst for the first time in weeks, had bedded down cheerfully on the roof and were soon asleep. Only she and Paibes were wakeful.

"Strange, how the simplest pleasure can bring such comfort," she said. "Our danger has not lessened and yet they sleep."

"As you intended," said the Nubian.

Neith smiled. In spite of her plans they could be dead tomorrow. Tonight was for confidences and truth. She sat quietly a moment, gathering her thoughts, looking up at the stars.

"A hundred times I have walked round you, Paibes, passed you and

never seen more than a Nubian guard. Only today, it seems, have I known you.”

Paibes inclined his head. “It is the same for me. I respect you now.”

“I respect myself.” It was true. She was free of jealousies, full of confidence and strength. Even Hori’s malicious letter to her husband did not trouble her. She knew now she could win Ramose again, and keep him.

“When these riots and famines are over, I shall go on pilgrimage to the birthplace of Osiris.” Neith felt reborn, full of fertile shoots like the green god. She and Ramose must start another child, she decided. She looked down at Mose, asleep with his thin legs jammed into the crook of her arm, and tickled one of his feet. “What would you like to do, Paibes?”

“I’ve never been in a position to consider that question.”

Neith laughed. “Honest. Well, would you like to be my new House Steward? I promise not to murder you.”

She saw his face only dimly, by the light of the villagers’ campfires, but could still spot his forehead creasing in thought. His features took on a ruddy glow that was more than modesty.

“What’s happening?” Neith turned towards the parapet.

That was when she saw the other fires: six, seven, eight at a time, all blooming in the desert.

\* \* \* \*

Staring at the thousand spikes of flame, red against the darkness as pricks of blood against skin, Neith knew that everything had changed.

It was frustrating, but now their fates depended on the enemy war host camped on that long ridge behind the palace. Neith knew that whoever’s army it was, it had nothing to do with Aweserre or her husband. Both those men would have sent messengers, even put in an appearance themselves.

Was it Bakht perhaps, marching to reclaim his gifts? Replete after food, Neith found that notion amusing. Upon reflection she did not think it likely that here was the Governor of the Oryx Nome come to call.

“Curse them.” The commander would have seen the light from the villagers’ fires. “I wonder if the villagers know yet that they are also trapped?” she said to Paibes.

“They’ll know tomorrow,” answered the Nubian.

\* \* \* \*

Kamose was furious. The glow on the horizon which he assumed was the city of Memphis turned out to be a single house—admittedly a palace—that was being alternately lived in and burned by looters.

“My scouts report that the family who owns the house are trapped by the looters on the roof,” said Per-hor, aware of Kamose’s anger and standing rigidly to attention. “Do you want them? They might be useful hostages. There’s nothing else left of value.”

“Waste of time!” Kamose felt a fool, and worse, felt that the army would think him a fool as well. “Forget it,” he said roughly, leaping into his chariot. “Sound the signal to break camp. We’ll carry on tonight until we reach the real Memphis.”

\* \* \* \*

The villagers, hearing the army move before they saw it, panicked and broke ranks. They streamed across the courtyard like flying geese across the sky, each villager scrambling for a hiding place within the walls and gutted chambers of the palace.

“Fools!” bawled Neith from the roof, as every entrance was deserted and left unguarded. “Cowards!”

She sensed the moonlight striking on her back. Already it was so brilliant that the cooling air rose in great visible waves from the earth. Out in the desert, a herd of oryx, starting at something which she could not see, shimmered and broke up like flowing silver water before disappearing in kicking plumes of dust.

The army was also raising dust from the East. Neith listened to the steady rumble of their war machines, yet knew no fear, only satisfaction. “You’re all going to die!” she yelled down into the empty courtyard.

“Lady,” warned Paibes, “you are making yourself a target.”

I shall make no farewells, thought Neith, as her people looked expectantly towards her. The only person I wish to say goodbye to is not here. She caught hold of her son and swung him round in the way that he liked. When he was giddy she let him down.

“Again!” shouted Mose, holding up his arms.

Neith whirled him about. When the soldiers break onto the roof, I shall jump down with Mose, she thought. She noticed that he had a smudge mark on his cheek.

Feet pounded below them. Hands tore at the barricade of broken storage jars, smashed columns, stones. “Let us up there with you! Help us!”

Neith settled Mose against her hip and walked to the top of the stairway. A few frightened faces, white by moonlight, appeared. When they saw her, the villagers began shouting again. “Let me in!”

Neith carefully wiped Mose’s face. “If they come further than that third step, shoot them,” she commanded Paibes. She would not speak to the villagers. A noblewoman did not converse with peasants.

A single despairing howl came up from the ante-room followed by angry grunts and growls.

“It sounds as though we have a troop of wild pigs down there, doesn’t it?” remarked Neith to Bakmut, wiping Mose’s face a second time. She carried her son with her to the parapet. Mose had never seen an army.

“Look for the pretty banners.” She pointed to where the standard-bearers would appear over the ridge. “Look for the donkeys, Mari,” she told the cook’s little girl. The cook was sobbing, whispering something about not being able to bake all the bread.

Behind Neith a gardener’s bow twanged, and a villager fell dead.

“So many men.” Paibes came to stand alongside his mistress as a hundred trumpets sounded. The army was not yet in clear sight.

“Yes, Steward, so many.” Neith licked her thumb and wiped Mose’s cheek, thinking of Bastet, her cat.

The army archers would be in range now, if they were marching in daylight instead of moonlight. Two bowstrings hummed, and two more villagers collapsed on the stairway. Bakmut whispered in Neith’s ear, “Sinu says there are no more arrows.”

“Tell them to use spears,” whispered Neith, wondering why they should bother trying to stave off the inevitable. She licked her thumb again.

“Don’t, Mummy,” protested Mose, squirming in her arms.

Solidifying out of the rippling shadows was a single chariot, a dozen yards ahead of the rest.

On the stairway, Sinu speared a village woman.

The chariot raced closer, right up to the entrance of the palace courtyard. There was only one man in it. He raised his fist, and behind him a thousand marching feet halted.

Within the palace, sensing without seeing that here was the moment of decision, the villagers froze and were still.

Bakmut wept in the silence.

The charioteer looked up and his gaze met Neith's.

Neith saw a broad-shouldered, hawk-faced youth, with moon-filled eyes as sharp as a kestrel's.

Kamose saw a woman clutching a skinny child, a woman who had once been pretty but who now was fat and middle-aged. He would have been surprised to learn that she was Ramose's wife.

Seeing each other without recognition, the two stared a moment longer and then Kamose pointed north with his clenched fist. The army wheeled on its right flank.

He was leaving them. Neith watched unbelievably as column after column of warriors passed within striking distance of the palace and just kept on going, marching into the desert they had come from.

Two chariot corps passed by like a mirage.

"You can't do this!" raged Neith, cheated of the death she had worked herself up for. "Have you no shame? Will you leave us to be murdered by peasants?"

Kamose blew the old woman a kiss and returned to his army.

Neith heard his laughter as the chariot went bowling away.

## Chapter 40

Moonlight flashed on Kamose's hair as he drove away from Mazghuna. In another part of the western desert, Ramose rode, brooding, in Aweserre's war-car.

My wife will be in her bed, he thought. Neith had been good in bed and yet it seemed to him now that he had never truly appreciated her skill. Perhaps if he had not always divided his time between so many obligations, sacrificing Neith to the demands of his god, his temple, his king.... He sighed.

"What's that?" bawled Aweserre.

"Nothing!" It was not surprising if they were irritable with each other. He and Aweserre and their small force had been traveling non-stop.

Aweserre drove as though nothing existed for him but his two black horses and the gray and yellow sands. He drives as though he were possessed, thought Ramose. A curse on that limping masseuse. Considering Tiyi, Ramose snorted in disgust. It would be just like 'Serre if he asked the girl to marry him.

"What?" Aweserre's face, trapped between the cheek-pieces of his helmet, looked as maddened as a charging animal's.

Ramose reminded himself that even as Pharaoh this man could not possibly read his thoughts.

"Careful!" he shouted, as the chariot lurched into the absolute black shadow cast by the Great Pyramid. They had watched Khufu's House of Eternity for so long, glimpsing the torches of Sekenenre's men moving along the dark bulk of the pyramid, that Ramose at one point despaired of their ever reaching it. All at once it seemed, they had arrived.

Aweserre's car tipped and skidded to avoid a jutting piece of rock. "Sutekh!" he screamed, wrapping the reins about his waist and drawing his long sword.

A Theban archer who had waited too long to be sure of his moonlit targets had his bow cut in half and his belly ripped open in one single stroke.

Two chariots charged them—the Kushite scouting party which had first spotted Aweserre's column and had since remained at the Great Pyramid. Ramose heard a confusion of shouts, saw the wide eyes of the oncoming, snorting horses as a separate, recognizable image, before the two cars closed on the Hyksos chariot. After that there was only screaming slaughter.

Death rode beside him and his name was Aweserre. He killed with the brutal efficiency of any predator, going for the weakest. A Kushite's head bounced onto the wicker floor of their chariot, and Aweserre speared it with his sword and smashed it into the face of an enemy's lead horse. A moving shadow to their left became a mouth with white teeth bared in agony.

In another instant the annihilation was complete. Two pairs of driverless horses lurched off in the direction of the river. Aweserre flicked an eyeball off the tip of his sword and cut down a fleeing Theban guard. "Any more?" he shouted.

"No more, my lord!" came the reply from the darkness.

All the Theban guards' torches had been extinguished, but a tiny winking flame shone out from one side of the pyramid, very faint as though it came from deep within.

"You were right," said Aweserre in an awed voice, pointing his long sword towards the slender light. "How did you know it would be this pyramid, Ramose?"

Ramose laughed softly. "It's the biggest." He knew how that answer would irritate his friend. "Start with the largest and work down, I thought."

Aweserre tore off the leather from round his middle, thrusting the reins at Ramose. "Take the horses and the other drivers out of range. Sekenenre must have done the same—"

"Sore about something, 'Serre?" asked Ramose mildly.

"No, I'm not! Except you're no fighting man...." Aweserre, catching movement above them, broke off. "Priests!" he cried, seeing a flash of white robes. He looked at Ramose in horror. "I can't possibly kill priests."

"But I can," said Ramose, drawing the long dagger from his belt. "Face it, Aweserre, you're going to have me with you." He quirked a painted eyebrow. "Besides, would you be able to interpret whatever's up there?"

\* \* \* \*

Leaving the drivers to carry out Aweserre's command about the horses, the rest of the force gathered at the base of the pyramid. Each man, including the king, had a bag of tools with him: hammers, chisels, torches.

Strapping their weapons onto their backs they scrambled up the pyramid to its entrance.

The priests of Amun, meanwhile, had not been idle. Stones the size of a man's head, throwing-sticks, even dust and bat droppings were all missiles in their hands. And Aweserre would not crouch with any of his men under a shield, but insisted on climbing alone, first into the teeth of danger.

Perhaps his god protects him, thought Ramose, as another rock landed so close to Aweserre's head that the impact blew a cloud of powdered limestone into the Hyksos' long, shaggy hair. He himself, less agile, was struck twice, once badly on the right shoulder by a throwing-stick. But by then Aweserre had reached the same ledge where Sekenenre had discovered the way into this massive tomb.

Sweating from the climb, Ramose hauled himself over the rim of the ledge. Aweserre had two priests of Amun backed against the granite blocking stone.

"See, I did not have to kill them after all!" he exclaimed, giving Ramose the broadest of grins. "Yet they will not tell me how many more of their kind are inside this manmade mountain." Playfully he twanged the flat of his sword against the two priests' middles. "Perhaps you can use your priestly wiles to find out, eh, Ramose?"

Ramose rubbed at his aching shoulder, unimpressed by the suggestion. "However many they are, it is of no consequence," he answered. "If the size of this block is anything to go by, then the passages will be narrow. It will be one to one in there." He pointed to the priests as the first of Aweserre's men climbed up beside him. "Tie these men up and gag them," he commanded briskly. "If they give you trouble, throw them off the pyramid. If their god Amun is as great as they claim, he will save them."

"It will be as you say, Lord," answered the guard, putting on a fierce expression to cover his own pious fear.

"We should light the torches," said Aweserre suddenly. He shook his own rough tool-bag, which he carried by a strip of cloth over one shoulder.



Ramose stopped him.

“No, we should wait until we are inside. It may be that we shall be able to follow Sekenenre’s lights.”

Ramose saw Aweserre shudder and recalled that his friend did not care for airless, shut-in places: a legacy perhaps of his Hyksos past, when his people had lived in the open eastern deserts, outside Egypt.

“Let me go first.” He made a joke. “I’ll blend into the blackness more easily.”

“No, I must do it.” Measuring the height of the granite block, Aweserre jumped for the gap between it and the limestone casing of the pyramid. On his first attempt he failed, and the bound priests of Amun laughed.

“Sutekh!” Aweserre tried again. This time he found a handhold near the top of the block. After that he was as nimble as a snake.

Ramose watched his legs disappearing into the gap. He turned briefly to the guard who would remain outside, reminding the man to gag the priests. Then, after a brief prayer to Ptah, Ramose found the same handhold as Aweserre and pulled himself into the darkness.

The granite block was as wide as a man is high, and the space between it and the crushing weight of the pyramid above no greater than the width of a man’s shoulders. Too tall to go on hands and knees, Ramose was forced to crawl on his belly, an undignified means of entrance. Worse yet, the granite block was smothered in bat manure.

Expecting darkness, he was nevertheless unprepared for how total a state that could be. He could not see even so far as his hands. Small squeaks and flutterings sounded in piercing echoes from all sides as he moved. Aweserre had been right. They would never be able to follow Sekenenre’s light. They needed their own torches.

Ahead Ramose could hear a man struggling for breath. A change in air, mustiness and cold flooding into his nostrils, warned him that he had reached the other end of the granite block.

How he descended he was not certain, being in too great a hurry to notice. Somewhere close, the Pharaoh of Lower Egypt was sobbing.

“Serre, ‘Serreerre.” Groping blindly, Ramose cracked his shaven head on the low ceiling before resorting again to crawling. He found his man sprawled full length in the narrow passageway leading down into the heart of the pyramid.

“‘Serre.’” Rolling him over, Ramose wrapped his arms about his friend and jerked him into a sitting position. “This won’t do.”

“Stop exactly where you are!” he shouted to the men following on behind. Aweserre was not trembling, but his limbs kept starting, as though in revulsion against touching some loathsome creature. Ramose held him tight for a moment, letting him know he was not alone. “It will be better when we have light.”

“I found a torch,” said Aweserre dully. “It’s back there, beside the blocking stone. Maybe Sekenenre left it for one of his priests.”

“Right, we’ll relieve him of it. Just stay here while I leave you to fetch it. I won’t be long.” Ramose clasped his friend’s shoulders and then let him go.

He found the torch and, following Aweserre’s harsh breathing, was quickly back. “Hold it while I light it,” he commanded. He was relieved when Aweserre’s sinewy fingers closed over his and took the torch from him.

The resin coating crackled and leapt into flames, and the priest looked eagerly about. He and Aweserre sat in a sloping passage some three feet square, built from huge blocks of stone. Cautiously, Ramose traced his fingers along one wall.

“Such workmanship,” he whispered, amazed. “Each of these must weigh as much as a hippo, and yet they are fitted together with the exactness of a fold of paper. I cannot even get my thumbnail between one stone block and its neighbor.”

“However nicely these walls are made, there’s no room to swing a sword.”

Belatedly, Ramose glanced at his companion. “How are you?”

“I’ve been better.” Aweserre looked as red and raddled as a woman laboring in childbirth. Blinking sweat from his eyes, he ran a hand through his lank and tangled hair and tried a smile. It didn’t hold. “Sekenenre’s ahead of us, somewhere. Let’s get on.”

He wanted to finish in the pyramid quickly, whereas Ramose would have liked to linger. Old things interested the priest.

Giving way to the demands of the moment, Ramose called back to the guards to light their torches and to keep following. “Do you want to stay here, ‘Serre?’”

“Alone?”

“Give me the torch then. I’ll go first.”

This time Aweserre did not object.

Taking the light, Ramose started from a squatting position. He had crawled enough. Shuffling his feet forward, the priest began the long descent into the pyramid proper.

Behind him, tobogganing on his backside, was Aweserre.

“We should count the number of steps we take,” said Ramose after a while, frowning as he heard the guard behind Aweserre scraping the point of his spear along the low roof. “Stop that!” he ordered roughly, disliking such mindless desecration.

Swallowing loudly, Aweserre started to count as though his life depended on it. Once, he said the same number several times, but Ramose did not trouble to correct him. Keeping ‘Serre occupied kept Pharaoh from losing his mind in this dark, shut-in world.

Every man has a weakness, thought Ramose. Licking his dry lips, he remembered the last time he had been underground, inside his own tomb. That was where he had captured Kasa. Of course he would never see Kasa again. “No loss to me,” he said under his breath.

Breathing was becoming more difficult with the increasing cold as they penetrated deeper into the pyramid. The torches burned sluggishly, casting almost as much soot as light along the sides of the passageway.

Aweserre’s counting grew more frantic.

Ramose counted the years he and Neith had been married. Seven. She was twenty-seven now. He had known her youth and young womanhood. He remembered her young.

The priest lifted his own torch slightly, in silent salute.

His action threw more light forward and showed that they had come to a place where they must choose which way to continue, for a second corridor branched off from the first. This passageway, smaller even than the one they were in, seemed to rise steeply into the heart of the pyramid.

“Ah, god.” Aweserre could see the width of the second passageway.

“We could go on to the end of this first corridor,” said Ramose. “Although I do not think we shall find anything of significance down there.” He pointed into the darkness ahead.

“Why not?” asked Aweserre, who wanted to go anywhere but into that

second passageway.

“Intuition,” replied Ramose, dark eyes gleaming. He thrust his head and shoulders into the second passageway and shone the torch. “King Khufu, whose pyramid and tomb this is,” he went on, without withdrawing his head from the passage’s narrow opening, “would wish to be buried at its heart.”

“Yes!”

The jubilant voice rang out above them, followed by a mighty pounding. It sounded as though a hundred men were all marching upon the same spot.

Not caring if Aweserre or any of the guards followed or not, Ramose vanished into the second passageway.

\* \* \* \*

I’m going to be sick, thought Aweserre. Sweat ran down his fingers, and he slithered and almost fell.

The second passageway ran upwards at a steeper angle than the first passageway ran down. The slippery paving stones had grooves cut into them, yet even with these footholds it was a very tough climb.

And all the while that they climbed, the pounding somewhere above their heads continued relentlessly.

Up ahead, climbing one-handed, Ramose seemed to have a rhythm going. He moved smoothly, surprisingly easily for a man of his size in such a narrow space, black muscles glistening in the torchlight.

He’s enjoying himself, thought Aweserre, taking in another gulp of clammy air. He was jealous of the priest’s urgency. He felt only fear.

“Amazing,” breathed Ramose suddenly. “Truly amazing.”

Pausing, as though in wonder, and then going forward again, the priest shot out of the end of the passage. Torchlight flickered eerily on the roof of the passageway as Ramose apparently straightened.

“Give me light!” bawled Aweserre, clinging desperately to one of the grooves cut into the steep and slimy paving.

A black arm, slipping towards him like a shadow, caught him by the scruff of the neck and lifted him out. He was set carefully on his feet, as though he were some squalling toddler. Deeply humiliated, Aweserre forgot about being sick.

“Look at this, ‘Serre.” Ignoring the sounds of hammering that drifted

and echoed through the pyramid like the sound of an angry sea, Ramose lifted the torch.

Aweserre sucked in a long breath and stared. They had entered a huge hall, the like of which he had never seen before and doubted that he ever would again. As long as one of the smaller wings of his own palace at Avaris, with a central passage broader than a man's outstretched arms and a superbly executed corbelled roof, the whole room was a marvel.

One by one, his men climbed out of the narrow passageway and straightened. They kept on raising their heads, tilting astonished faces farther and farther back. No one spoke.

Perhaps this is what it feels like to be born, thought Aweserre. First the darkness, the cramping walls of the mother's vagina and then release and space. Here too, the arching stones of the corbelled roof seemed to hold them in a loose embrace, no longer suffocating.

Lifted out of his fear in a rush, Aweserre began to run up the smooth rise of the chamber. It was not the space which drew him but the lights which emerged from the narrow corridor at the far end of the long hall.

The two Pharaohs, Aweserre and Sekenenre, were about to meet each other face to face.

## Chapter 41

By the second night after Aweserre's departure from Avaris, Tiyi decided that she had been a great fool. Her impressionable, pliant nature made her feel things deeply for a short space of time: too deeply, perhaps.

Bakht had been cruelly put to death before her eyes. She had not known that such tortures were possible. It had made her angry.

Anger was a strange emotion to Tiyi, one she had only lately learned to recognize in herself. To be angry a person must have a sense of his or her own worth. To be able to express anger, that person must also have an audience.

For much of Tiyi's life she had been overlooked. "She's so good, so quiet, we barely know she's there," Tiyi's mother had said in praise of her daughter. And because her parents loved her, and their home was so often in tumult with Kasa's brooding rages, Tiyi had made even greater efforts to be obedient and silent.

Not without cost. With any expression of frustration denied her, first as a mute and later as a slave, Tiyi's anger turned into self-loathing. It had been her pleasure to hurt herself, to allow others the same liberty. Bakht, Setna the thief who raped her, Ramose who treated her as no more than a useful tool: she never blamed them. Does the drum blame the drummer?

'Serre was different. With him she felt like a real person. Armed with that feeling and her new freedom of speech, Tiyi made a stunning discovery. She could rant and rave in her own way as much as her brother Kasa.

Tiyi was only young. The luxury had gone to her head. She had accused 'Serre of many things, the worst that he was as cruel as Sekenenre. She had been glad to see him go.

That first day alone in the palace of Avaris she nursed her righteousness. She walked in the gardens and the beautiful rooms as proudly as a queen, and the servants bowed down to her. They brought her wine in a silver cup

and food on decorated plate. When she sat in the gardens, a sunshade was brought for her head. When she retired indoors, a blind harpist crouched in the corner of her chamber, making cool rippling notes sound throughout the palace.

She wandered where she liked—no place was barred to her. Sometimes in the high-gabled rooms she saw courtiers and generals. They bowed to her.

‘Serre must have told the servants and the courtiers and the generals to do this. They parted on a quarrel, yet he had still taken the trouble to inform the cooks of her favorite foods. No detail of her care escaped him.

And all the while he had been afraid. “I have to go with Ramose on a journey which I do not wish to make, to a place which fills me with dread. Will you not bid me farewell?” ‘Serre had said those words to her. She remembered his bright eyes, dark with fear.

Why was he afraid? Where had he gone?

By a man’s house you may know him. Aweserre’s palace of Avaris was full of light. As Tiyi’s half-closed eye healed, the light seemed to grow stronger still.

On her second morning alone, as she drifted through another of the rooms, Tiyi discovered a life-sized fresco of Aweserre. The painting was opposite a door leading into the water garden. Sunlight had already begun to fade its brilliant colors.

Tiyi removed her arm from its sling and traced the chin of the painting with her fingers. Tied to convention, the artist had drawn ‘Serre in profile and given him a brown eye.

She was wearing blue eye paint. It was easy to transfer blue onto brown. The picture looked quite different when she had finished, somehow more approachable. Tiyi stood on tiptoe—the artist had made Aweserre taller than he was in life—and whispered into Pharaoh’s ear, “I forgive you.”

\* \* \* \*

Outside the chamber, unknown to Tiyi, Aweserre’s chamberlain stood watching. He and the others at the palace were well aware of Tiyi’s firm hold over Aweserre’s affections, despite the fact that these two had quarreled. Once the girl decided to make it up, the chamberlain had no doubt that Pharaoh would be more than willing to comply.

For himself, the chamberlain liked Tiyi. She was young, pretty, grateful for any service rendered, unaware of politics and no possible threat to his own position. If Aweserre wanted this smiling girl as his queen instead of some meddling foreign princess who would make his, the chamberlain's, life a misery, then he wholeheartedly approved. He gave Tiyi a moment longer to complete whatever game she was playing and then entered the chamber. "My lady."

Light-footed as a lynx, the girl jumped back from the fresco. "Oh, you startled me!" She put her hand up to her mouth as though she should not have spoken.

Her skin looks as dark as rose petals, and as soft, thought the chamberlain. But her hair.... Thick, black and impossible to braid, Tiyi's hair was as much a disaster by Egyptian standards of beauty as Aweserre's springy curls. Glancing at Tiyi's hair, the chamberlain recollected himself. "My lady, a Canaanite trader from Punt has arrived. Do you wish to see him?"

Why not? thought Tiyi, and then was struck by doubt. Despite serving within Bakht's and Ramose's homes, she was unsure of court etiquette. What if her behavior disgraced Aweserre in any way? She looked up into the chamberlain's kindly face. "Will you be there?"

"If you wish me to remain, my lady."

"Please," answered Tiyi, adding quickly. "Can you help me? I don't want to do anything stupid."

The Chamberlain bowed. "I shall certainly do my best to ensure your audience is a success," he replied, hiding a smile.

The man was as good as his word. He brought her to a small audience chamber, where she felt, if not comfortable, then at least not terrified. Inside the room were a long table and two seats.

"You sit on the chair at one side of the table, your guest sits on the stool at the other," said the Chamberlain. "I will stand behind your chair and anything you don't understand, whisper to me." The Chamberlain's smile was his best feature. "Are you ready?"

Tiyi seated herself on the chair, glad that the bulk of the long table between herself and the stranger would hide her a little. She smoothed out her tunic and nodded.

The Chamberlain did not move away at once. "Do you wish wine and



food to be brought in to you?”

“Whatever you think best,” said Tiyi hastily. “Whatever is usually done.”

“When Great House meets traders, after the prostrations, bread and salt are served as a gesture of friendship at the beginning of the audience. Wine is brought in at its end to toast new fellowships.”

“Then I will do the same.” Tiyi hoped she sounded confident. She watched the Chamberlain leave and leaned back in her seat, feeling slightly sick. ‘Serre held audiences like these every day. Why couldn’t he be here with her? I’m frightened, thought Tiyi. All she could think of were blue eyes and a haunted face. Suppose this trader had news concerning Aweserre, bad news? She mustn’t cry....

Footsteps drawing nearer, voices in the corridor outside. A man saying, “Is there no one else in this pile of mud brick who will talk to me? What I have to say is important.”

Tiyi clapped both hands to her ears. She must have misheard.

The trader was still protesting. It seemed that he and the chamberlain had stopped just outside the door to the audience chamber. “Those men we passed with swords at their belts, aren’t they generals? I’d be better talking to them.”

The door burst open and a tall, bearded Canaanite stalked into the room, a full three paces ahead of palace Chamberlain or guard. Legs trembling, heart hammering within her breast, Tiyi pushed back her chair and walked slowly around the length of the table. She wanted the trader to have a good look at her. At the last moment her will broke and she stopped, hardly daring to believe it. “Brother?”

The wild-looking man, with his jutting beard, fringed woolen kilt and hairy sheepskin cloak, lurched forward. Close up, he smelt of an unpleasant mixture of rancid milk and strange spices. His deep-set eyes narrowed as he stared down into Tiyi’s face.

“Say my name!” he commanded, ignoring the others in the room. His voice, like the rest of him, was fierce and threatening. “Speak!”

He was real. Realizing that wonder, Tiyi knew that everything else in her life could also be made right. Holding up a hand to the chamberlain and the guards, she touched the trader’s face. “You have not changed so much, Kasa,” she said, flicking the tips of her fingers against his cheek. “And I am

still your sister, Tiyi.”

In another instant, they fell into each other’s arms.

\* \* \* \*

Kasa poured himself another cup of wine and drank half without tasting it. For an hour he had been watching and listening. It had been one of the strangest hours of his life.

He had come to Avaris not to seek his sister but to find a king. He had promised Anat that he would do so.

Anat. It still hurt to think of her. She had given him everything, made him what he was. In the end they’d only had three months together.

“I have been a great fool,” said Tiyi.

Kasa blinked and drained his cup. “This man from whom you say you parted on bad terms, what is he?” he asked abruptly, skidding the empty goblet across the table between them.

“‘Serre. He’s an acrobat.” Tiyi caught the sliding goblet and placed it next to her own. “He wants to marry me.”

Her smile was full of secrets. Reunited with her again, so unexpectedly, Kasa was astonished at how greatly Tiyi had altered. The sister he remembered had been a timid, clinging child, prone to fits of weeping and desperate shows of affection. The girl in the light blue gown seated opposite him at this great cedar wood table was confident, poised, smiling.

And her voice! With her own tongue, Tiyi told how she had been taken to Thebes—one of the places Kasa had tried to reach but failed—how in the city of Amun she had obtained the means of speech. She told of the Medjay, of the palace of Sekenenre, of Sekenenre and Kamose and golden Ahhotpe. And, woven through it all, two shining threads in her narrative: the kindness of the woman Hathor and the friendship of the man ‘Serre. Their names recurred again and again in Tiyi’s account.

“And Hathor is with Kamose now?” asked Kasa.

Tiyi nodded. On the second occasion that Kasa asked exactly the same question, she took his hand between hers and clasped it.

There was much human understanding and comfort in her simple gesture. Kasa marveled again at Tiyi’s serenity. Had it always been there and he too angry to notice?

“How is it with you, Kasa?” Tiyi asked him.

“I am well enough. I have become a trader in spices.” He did not want to tell his story yet, for fear of breaking down in its middle or end. “You speak like our mother, Tiyi. With her voice.”

“Perhaps that is her last gift to me.”

Looking away from her brother for the first time since their meeting, Tiyi beckoned to the chamberlain standing by the door. “Bring torches, please,” she instructed the man. If she was nervous of commanding so grand an official, she gave no sign.

“Why does he obey you?” asked Kasa when the chamberlain had gone.

“That’s easy,” answered Tiyi, returning the smile of the guard who had remained in the chamber with them. “Ramose gave me to the Pharaoh of Lower Egypt as his personal servant. I have the ear of the king.”

Kasa could scarcely take it in. “You appear to move in very high circles these days, Tiyi.” He swept a weather-beaten hand across the table top. “Can you say then when your master is likely to return? None of the palace people seem able or willing to tell me.”

“That is because they do not know. And nor do I.” She took a deep drink from her cup. “What happened to the others?”

Kasa was a moment before he understood. “You mean Teta and Setna and the rest? They all died in the desert.” He stared at one of the rings Anat had given him, twisting it round on his finger. “I did try to get to Elephantine for your sake, you know,” he muttered. “I kept my promise.” Yet he had not come to Avaris for Tiyi....

“I know.” His mother’s voice, Tiyi’s voice, understanding everything. It made him feel old, yet at the same time young.

“Oh, Kasa, what’s that? Let me see.” Tiyi had noticed the tattoo on his left wrist. Reluctantly Kasa drew back his sleeve and extended his arm. He allowed his sister’s fingers to trace the squat, colorful figure printed forever onto his skin.

“This is the goddess Anat,” he said. I am Anat, named for a goddess, she had told him, the woman who had become his life. Kasa bunched his hands into fists. The memory of Anat’s steady light brown eyes, her honest, sensible face, blurred and dissolved.

Tiyi said nothing as her brother covered his face with his hands and wept.

"Forgive me," whispered Kasa. "There was a Canaanite woman I met in my travels. She saved my life in the eastern desert. I lived with her for a time in Punt. Now I cannot forget her."

"So, go back to her." Tiyi ran her fingers through his hair. It suited him long. "You look like a Canaanite yourself. The beard makes you handsome."

"I cannot go back." Kasa shivered and then, despising his weakness, straightened his shoulders and firmly wiped his face. "I made a vow to come here, to Avaris. Even in Punt, we heard of the coming war between the Two Lands of Egypt. It may be that I can help your Pharaoh."

"My Pharaoh." Tiyi smiled. She wore eye paint and lip coloring, Kasa noticed, wondering why he had not seen these details earlier. The Tiyi he remembered had never worn cosmetics and had dressed in mud-colored tunics drab even by poor men's standards.

"How can you help? Why should you want to?" Tiyi asked him now, breaking into his reverie.

"It is payment of a debt." A quiver passed like a shadow across Kasa's strong features. "I should say no more, except to Pharaoh himself, or to his generals." He lifted Tiyi's hand and sniffed it. "The perfume you are wearing is too strong," he said, disapproving.

Tiyi giggled. "This is a scent 'Serre uses. I've borrowed it from him."

"Ah, the 'Serre who wants to marry you. Tell me about him. What does he look like?"

Tiyi shook her head. "You must see him for yourself," she said mysteriously.

"Will I like him, do you think?"

"I hope so."

She sounded so anxious that Kasa smiled. "When shall I meet this man?" he asked, returning Tiyi's hand to her with a brief kiss.

"When Great House returns to Avaris." Tiyi bit her bottom lip with her teeth. "Kasa, there is something you must know. The acrobat is the king. 'Serre is Pharaoh."

## Chapter 42

The bobbing torches were coming closer. Aweserre ran his fingers over his shoulder straps, undoing two. There was enough room in this chamber to swing a sword.

Aweserre drew his long blade and ran forward again.

Five priests of Amun stepped into the great chamber of the pyramid, shining their torches into his face. Dazzled, the Hyksos Pharaoh stumbled back, blinking and shaking his head in a desperate effort to clear it as priests gave way for the slim figure behind them.

“We meet at last,” said Sekenenre, and attacked.

His sword sparked against the wall where Aweserre had been. Another ringing blow sliced into the smoke of the torches.

“Kill! Kill!” chanted the priests of Amun, waving their torches. No one could help or hinder in this conflict. It was between the two kings.

A blade jabbed for Aweserre’s eyes, for his guts. Parrying furiously—this man was fast—the Hyksos slipped. He rolled to one side, striking the wall as the sword came down again.

“Fight me, you coward!” screamed Sekenenre. “Come at me and die the death you deserve!”

“Sutekh!” Enraged, Aweserre surged to his feet. His sword point, probing for Sekenenre’s heart, found Sekenenre’s cloak. Within seconds both were hopelessly intertwined. Aweserre had no choice but to go for the man instead of the sword.

He leaped forward, catching Sekenenre’s sword arm. Breathing harshly, the two men struggled together, wrestling in the limited space afforded by the long, high roofed gallery. Finally, closer than a woman and her mirror, their eyes met. Face to face at last in mortal combat, the Egyptian and Hyksos Pharaohs stared at each other.

Sekenenre’s gray eyes widened. “You!” He laughed and his grip

tightened. "You've taken your last tumble, you and your stinking god."

Something flashed in his sword hand and Aweserre was knocked into darkness.

\* \* \* \*

"Don't try to move. You've been badly hurt. I thought Sekenenre had finished you in there."

"Ramose?"

"Who else? Sekenenre and his minions are long gone. Our own men are all dead. We couldn't stop him. "Serre, he fought like a madman, like a caged lion. Or like a man inspired by his god."

"Why can't I open my eyes?"

"It's blood, "Serre. Your eyelids are caked with it."

Slowly, feeling was coming back to Aweserre. His body ached, his head was splitting. Lights flashed inside his temples and his ears boomed.

"Here, drink." A flask was put to his lips. Wetness ran down his chin and then he remembered how to swallow.

"What did he hit me with?" Aweserre croaked when the flask was withdrawn. "It wasn't his sword. There was something else in his fist, red like a jewel but as hard as stone."

"My guess is that he struck you with a piece of red granite taken from Khufu's stone sarcophagus." Very gently, using the rest of the water, Ramose began to clean the wound on Aweserre's forehead.

Aweserre thought he could hear bird song. He sensed the tips of his fingers resting not on smooth paving stone but on dust. A breeze seemed to be eddying round his feet. "Where are we?"

"Outside the pyramid on the ledge. It's almost dawn."

"How did I come here?"

Aweserre sensed Ramose smile. "I carried you. I set you on my shoulder and lifted you back down the passageways. Where the roof narrowed I dragged you." The priest sounded amused, making light of what he had done. "Getting you past the blocking stone was the worst of it. We're both covered in bat dung."

And that was all he would say on the matter. Yet what feats of strength, endurance, and agility had Ramose shown to bring them both out of the

tangled womb of the pyramid? Few men could have done it and no other man but Ramose would be so calm after.

Aweserre groped for his friend's hands and shook them tightly. "I know there is no need for me to say this, but thank you. If there is anything in my power to grant...."

"Try to open your eyes for me, 'Serre."

Aweserre blinked and then focused. He was propped with his back against the blocking stone: two blocking stones. Ramose was dabbing at his forehead: two Ramoses.

"Listen, now that you're fully awake you had better hear the rest." The two Ramoses were speaking at once. Aweserre, knowing it to be important, forced himself to ignore his throbbing head and concentrate on what his friend was saying.

"Sekenenre's priests have wrecked the royal burial chambers. They defaced the walls and burned countless precious scrolls of papyrus. They smashed the lid of Khufu's sarcophagus into pieces, taking some of the granite with them and scattering the rest."

"Why?" whispered Aweserre. "To deface a king's tomb, that's the worst sacrilege."

"I think we must assume that Sekenenre discovered whatever he was looking for in Khufu's house of eternity. That being so, he didn't want us to find it as well. Quite possibly, the lid of the stone sarcophagus held some inscription to Set that was the key—otherwise why did they smash it? I fear we came too late."

The Hyksos Pharaoh heard himself saying that a lot seemed to have happened while he was unconscious.

The two Ramoses looked at him somberly. "Even as you fell, Sekenenre attacked me. He would have killed me too, except one of your guards took the sword thrust. After that it was all fighting. I don't remember much."

"You're hurt!" Aweserre's clearing vision allowed him to see the mat of blood on Ramose's upper arm.

"It's nothing much, only a scratch that looks worse than it is. Sekenenre and his men were in a hurry to leave, so they didn't check to see if the fallen were still breathing."

The priest sighed. "I found the rest of their destruction later, when they had gone. They left a torch burning in the burial chamber: Sekenenre's last

little joke at our expense.”

“So what happens now?”

“Now, ‘Serre, we must earnestly hope that our drivers and chariots have avoided Sekenenre and his men and that before too long they will come looking for us.”

Ramose settled with his back to the blocking stone beside Aweserre. “Wake me when they arrive.” He closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

“Behold the defeated.” Round face glowing, Amun waved towards Set, standing in the prow of the sun boat.

“Your men have lost this race,” he called out. “You must fulfill your word and make Sekenenre king over the Two Lands.”

“Your Pharaoh must worship me first,” answered Set mildly. “That was also part of the bargain.”

“Oh, he will,” said Amun, “and in your own temple at Memphis. Or have you not noticed how his son Kamose has brought the Theban army up to the walls of the White City and even at this moment is receiving the nobles of Memphis who will throw open the city gates for him?”

“So Memphis falls without a struggle,” said the goddess Hathor under her breath. She shot a glance at Ptah, god of Memphis and husband to her own incarnation as the lion goddess Sekhmet. The god spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

Amun had observed their silent exchange. “If you desire bloodletting, golden one, I suggest you take a look at Mazghuna.” He smirked and pointed over the gunwale of the boat. “The mortal woman Neith is quite as fiery as yourself and will give good sport for another day at least.”

“Ramose is going to Mazghuna,” said Astarte.

The Egyptian gods, on the point of beginning another argument, checked their breaths at her quiet remark and stared.

“This fighting bores me,” the silver goddess went on, “and fate has come between my Kasa and Anat.” Settling herself beside Ra, she took one of his hands in hers. “I sent Ramose a presentiment, urging him to go to Mazghuna, to his wife. Have I done wrong?”

Ra beamed and patted her hand. “Of course not, my dear. Although you



must bear in mind that your powers here will be more limited than if you were in your own country. You may not get what you desire.”

“I understand,” said Astarte, meekly bowing her head.

“Any other presentiments we should know about?” asked Set. “What about you, Amun?”

“I may have prompted Sekenenre to go straight to Memphis and meet with his son,” answered the blue god smugly.

“Kamose won’t necessarily be pleased with that development.”

Amun refused to be ruffled. “Say what you like, Set, the fact remains that my man has won over yours. My worship will prevail in Egypt.”

Set said nothing, and he did not smile.

## Chapter 43

Ramose knew he was not dreaming, but the same scene hovered constantly before his eyes. His wife and son in a burning building, surrounded by fire. He watched their mouths opening in silent screams. It was the sun affecting his mind. It was the exertions of last night. It was—

“No!” The priest cried and drew rein. Beside him in the chariot Aweserre swayed and fell against him.

“What?” Pharaoh sank on his knees to the floor of the carriage, obviously unaware of where he was.

Ramose brought the horses to a dead stop and signaled to the other chariots. When the head driver came alongside, the priest shouted, “Take Pharaoh back to Avaris! Here—the royal crook and flail. Get to the river and commandeer a ship. The downstream currents will carry you swiftly.”

“But where are you going, lord?” protested the charioteer.

“To my home—finally.” Ramose wound the reins round their peg and clambered down awkwardly from the chariot. After a night in the pyramid he felt as stiff as old leather. “You’d better change places with me.” ‘Serre would never forgive him for taking his car and horses.

“Lord, Great House is sick—”

“He will recover more quickly in Avaris,” said Ramose firmly.

There was no one else. Only he, Aweserre and seven charioteers had survived the night. Their guards had been killed, either within the pyramid or outside it. Sekenenre would have murdered the drivers, too, if he had found them. Fortunately he had not. Ramose and Aweserre had been picked up.

That descent from the pyramid with Aweserre cradled in his arms had been one of the hardest things that Ramose had ever done in his life. Its steep sides had few footholds and many loose patches of limestone and dust, where to slip would mean a skidding fall to almost certain injury.

Sometimes the priest had been forced to clamber down backwards, using hands as well as feet, with 'Serre clinging on his back. Light as he was, 'Serre was a grown man. By the last few steps, the priest had been shaking in every limb.

They had been forced to leave the bodies of the guards. One day, perhaps, these would be recovered and buried properly.

Knee joints cracking, Ramose squatted and looked at Aweserre, rolled on the floor of his chariot. The Pharaoh of Lower Egypt was unconscious again. His face was a bright rainbow of bruises, starting yellow and red at his chin and finishing black by his eyes. The wound on his forehead, cleaned and stanching of bleeding, was still terrible. Fearing that the skull was broken, Ramose had bound the man's head tightly with a swathe of cloth. Aweserre looked as though he were in his funeral wrappings.

The priest shivered. "'Serre." He touched an arm.

One blue eye opened slowly. "How do you think Tiya will like me now?"

Ramose did not try to answer the question. "I must go home. I need to leave now and return to Mazghuna. I will come on to Avaris when I can."

A hand rested shakily on the top of the priest's shaven head. "May Sutekh bless your journey," whispered Aweserre. "May your family be safe in these uncertain times." The blue eye rolled shut.

"Bless you for understanding," said Ramose, softly. He rose and stepped back to allow the head driver to squeeze into the chariot—a difficult task, with Pharaoh taking up most of the space.

"Guard him with your lives," he told the charioteers. His conscience pricked him harshly for deserting Aweserre at his most vulnerable, but Ramose knew there was no other way. He knew for certain that his wife and son needed him more.

\* \* \* \*

"When is Daddy coming home?" asked Mose.

"Soon, my darling," lied Neith. "Go back to sleep." She sighed with relief when her son closed his eyes again and snuggled up against her.

Neith was weary almost to death. The famine, the riot in Mazghuna, the horrors and fear of the villagers' attacks, the endless waiting for the next

assault, had all exhausted her.

So why had her body returned to the shape she had been when a young woman? Neith trailed a finger over a newly discovered waist, across a flat stomach and firm hips. She knew without a mirror that she looked better than she had for years.

"A pity Ramose isn't here to enjoy the view," she said aloud, not caring if anyone else on the roof heard or not.

The Nubian Paibes cocked his head to one side as though listening. "The villagers are starting up again." He reached for his spear.

"By all the gods, why can't they leave?" moaned Bakmut.

Ah, but they want revenge, thought Neith. They have not forgiven us for shutting them out when the army passed by our walls. She said nothing. Bakmut and the other maids were close to breaking point. They all were.

The arrival of the army had foiled their escape for another day. Her plan was simple. One of the outer walls of the palace butted directly onto the roof. The villagers had noticed this and made an attempt to keep watch so that no one could slip over the wall, but their guard was at best sporadic. No villager bothered to keep a watch during the coldest time of the night, the last hour before dawn.

That was when she and the others would make their escape. Using cloaks, they could let themselves down from the roof and be safely away before daylight.

All we have to do first is survive the rest of this day, thought Neith.

\* \* \* \*

The wind struck against Ramose as he drove. It was a strong wind, a wind that would defeat the Nile's current and fill the sails of a ship which could take him to Mazghuna.

He had been on the move from Giza for an hour, running his tired team along the side of the river, when the wind rose. It came to him as a gift, in the same way that a giant barge transporting stone came gliding into view, going in the right direction. Even in these semi-lawless, lean times, river trade had continued, albeit less than in other years.

Ramose hailed the crew. Seeing a nobleman in a chariot, the men guessed that the bargain of their lives was about to be struck and stopped for

him at the next wooden jetty.

A large jewel given in good faith can solve many problems. Despite Ramose's filthy appearance, for the sake of his golden armband the sailors were willing to accommodate the two horses and the chariot. The ship was so large that the car did not have to be dismantled. Ramose simply drove it aboard.

He could rest on the ship, and so could the horses. The pair, their flanks sweating and steam billowing from their nostrils, accepted the strangeness of the ship and its motion with tired resignation. Ramose stretched himself on top of a block of Turia limestone and tried to relax.

He was physically exhausted, but sleep proved elusive. His thoughts were chaotic. Horrible images of death and destruction flashed through his mind. Neith and Mose: he had to see them. With an aching intensity, Ramose wished Neith had come with him to Thebes, that their too-frequent partings had been more passionate, less civil.

Finally, worn down by vain regrets, the priest fell asleep.

He missed seeing Kamose's army camped against the walls of Memphis. He missed Sekenenre's standard floating above the main gate of the city. For their part, Kamose's troops did not bother to stop a single stone-carrying barge.

Oblivious to the noisy celebrations going on within the walls of the White City, Ramose did not stir until the captain of the vessel shook him awake and told him they had reached Mazghuna.

\* \* \* \*

After another failed assault, the villagers had gone quiet again. They seemed to have decided on starving the nobles out and were now building their barricades even higher.

Earlier that morning, Neith had seen a straggling group set out from the palace in the direction of the river, carrying what little remained of the jewelry, linens and fine furniture. These they would barter for food from passing ships.

While the villagers had hit upon a means of getting supplies, Neith and her people had nothing. Worse than the lack of food, they had no water. Despite rationing, their supply had run out.

"The children are very weak," Paibes told Neith.

"I can see that for myself," Neith snapped. Sprawled in the narrow band of shade from the roof parapet, Mose and her maids' children looked like little hot dolls. Gemny, Neith's old nurse, was also ailing, slumped under the makeshift awning of a cloak and two empty water crocks. Only the shallow movement of Gemny's chest showed that she was still alive.

Neith wanted to scream with rage, but she had not the energy. "We must break out of here tonight, Paibes. If we do not, we'll be vulture food."

"That is so, my lady."

Neith sighed, drumming her fingers on a discarded shield. Their weapons were useless against the inhuman energies of the sun. "I wish I knew about Bastet." She smiled at Paibes' puzzled frown. "Bastet, my yellow jungle cat. I have not seen her for days."

"Cats are wise creatures. Your cat will have escaped."

As he spoke, the Nubian's black eyes widened. He raised an arm and pointed directly over Neith's shoulder.

"If it's the army back again, I'm not going to look. That commander was an ignorant, arrogant young man."

Something in Paibes's agonized expression made Neith whirl about. A single chariot, drawn by two horses, rattled madly along the track from the ruined village of Mazghuna. Despite the huge dusty clouds raised by the churning wheels of the chariot, Neith no less than Paibes recognized its driver.

"Late as ever," she breathed.

Paibes's long, narrow face was creased with lines. "He is alone. I hoped he would have men with him."

"A lion needs no allies." Neith gave way to the luxury of the moment. "Ramose is not alone! We shall go down to him."

Eyes glittering, color high, Neith swept Mose into her arms and kissed him. "See!" she cried, lifting him high and holding his sagging chin up with one hand. "Your father has come home!"

\* \* \* \*

Ramose urged the tiring horses to greater speed. The chariot creaked dangerously, its wicker shell splintering as the priest leaned against it,

flogging the horses with their own reins.

His drive through Mazghuna, deserted except for the dead, should have prepared him, but Ramose still experienced a tremendous shock when he first caught sight of the palace. His home. Where were its palms, its great cedar wood gates, the flashing marble pillars of its main entrance? Where the running servants, the voices raised in greeting? Above everything, where were Neith and Mose?

"This cannot be." Wrapped in this sense of unreality, the priest careered towards his devastated house.

Small, stick-like figures scuttled from the shadow of the palace walls. In another few moments they would be on him.

Up on the palace roof someone shouted. The distance was too great for Ramose to make out the words.

A man, his face a staring mask of cruelty and avarice, hurled a great stone at Ramose's lead horse. Struck in the face, the beast squealed and reared, then swerved towards its attacker.

The man had stumbled only a few more paces when the horses ran him down and trampled him. As the chariot lurched over his screaming body, Ramose recognized the man as a villager from Mazghuna, a carpenter who had once made him a chair. Now they were enemies and the carpenter was dead.

The other villagers turned looters were not so foolish as to engage a chariot in single combat. Armed with their staves and stones they were waiting in a mass for him to come to them.

They will not be disappointed, thought Ramose grimly, whipping the horses again. His mind was seething after the first numb shock had passed.

Ramose was known as a cool, thoughtful man, the kind who would calculate risks and use slow poison as a weapon. Yet driving towards this rabble who had wrecked his home, the priest learned that he was no different from Aweserre or any other wild man of Set. He would do anything to reach his house, clamber through a mountain of dead if need be, to win back his wife and son and to have his revenge on those who had threatened them.

Recklessly, one man against many, he bore down on the mob.

Suddenly from the back of the lines of villagers came a shout of alarm, and half the crowd turned inwards on itself, all jostling and yelling at once.

Someone had scrambled down from the roof, dropping the last few feet.

It was his wife. For an instant Ramose glimpsed her face, glowing with pleasure, before the body of the crowd blocked his vision.

“Neith!” His single intent was to rescue her. His hands and body did the rest. Tearing the long dagger from its sheath, he roared the horses on into the heave of people and laid about him with the knife as far as he could reach.

His frenzied slashing attack was too much for the villagers’ nerve. Screaming, they broke ranks and scattered, fleeing in the direction of the river.

It was then that he saw her again, huddled against the wall. Two of his own Nubian guards were standing over her.

Ramose leaped from the chariot and ran, roughly pushing aside the two men. His eyes, gleaming with hope, were swiftly blurred with tears. The twisted way that Neith was lying told him that he had come too late.

“Oh, no.” He rolled her into his arms. Someone had stabbed her.

She was barely alive. Hope flared again in Ramose, hope quickly and cruelly snuffed out when he saw the long wound in her side. Whoever had assaulted Neith had known where to strike a killing blow. She lay in a great welling pool of her blood.

Tears ran down his black cheeks and splashed onto Neith’s face. Her eyelids flickered and then opened.

“So you came, my husband. Despite the letter.” Her voice was clear and sweet.

Ramose gathered her closer. Letter! What letter was this? What was she talking about? “Don’t speak. Save your strength,” he begged, tears streaming from his eyes.

Neith’s gaze met his steadily and with love. “Take care of Mose...and prepare me well for the Field of Reeds. We shall dwell there together for eternity.” Her eyelids closed. Her breathing slowed.

“Don’t!” said Ramose, stroking her hair, crooning her name over and over. *Without this woman I am nothing.* “Why should we be parted now, when we have found each other again?”

Neith could not answer him.

As he felt the hand of a guard gently on his shoulder, Ramose was still shaking the body.



## Chapter 44

Neith was dead. He had not saved his wife, but delivered her to her enemies.

A spear lay beside her, hidden in the black shade of the wall. She had left the roof, where she had been safe, and scrambled down to help him. Had he not come alone, had he shown even a little foresight, she would still be alive.

“She gave us no time, lord.” Weeping, the Nubian Paibes put out his hand towards Neith’s still face. When Ramose allowed the man to lay his fingers against the pale, cooling cheek, Paibes broke down.

“When she saw you were in danger, she let herself down over the wall ahead of us,” said Sinu. His voice thickened, and he shook his head. “She was only a moment outside our protection, only an instant.”

Ramose cleared his throat. “You did what you could.” It was as much comfort as he could offer. At the stroke of a knife, his world had fallen apart.

“The others are bringing your son down.” Sinu pushed himself from the wall. “I will go to help clear the barricade.” He tugged at Paibes and made him come away.

Alone with his wife, Ramose laid Neith gently on the hot sand and straightened her limbs. He smoothed back her fine hair and wiped her face. He removed his head cloth and used this to cover the wound.

In death, Neith had recovered all the beauties of her youth. Her face seemed full of light, like a bride asleep on her wedding day. Ramose took her cold hand in his and willed her to live.

A small scurrying close by rustled the dry sand, some filthy scavenger creeping forward to investigate. Ramose snatched up a stone and hurled it at the sound.

A yellow blur yowled, laid back its ears and ran off.

He had hit Bastet. Even as his wife was dead, he did her injury. Ramose closed his eyes and beat his fist against the wall.

"My lord." The voice was insistent. Ramose raised his head. Standing before him was Paibes, holding Mose by the hand. Behind them waited the surviving guards and members of the household. The steward Hori was not amongst them.

"You never came," said Mose, who had seen everything. The boy had not cried.

Not knowing how to make amends, Ramose opened his arms. After a push from Paibes, Mose walked stiffly into them. "I'm sorry." Ramose caught his son against himself, feeling the boy's ribs and pelvis. Mose seemed to be all bones. "I'm sorry." He felt he could bear anything in time except this, having to watch his child suffer.

Paibes coughed and shuffled his feet, and Ramose was reminded of other responsibilities. Claspng Mose tightly, he rose to his feet.

The palace was no longer safe. The villagers of Mazghuna had run off, but they might return at any moment. He must find shelter and food for his people as soon as possible. Gemny, Neith's old nurse, would have to be carried.

And Neith herself would need to be prepared for burial. The preservation of her body was vital for the survival of her soul.

Thinking of her dying words, Ramose straightened. With Mose still in his arms, he walked across to Bakmut and the maidservants. They had been crying, and he felt again the prick of tears in his own eyes. "Can you walk?"

Bakmut and the others nodded.

"We shall go down to the riverbank," said Ramose. "We shall wait for a ship which will take us to Memphis." A muscle in his face twitched. "I will look after my wife."

In Memphis, Ramose had a town house where they would be safe. In Memphis were the embalmers who would make Neith ready for eternity.

## Chapter 45

“This is the house,” said Hathor in a low voice. She had never expected to come here again.

“And a very fitting place for a priest, so close to the great temple of Ptah.” Ahhotpe smiled down at her brother from the carrying chair. “Shall we go inside and rest? I’m sure Ramose would not mind.”

“Is that agreeable to you, Hathor?” asked Kamose, without taking his eyes from his sister’s face. Reunited that morning, Kamose and Ahhotpe were scarcely aware of anyone else.

“As you wish.” Hathor knew it was only good manners which had provoked Kamose’s question. Brother and sister wished to go inside and who was she to deny them?

It was uncanny for Hathor to enter Memphis again, to step back into Ramose’s house where she and the priest and Mose had lived together almost as a family. Strangest of all, the return reminded Hathor sharply of Kasa, as though somehow in her memories he and Ramose had changed roles and places. Or perhaps that was simply her way of protecting herself from the past.

A frightened housekeeper, whom Hathor recognized, opened the street door in response to Kamose’s pounding. Seeing the commander of the army which had taken Memphis standing on her doorstep with a dozen soldiers, the woman fled shrieking into the kitchen.

“Leave them for the moment.” Ahhotpe held out her hands to be lifted down from the chair. “Let’s send the soldiers to raid Ramose’s wine store and explore upstairs ourselves.”

Knowing the way, Hathor lead Kamose and Ahhotpe through the house. She showed them the chambers where she and Ramose had dined, the room where they had slept. Saving the best until last, she brought them to the biggest upper room and opened the doors onto the garden balcony. “This is

where we would sit on an evening.”

Ahhotpe waddled into the room and looked round for a seat, which Kamose brought. While he leaned out over the balcony, Hathor found her own chair.

“Sit beside me,” said Ahhotpe, playfully flicking her brother’s backside with her hand. “Kamose can pour the wine which this fine captain has brought.” She gave the soldier a smile warm enough to make the man blush, then patted her chair arm. “Kamose, perch here.”

“Wait for us downstairs,” Kamose told the soldier.

When the man left the room, Ahhotpe said, “And now perhaps you will tell us the news which has been scalding your mouth.”

Kamose tapped her chin gently with his knuckles. “You are right. I have learned something today.” He paused and took a drink of wine, smacking his lips in appreciation. “The priest has a fine cellar.”

Ahhotpe shook his arm. “The news.”

“This should interest you, Hathor,” said Kamose. “According to my father, Ramose is dead.”

Hathor tried to swallow the wine in her mouth and found she could not. The news seemed unreal, she could not believe it.

Ahhotpe’s reaction was different and more immediate. She tossed aside her goblet. “Our father in Memphis? Why, what is he doing? Did you know when you summoned us from Ta-she that Sekenenre would be coming here?”

“You need not be alarmed. This is no plot, Ahhotpe,” said her brother. “Sekenenre arrived unexpectedly in the city yesterday, at first light.”

“For what reason?”

“He says he is to worship Set in the god’s temple of Memphis. Apparently, once he has done that, all Egypt will be his.”

Hathor finally swallowed and spoke. “I cannot believe this news—about Ramose.”

“What is supposed to have happened?” asked Ahhotpe.

“Sekenenre says that he struck down Ramose and the Hyksos usurper Aweserre in the pyramid of Khufu. He says that they perished at his hand.” Kamose fastened his keen gray eyes on his sister’s face and laughed aloud. “No, I did not find these claims convincing, either. Which is why, when we leave here, I will post guards to inform me if our priest of Ptah should

return.”

“Why do you put such little faith in what your father says?” asked Hathor, still bewildered by this flood of news. “What reason does he have to lie?”

“Our father has many reasons to lie,” answered Ahhotpe, trailing her fingers down Kamose’s arm. “These claims will give him men and time. The nobles and the priesthood will not dare withhold their support if he is indeed the sole Pharaoh.”

Kamose lifted his sister’s hand and kissed it. “Can you imagine Ramose rolling about inside an old tomb?” he asked Hathor with a chuckle. “Sekenenre must be lying.”

\* \* \* \*

Several hours later, when Kamose, Ahhotpe and Hathor had retired for the night into the royal palace which until a week ago had been Aweserre’s, the general, Per-hor, came with the news that a patrol had picked up the High Priest of Ptah.

“In the street of the embalmers, would you believe?” said Per-hor. “Him and a few low-born followers and their half-starved brats.”

“Let me see him,” said Ahhotpe. “It will confound Ramose’s dignity to be brought before a lone woman. The shock may even free his tongue.” She cast an indulgent glance at Kamose. “I’m sure you and Hathor will find some way to amuse yourselves.”

Pleased that she and Kamose would have some time alone together, Hathor ran her tongue suggestively over her lips. She was grateful to the princess for sparing her the ordeal of meeting the High Priest.

Kamose was also pleased. Hathor after all would be his second wife. It was neither prudent nor honorable to neglect her. He was grateful to Ahhotpe for reminding him of what would be a very pleasant duty. He swung down from his couch and held out his hand. “Come, Loving One. Let us seek the gardens of this palace.”

“I will give you a full report in the morning,” said Ahhotpe as they linked arms and passed her couch. “What do you want me to do with them after I have questioned Ramose?”

Kamose shrugged. “You may throw them in the river for all I care. But

no,” he added, feeling Hathor stiffen, “on reflection, let the priest and his people return to his city dwelling. He can do us little harm.”

Ahhotpe lowered her head. “I will do as you say, my brother.”

When Hathor and Kamose had left by another door, she nodded to Per-hor. “I will see Ramose now. Keep the others back.”

Per-hor hesitated. “Do you wish perfumes to be brought?” he asked, with a surprisingly delicate gesture towards her rounded stomach. “The priest is not clean.”

Ahhotpe thought of pyramids and shook her head. “I will see him as he is,” she said firmly.

A moment later, she and Ramose were gazing steadily at each other. Ahhotpe put her hand up to her mouth. The man was not only unwashed, he stank. From head to foot, his black skin was covered with gray and brown smears.

“Bat dung,” said Ramose, breaking the silence between them.

“So my father did not strike you down inside Khufu’s house of eternity as he claimed.” Ahhotpe had adjusted to the smell. Sensing a battle of wits, the kind of sparring she enjoyed, she fired the first dart. “Where is your Hyksos master?”

“Aweserre has returned to Avaris, where he musters the army that will march to recover Memphis.”

There was no way Ahhotpe could be sure whether the priest was speaking the truth or not. “I wonder that you tell me this, my lord Ramose.”

“In a few days, princess, when the Pharaoh of Lower Egypt comes knocking on the walls of this white city with a battering ram, it will be public knowledge.”

Ahhotpe could see why her brother liked this man. Untidy, unshaven and covered in dung, he none the less had presence, an aura of power about him. There was a scabby wound on his right shoulder. “Did Sekenenre do that?” she asked.

“He may have.”

“My father says that all the people of Egypt are ready to lay down their lives for him.”

“If that is so, why has Kamose brought an army with him from Thebes?”

The priest paused, glancing behind at the closed double doors which

separated himself and his retainers. For a moment, Ahhotpe wondered if there was one amongst the group who might have value as a hostage, but decided not. Hathor had never told her about Mose.

Ramose interrupted her thoughts. "Could it be, princess, that your brother has ambitions of his own, beyond those of Sekenenre?"

That this was close to the truth did not disturb Ahhotpe. "Kamose's strongest virtue is his loyalty."

"His loyalty to whom, princess? You or your father?"

Ahhotpe laughed and crossed her hands over her stomach. "You must decide that question for yourself, my lord."

She lifted her right hand and made the symbol of the cross of life, the holy Ankh. "Great days are ahead of us. A new order born from ancient forms. The Asiatics will have no place amongst us." She flung Ramose a pitying glance. "Where will you be in this scheme of things? Be wise, like the people of Memphis."

There was silence. The tall black man shifted his feet slightly. "One man is different from an entire city. Has Kamose not explained that to you yet?"

Ahhotpe blanched, angry with herself for having given Ramose that opening. "Do not patronize me, priest."

Ramose touched his grubby forehead in a graceful gesture of apology. "Forgive me, I mean no disrespect. What I should have said is that your brother, who places such high value on loyalty, is unlikely to trust a man who at the first sign of danger to his monarch comes to fling himself at your feet."

"Yet you do not seem concerned that my brother holds Memphis." *Or at my questioning of you.* "Do you think him merely a boy?"

"I have the greatest respect for Kamose's military skills. So has Aweserre."

For all that the answer pleased her, Ahhotpe was growing disappointed. The priest would never change his allegiance. She had, moreover, the strange feeling that Ramose was talking to her from another room. He seemed remote and not in the least disconcerted. There was a new stillness about him, as though some part of his life had stopped. She noticed how he had lost weight since she had first seen him.

Watching him, tracing the stark planes of his face, Ahhotpe thought she understood. "What were you doing in the street of the embalmers?"

The remoteness was at once replaced by pain. “My wife, the lady Neith. She is dead.” He swayed as though he would fall.

“Per-hor, bring a chair for my lord.” Ahhotpe wondered how Hathor would react to this news.

“I blame myself.” Ramose was shaking and the chair shook with him. “I should never have left her and Mose alone.”

“Who is Mose?”

“Mose is my son.”

Mose was presumably one of the two skinny little boys waiting with the rest of Ramose’s people. Ahhotpe’s eyes glittered. “Tell me what happened.”

The priest’s tale was garbled, but she gleaned a few more useful facts. Before the end of his rambling speech, she let her eyes fill with tears. Ramose was fingering a battered wrist guard. He looked puzzled, then reflective, as though he had just remembered something.

“Neith mentioned a letter. I did not know what she meant at first, but now....” His thumb worked under the guard, and a slip of paper fell out onto the floor. Ramose bent to retrieve it, but at a signal from Ahhotpe, Per-hor fixed it to the tiles with the butt of his spear.

Ahhotpe glanced down at the letter. “I see that its seal is unbroken. Allow me to read this to you.” Fixing her gaze on Ramose’s face, she waited for Per-hor to hand it over.

The letter was put into her palm. Ahhotpe broke the seal and read. She found a second letter folded inside the first and read that out, too.

After she had finished, Per-hor looked embarrassed. Ramose clutched at himself, as a man with his belly slashed open by a sword might try to hold in his entrails before he dies. Suddenly he lurched to his feet.

“Leaving us so soon?” asked Ahhotpe. “By all means, you have our permission. Here, take your steward’s letters with you. They may give you comfort.” She dropped the pieces of papyrus on the floor between them.

“Let him go,” she told Per-hor. “Feed them, then let them all go—including this mysterious child Mose.” Mose had been mentioned by name in one letter.

She could afford to be generous, thought Ahhotpe, as Ramose, walking like a condemned man, picked up the letters and turned on his heel. The priest was finished.



“Wait. Did you know that I have been in your house? We sampled some of your wine, Kamose and Hathor and myself.”

The man gave no visible reaction, but Ahhotpe knew she had drawn blood.

In the end it had been a most interesting encounter. She had much to tell Kamose, Hathor and, yes, her father, Sekenenre. Ahhotpe smiled.

## Chapter 46

Aweserre's seven charioteers were seen in Avaris, driving up from the river to the palace. An escort was sent to meet them. They rattled through the rutted city streets, stopping for neither man nor beast.

Tiyi rode with the escort in the commander's chariot. She had left Kasa behind at the palace. There were things she hoped to settle between herself and Aweserre before Pharaoh and her brother encountered each other.

She could not look farther than a reconciliation. She told herself that was all she wanted. His feelings towards her would surely not have changed, not in so short a time. He will have me back. I'm useful, she thought. If nothing else, she could be his masseuse. Anything except that she be cast aside.

Throughout their separation, Tiyi had been preoccupied with her response to him: how she would forgive Aweserre and so on. She had not considered his feelings. Faced now with the possibility that Aweserre might have turned against her, she realized just how much she cared. She thought of what he had offered, what she had turned down and, growing more afraid, tried to convince herself that it would be enough to be Pharaoh's servant. At least she would sometimes see 'Serre about the palace.

Even so, her heart galloped in her chest when she saw the dust cloud moving through the poor quarter.

That was not Aweserre's voice raised above the noise of the milling city. Yet it was his chariot. The two black horses swung suddenly into view around a street corner, drawing a crazy collection of wheels, wicker, flashing bits of metal and glass. Pharaoh had not deserted her. He was returning.

Something was returning.

"Stop!" screamed Tiyi, pulling dangerously on the reins. Even before her chariot wheels stopped spinning, she was down, launching herself at the

oncoming vehicle without thought of danger or her own safety. There was a brief glimpse of a sweating, shouting face and then the chariot was jolted to a stop, one wheel scraping against two house steps.

*If Aweserre is dead—*

Ignoring driver and escort, Tiyi caught hold of the wicker frame of the chariot. If 'Serre were dead, she would curse Sekenenre. She would make a wax model of the man, stick needles into its eyes and let birds peck off its penis. She would beat him to death and throw his body to the crocodiles.

Her vision blurred as she thought of other means of death. Nothing was too bad. She was as bloodthirsty towards the Pharaoh of Upper Egypt as 'Serre had been against Bakht.

On the floor of the chariot lay a small, still bundle which Tiyi was reluctant to touch. Had she only parted from him differently....

"Let him be alive." If this was the gods' punishment on her folly, then it was unfair.

"Please let him be alive." She would never quarrel with him again. Sekenenre could be Pharaoh over the whole world and rule forever, so long as Aweserre was alive.

She laid a hand against the dirty ear poking through rough bandages. Her fingers shook so much she could scarcely feel anything except the stickiness of drying blood. She traced a purple cheekbone, a swollen chin. She could not tell if he breathed.

Tiyi dropped to her knees and bowed her head. "Take my life instead." It seemed that she must break in pieces from this helpless sorrow.

"Marry me."

"'Serre?" Her eyes were level with a bloodied mouth. The mouth was moving. "Terre?"

"I accept your offering." The cut upper lip creased itself into an untidy smile. Though half closed by bruises, the blue eyes were still as she remembered them. "Marry me, Tiyi."

He had survived. He had come back to her. He still wanted her. Life, love, happiness: the three greatest gifts, spilled back extravagantly into Tiyi's lap. "If you're sure," she said, when she had breath to speak, and she nodded.

Aweserre sighed and closed his eyes. At last, he thought.

"My head hurts," he remarked after a moment. "As a place of rest, I

can't say I recommend a pyramid." His fingers found hers and squeezed them. "So I'm an acrobat again, eh? Well, you may be right. After what Ramose discovered...."

His voice trailed off into an easy snore. Everything was right between them again. She had called him Terre and had finally agreed to marry him. If a sore head was the price for such an outcome, Aweserre was glad to pay it.

Tiyi hugged his hand and let the tears come. She had been given a second chance, one which she did not intend to waste.

Life was wonderful.

\* \* \* \*

"I will see him now," said Aweserre.

"The healers say you must go to bed," said Tiyi.

"Come to bed with me."

"No 'Serre," answered Tiyi. "Your head will never heal if you do not sleep."

She was trying to be firm with him. Had his skull not been splitting, Aweserre would have laughed. He put out a hand to pull on her leg but had to regrip the arms of his chair to stop himself slithering out of it altogether. His legs felt as weak as melted wax.

"Bring the man Kasa," he ordered. He was eager to see Tiyi's brother and put their meeting first, ahead of that with his generals. "Don't look so worried," he told her. "Everything will be all right."

"You will not be angry if he does not bow?" whispered Tiyi.

Aweserre shook his head carefully. Not wishing to be thought soft by his future brother-in-law, he had unbound the bandages from his head. Each time he shifted position his eyes swam and his ears buzzed fiercely. "Go out onto the terrace, child. The chamberlain will call you in when we have finished." He watched them leave.

An impatient figure lunged into the room and moved with long strides towards the dais. Dressed in the brightly patterned clothes of a desert dweller, he looked out of place in an Egyptian court. He had a bushy black beard, frowning eyebrows, wary eyes.

Aweserre was startled by the man's bulk. Tiyi had said that Kasa was

tall but somehow he had not believed her. In no feature was she like this grim-faced man except for her thick black hair.

Aweserre hauled himself out of his chair. "Welcome! Come up here." He would have held out his hand but was concentrating hard on keeping steady on his feet.

Stepping onto the dais, the tall, self-possessed man fixed him with a piercing look. "You should be in your bed."

Aweserre threw convention to the winds and grinned. Here was a man after his own heart. A man like his Uncle Pepi. "First, give me leave to marry your sister."

Kasa looked him up and down. "What if you lose against Sekenenre?"

"I won't," said Aweserre quickly.

"There's a messenger outside this room who claims you have already lost."

The Hyksos felt himself growing red. "Is that why you are talking so bluntly? Because you think I'm finished?"

"No, that is not the reason." Kasa had made up his mind about Aweserre. "Talking bluntly is what I do." He held out his hand.

"Serre."

"Kasa."

They shook hands. Without a formal word of consent, the matter of Tiyi's marriage had been agreed between them. They had taken a measure of each other.

Aweserre lowered himself back onto the chair. "Sit down." He indicated the throne next to his. "As soon as my chamberlain has gathered the rest of my court, we'll call in your sister and tell her to put on her wedding clothes."

Kasa thumbed at the door. "What about that messenger?"

Aweserre yawned. He would show his brother-in-law that he was not afraid. "Let him wait."

\* \* \* \*

The messenger was Kamose, and he had not come alone. Half the nobles of Memphis were with him.

"What is the time now?" he demanded.

A nobleman went scurrying to the corner of the room and peered at the water clock for the twentieth time. "Almost an hour, lord." He cringed as though Kamose might strike him for that answer.

Kamose was reserving his anger for more worthy targets. They had been packed into this antechamber for an hour, waiting like servants while all of Aweserre's court, even the cooks and entertainers, trailed into the main audience chamber. As an insult it was studied and deliberate.

Kamose clenched his fists. Another knot of people were crossing the corridor, going in ahead of him. He recognized the girl at the center of the group. He pointed past the guards who were keeping them cooped up in this hot little room. "You!"

The girl started and swung round. She was small and plump, with fine wide eyes and a mouth for kissing. Her dark, loose hair was scented with oil, and her skin gleamed with unguents. Her wrist and arm bands were of silver and gold. She wore a gown of pure white linen which flattered every curve of her body. She was beautiful.

"Why are you here?" Kamose cursed himself. Of course the mute could not answer.

With a reassuring gesture to the guards, Tiyi came back to the entrance of the antechamber. It was not Sekenenre as she had feared, but his son. She decided to answer him.

"It is my wedding. I am to be married to Pharaoh."

For several moments her words meant nothing to Kamose. Not the fact that he had been delayed for a wedding, nor the significance that it was Aweserre she was marrying.

"Did Hathor not tell you I can talk now?" asked Tiyi. "She knew this, I think."

"No, I had not known." Hathor had not told him. What to Tiyi was an innocent question was a much darker matter to Kamose. It exposed his heart to misgiving, made him doubt where once he had been sure. For the first time in months, Kamose reminded himself that Hathor was a foreigner. She was from Lower, not Upper Egypt.

The girl Tiyi—yes, that was her name—was being drawn away by the Chamberlain. The doors to the main audience chamber were opened again, and Tiyi walked in to a fanfare of trumpets.

They were playing the ancient salute due to a queen. Aweserre was not

only marrying her, he was making Tiyi his Great Wife.

Kamose's mouth twitched in a bitter smile. The Pharaoh of Lower Egypt was making another mistake. Aweserre would do better to ally himself by marriage to another kingdom.

Then it struck him. His mission was being delayed because of a slave girl's wedding. "Let us pass!" he barked to the guards and pushed forward.

\* \* \* \*

When the brief marriage ceremony began, Kasa rose from his seat and slipped out onto the terrace. He stood in the slanting sunlight, taking deep breaths. So far, he had been able to conduct himself with the dignity and purpose of a caravan leader. He had no wish to break down now. His own wedding day had been blissful, and he had no right to mar his sister's.

Kasa liked what he had seen so far of Aweserre. Although he had obviously been badly beaten, the Hyksos had made no concessions to himself throughout their meeting: behavior which Kasa respected and responded to.

Hyksos and Canaanite: the two peoples were much alike. Sometimes, in the way Aweserre used his hands, the little man had a look of Anat...

As soon as this marriage ceremony was over, he must talk to Aweserre, tell him why he had come to Avaris, thought Kasa.

It felt strange to be walking on flagstones instead of sand. Kasa strode from one end of the terrace to the other, gazing out sadly over the famine-stricken countryside. The river was too low, many people would be starving.

To Kasa, it was wicked that Sekenenre and Aweserre should contend against each other when the whole of Egypt was suffering. They should be working together to bring food to their people. Traders would join together in caravans. Why could not the two Pharaohs do likewise?

When he thought of trading, he thought of Anat. He missed her so much, more than the desert or the green hills of Punt. In Punt he had missed the smell of Nile mud. As a traveler he was forever an exile.

Yet he would not give up his way of life now. Aweserre had offered him lands and a palace, which Kasa solemnly refused. He could not dwell forever in houses. He needed open space.

"Hallo! The commander in chief!"

Something new was happening in the audience chamber. Aweserre's voice rang out over scuffling. "Yes, yes! Let the lord Kamose enter. We know each other well. If I had known you were the messenger, my boy, I would not have kept you waiting. You could have been a witness to our wedding."

Kamose. The youth who had taken Hathor.

Kasa had forgotten that Hathor had been given away.

Stirred by a feeling which he would not admit was jealousy, the tall bearded man returned to the audience chamber.

\* \* \* \*

Ahhotpe's information from Ramose had been correct, though incomplete, reflected Kamose. Aweserre was alive but injured. His generals were in evidence, but by no means all the commanders of the Hyksos's war host were here. The court was loyal but diminished. Almost half the nobility of the delta seemed to be missing, and Kamose guessed that in a few days' time these landowners would make their way to Memphis to pay their respects to Sekenenre.

It was time to make demands.

Bursting into the audience chamber, Kamose interrupted the final part of Aweserre's marriage. The couple standing before the dais amidst a group of applauding courtiers had already made their public vows. Pharaoh was in the act of adding his signature to a marriage contract granting his new wife a substantial dowry.

As Kamose flung himself past the guards and launched into the room, Aweserre laid aside his reed pen and offered Tiyi the finished document. "Take it to our room, my dear. Here—" He caught her shoulders, turning her towards the light. "Go out through the terrace."

He watched Tiyi leave and boosted himself with unsteady arms onto the dais. He sat there with his feet dangling over the dais steps, a pose familiar to Kamose.

"We meet again, tumbler," he said. "I am pleased that we do, although you do not match my guesses about you." Kamose glanced after Tiyi.

"Unless you wish me to forget that you are a sacred messenger and protected by virtue of your office, I would suggest that you say nothing



against my wife,” Aweserre said quietly.

“I do not abuse women,” said Kamose. “But what happened to your face, Hyksos?”

Several of Kamose’s Memphis escort tittered nervously.

“I encountered a wild animal in a confined space, a mad beast that did not know who was master. The next time our paths cross, I will kill it.”

“No, you will not.” Kamose strode forward. “The people have recognized their true Egyptian destiny and thrown off your foreign rule. Elephantine is ours. Thebes is ours. Abydos is ours. Memphis is ours. The Governors of the Nomes, from Ta-she to Nubia, have all come over to our side. You are finished, Aweserre.”

“Is that all your message?” asked Aweserre, kicking his heels against the dais steps.

“No, my message is this. My father Sekenenre, true Pharaoh of the Two Lands, has worshipped in the temple of Set at Memphis according to the god’s true nature. His worship has been accepted.”

Kamose snapped his fingers and a priest of Set, one of the escort from Memphis, came to stand alongside him. “This holy man, the High Priest of his order, will vouch for what I say.” Kamose lifted a delicate eyebrow. “Even your god has deserted you, ‘Serre.”

If Aweserre was insulted by Kamose’s use of his nickname, his color and countenance never changed. “Is that everything?”

Kamose raised the herald’s fan, which he carried like a spear, and whirled it above his head. “Aweserre, my army awaits you at Memphis. We shall wait another five days. If by that time, you and all your followers have not crawled to our camp then we shall come to you. And when we take this city of Avaris, every man, woman, child and beast within it will die!”

The fan fluttered to the floor. Kamose turned on his heel.

No one attempted to detain him. All eyes, even those of the guards, were on Aweserre.

The Hyksos Pharaoh lowered himself from the dais. He stood before his depleted court, studying each frightened face in turn.

He spoke. “If your hearts are troubled, then leave with Sekenenre’s messenger. I will not hold it against you.” He licked a bead of sweat from his upper lip and straightened. “I would not have it said of me that I hold any man’s allegiance by force.”

In that moment he seemed to grow taller. Bareheaded, with stubble on his face, lurid bruises on his forehead, blood on his uncombed hair, Aweserre was still a king.

Kasa stepped out of the door-shadow to the terrace. "I am with you, lord." He drew back his sleeve and showed the blue tattoo on his forearm. "I am with you, and so are the people of the caravans. We are ready to pay back our debt."

Tiyi walked in from the garden and took Pharaoh's hand in hers. She lifted a bead necklace from her neck and wound it about their two wrists, linking them together. She too had heard, and made her choice.

The rest of the court prostrated themselves in silence. Aweserre's eyes were blurred with tears.

"Thank you," he said.

## Chapter 47

"I don't want to kiss him!" shrieked the freshly-bathed Mose. "He never came. He's not my father!"

"Let the boy go," said Ramose wearily.

Mose, freed from Bakmut's grasp, stuck out his tongue at both of them before fleeing up the stairs. His running feet pounded along the boards of the upper floor, stopping abruptly in what had been his mother's chamber. The bed inside the room creaked as Mose hurled himself onto it.

Gemny, leaning carefully on a stick for support, potted over to where Ramose was standing. "Give him time, lord. He has lost the best thing in his life, his mother." Her gnarled hand dithered on the head of the stick and her wrinkled, rheumy eyes were fat with tears.

"Yes, Neith was certainly his mother." Embarrassed and shamed by a servant's show of emotion, Ramose stared down at the letters which Ahhotpe had allowed him to keep. Since he and his people had been allowed to return unmolested to his town house, the letters had become a compulsion.

He was going to read them again, almost as though a fresh reading could somehow alter their contents.

How that golden haired girl had enjoyed his humiliation! He had underestimated her, as he had underestimated Neith and every other woman he knew. Ramose could not forget Ahhotpe's face, bright and hard as she read aloud. She had nodded her head at each particularly satisfying part....

"Ubaoner, general of the auxiliaries at Bubastis, sends his greetings to the lady Neith.

"Little cat, my own Bastet, how are you now? I received your note this morning and have carried it next to my heart since. Health and love in abundance to you, my darling! I have drawn your image on the backs of all your letters, and in the long dreary evenings—which pass so slowly without

you—I kiss them all goodnight.”

I never talked in that way to Neith, thought Ramose. Such language as Ubaoner used seemed sentimental, yet perhaps this was what Neith had wanted. Had she not called her yellow jungle cat Bastet?

Without warning, as he had often found in the last few days, Ramose realized he was weeping again, tears pouring out as though from some inexhaustible spring. He closed his eyes, hearing a muted sobbing from somewhere else within the house. Gemny was tapping up the stairs, presumably to sit with Mose. A rich smell of baking bread drifted from the kitchen area, turning him faintly sick.

Ahhotpe had not only fed his people at the palace, she had ordered that provisions be sent to his house. Boats now traveled under Sekenenre’s protection from Upper to Lower Egypt and the citizens of the White City were receiving wheat from the granaries of Thebes.

It was another humiliation for him and for Aweserre. They should have fed Memphis.

Ramose wiped and opened his eyes, staring at his bare hands without seeing them. His rings had gone to the embalmers. They had told him Neith would be ready for burial in seventy days.

That was before he had known of the letters. Ramose scanned the rest of the note in his hand, hating himself for noticing, even at this moment, the general’s many spelling mistakes.

“Little cat, how can you think that I will not be pleased by your latest news? My own great son and heir! I have long hoped that you would be the mother of my children.”

Had Neith betrayed him? Instead of feeling anger, he felt tired. Was it grief that blunted his senses?

Ramose glanced at the second letter, the last Hori had written before he died. There seemed to be a mystery surrounding the steward’s death, a conspiracy of silence. Ramose was not interested in that. He could not be bothered with the man, only what he had written.

Veiled hints and innuendoes such as Mose’s delight in playing soldiers, couched in terms expressing sympathy and concern—the work of a smooth-talking hypocrite or a devoted servant? Neith had told him often enough that she disliked their steward. Should he have listened to her?

Neith with her drinking and her tantrums. He had long since resigned

himself to her not being a perfect wife, yet he had been sure of her love for him. Now she was dead. Nothing held together any more.

Ramose followed Gemny upstairs, pushing open the door into his bedroom. Through the mud-brick wall he could hear the old woman saying a sleeping charm over Mose. It was the same spell that he had heard Neith sing.

The priest laid down on his bed and listened to the song while he lifted a writing palette from the bedside table. Taking a burnisher, the first tool he laid his hand on, Ramose began scraping away at the painted hieroglyphs on the general's letter, not stopping even when the paper was clean and all the writing was gone.

\* \* \* \*

Early next morning, before the servants stirred, Ramose went downstairs, fired one of the large braziers and heated a ewer of hot water. He scoured himself with sand, rinsed off, sniffed at his armpits and groin and repeated the process. Finally he stopped, not because he was satisfied but because there was no more hot water.

Since he had returned to his home, Ramose had washed many times. So perhaps it only imagination which made him smell bat dung on his fingers.

Observing the custom that priests be completely without body hair, Ramose was shaving his legs with a copper razor when Mose entered the room.

"Oh." The boy skidded to a halt. "I thought you were Gemny." Without looking at the tall naked figure, he backed away.

Mose's reaction decided him. Ramose knew by then that he had seen enough. He finished his shave, dressed, and went in search of Neith's old nurse.

He found her sitting outside the house under a palm tree, sharing her breakfast bread and beer with Mose. When the boy saw who it was, he threw down his bread and ran away and hid in another part of the garden.

"I know," said Ramose. "I should give him time."

"It is only that he is not familiar with you, Lord. You have not been home much these last months." Gemny, an old and trusted servant, could speak bluntly.

Ramose found himself wondering if she or any of the surviving servants knew the contents of Hori's letter. Of course, none of them could read, but Hori might have told someone. It was not a comfortable thought.

"Are you fond of Mose?" he asked abruptly.

"He is Neith's child," answered Gemny. "I look at him and see my lady as she was." A tear ran into the creases of her face, and she wiped it away. "I used to call her my gosling."

"Will you take care of him?" asked Ramose. "I must get out of Memphis."

Gemny looked confused, then disapproving. "Why, Lord? Why must you go now?"

Neith. He had to make things right between them. He had to know, finally, whether or not Mose was his. There were old and secret rituals, not written but passed by word of mouth through the priesthood of Ptah, on how to speak with the dead.

"I wish to spend time in contemplation at my wife's tomb." He would not reveal more than this to a servant, even so trusted a dependent as his wife's old nurse.

"But how will you leave the city? Travel is forbidden and all gates are guarded."

"There is a secret way leading out into the desert from the temple of Ptah. I shall use that to make my escape."

He smiled, but Gemny was not convinced.

"Take care of the boy," repeated Ramose. Thanks to Ahhotpe's perverted generosity there was now enough food in the house for Gemny and the rest. No one need risk going out into the streets. "Live here quietly and do not venture into the city, for these are uncertain times. I will return in seven days or less."

Gemny coughed into her hand and hid her mouth. "Will you say goodbye to Mose?" she asked, her hand still shielding her face.

"In the circumstances, I think it best if I just leave."

"As you wish, Lord. When do you go?"

"Today."

\* \* \* \*

“Do you know why the priest has decided to leave Memphis?” the goddess Hathor asked the goddess Nephthys. “Do you believe that he has gone solely to visit his wife’s tomb?”

“Perhaps. He is filled with remorse at his wife’s death, for coming too late to save her.” Nephthys plumped a cushion and lounged back against the sun god’s throne with a yawn. “Perhaps he feels that only the emptiness of the desert will match the desolation in his own heart.”

“Ramose?” Hathor studied her reflection in a silver mirror. “I admit that he is much affected by grief, but he does not strike me as the kind of man to be overwhelmed by anything.” She plucked at an eyebrow with some golden tweezers.

“Perhaps he is running away.”

“From having to face his son, you mean?”

“Well, he is not sure now that Mose is his son.”

Hathor laid aside her mirror. “If he believes Ubaoner’s ravings and Hori’s gossip, then I am disappointed in him.”

“Men are like gods. They all have their blind spots.”

Hathor motioned to Ra’s fan-bearer, Unas. “Bring us something cool to drink,” she commanded the soul of the long-dead Pharaoh, giving him a prod with the tweezers. As Unas prostrated himself, then scurried off to another part of the divine sun boat, the two goddesses brought their heads together.

They both spoke at once.

“Is it something to do with Aweserre?” Nephthys asked Hathor.

“Has Set a hand in this?” Hathor asked Nephthys.

“You answer,” laughed Nephthys.

“No, you,” said Hathor.

Set’s wife lifted her narrow shoulders. “My husband is bound by the promises he made to the two Pharaohs. If Sekenenre has accomplished everything demanded of him, Set must honor his side of the bargain. I cannot see how Ramose’s abrupt departure is due to his influence.”

Nephthys’s mouth took on a sulky look and then lifted. “Ramose has always felt an obligation to Aweserre that conflicts and often outweighs his duties to his family,” she went on. “I think it more likely that he is serving the Hyksos in some way.”

“In the desert? What possible useful thing could he be doing there?”

Nephthys took a goblet from the kneeling Unas and drank, considering Hathor's answer. "Yes, you are right," she said finally. "What can Ramose hope to achieve in the wilderness?"

"Without Aweserre or my husband we are back to grief and remorse," Nephthys went on. "Perhaps the double shock of watching Neith die and learning of her supposed infidelity has unhinged Ramose."

Hathor, placing her drink on a purple cloud, remarked how mortals' motives were so often a tangle of desire and guilt. "They live out their little lives with such intensity."

"That is so." Nephthys glanced pityingly at Unas.

"How go Sekenenre's battle preparations?" Hathor asked, casting aside her tweezers and changing the subject.

"Very well," said Nephthys. "Sekenenre is almost beside himself with joy in anticipation of putting a sword through the bowels of his rival. He has retaken command of the army so that he may lead them to victory."

"Kamose will not be pleased by that."

"No, he isn't." Nephthys chuckled at the thought of the mortal youth's discomfiture. "Kamose claims he is the better general."

Hathor touched her goblet, stroking the moisture on its cool sides with a finger which she then extended to the kneeling Unas. "Lick it off for me," she commanded.

"Is that Amun I can hear, making bets as to how long Aweserre will survive?" she asked Nephthys, as Unas eagerly obeyed.

They listened for a moment, both goddesses watching the fan-bearer's attentions in mild amusement. Amun had gathered all the male gods—except Ptah of Memphis, who would not come—into the bows of the sun boat. He was showing off the battle lines to Ra, king of the gods.

Sensing Nephthys's and Hathor's interest, the blue god turned. "Ladies! Join us? The sport is about to begin."

Nephthys glanced at Set standing beside Amun, having to endure Amun's arm about his shoulders. The storm god was pale and tense. There was a dark shadow over his head. He looked drained of power and utterly defeated.

"That is not—" the goddess Hathor clapped her free hand to her mouth.

"I know," said Nephthys softly. "Amun has been deceived by another god. The one who looks like Set is not my husband."



## Chapter 48

His court was already gathered when Aweserre summoned the officers of his army. He also sent to the priesthood and to the nobles and leaders of Avaris, bidding them attend him in council. Settled on the terrace under a yellow moon, inhaling the floral scents of the gardens as though they were idle courtiers at a banquet, this group of tense, uneasy people heard Kamose's demands.

"Must we meet him at Memphis?" asked the generals.

"If we do not, then the country up to Avaris will be Kamose's without a struggle," answered Aweserre. "I have no choice but to take the bulk of the army upstream." He vaulted onto the wall of the terrace so that everyone could see him. "A force will remain to guard the city. You will be safe. I swear it," he added, glancing at the very young, frightened kitchen boy perched on Tiyi's knee. His partner of half a day smiled at him.

"I will still be here," she said.

This had already been agreed between them, in the brief privacy which they'd snatched while the council was gathering. Arm in arm, leaning over the terrace wall with their backs to the milling people, the couple had made their farewells. Both knew that they would have no other chance.

"You leave tonight?" asked Tiyi.

"I fear so."

"Take care of my brother for me. If you watch for him, then you cannot fail but to watch for yourself."

Oh, for such blind faith, thought Aweserre. He plucked away a tamarisk leaf which had fallen and tangled into Tiyi's hair. He took her soft dark face between his hands.

"We shall miss our wedding night," he said softly.

"Do not fear for me," said Tiyi, after a small pause. "Avaris has strong walls."

Aweserre shook his head. "I am not happy at you staying here. Why not travel to sanctuary at Buto?"

Tiyi's sudden smile was full of dimples. Her eyes sparkled. The danger of the situation seemed to excite her, or perhaps it was her new role as Pharaoh's wife. "Out of reach of Kamose's army, you mean? And what could I say to the people I would leave behind?"

"Do you think it impossible for me to lose?" Aweserre was not whispering now. "You heard what Kamose said about the gods. If Avaris is taken—and it may well be, if even Sutekh is against me—then Kamose will show you no mercy."

Close to them a nightjar sounded its eerie cry. The terrace was growing crowded, they had only a few more moments.

Aweserre traced the spear-scar on his wife's chin. "Don't do that." He released her quickly. "Don't cry, Tiyi. It's unfair of you."

Tiyi wiped her eyes. "I want to be here to welcome you home, as a wife should." Unseen by the politely waiting people, her hand touched him. "And more," she said, showing the tip of her tongue. "I don't want to wait forever."

Aweserre reddened. "Mad," he said under his breath, conceding defeat. "Madder than me." He grinned, kissed her and, after several more deep breaths, turned to begin the council.

\* \* \* \*

Now in that same council, Tiyi's calm words, "I will still be here," carried their own promise. Haggard faces brightened as hope became possible. If the Queen was not to leave Avaris, then Pharaoh had not deserted them. The scribes' pens scratched busily as Aweserre gave detailed instructions as to how the city should be guarded and provisioned in his absence. Fear of Kamose and Sekenenre's "pure Egyptian" warriors had been replaced by resolve and purpose. When the leaders of the city rose to take their leave of Pharaoh and perform a last obeisance in token of their loyalty, these men looked grim but determined.

The people of the palace and the priesthood were next to depart. The priestesses sang and danced a spell for Aweserre's final victory as they made their way from the terrace into the darkened palace.

Tiyi touched Aweserre's shoulder. "I will go in now, 'Serre," she whispered into his ear. "There are torches to be lit and food to prepare. You and the generals must eat before you go."

Gracefully, she slipped away with the last priestess. Aweserre knew he would not see her again until after the battle—if he survived.

Only the men of war were left. And Kasa.

Kasa disdained a chair or cushion. He stood to one side, slightly apart from the rest, in the shadow of a sycamore tree. His strong arms were folded across his body, his face in darkness. Aweserre saw power and wisdom in him, and sadness. The man was very different from his sister in appearance, character and intelligence, yet Kasa's sadness reminded Aweserre of Tiyi. It was time for Kasa to tell his story.

"How is it that the caravan people are indebted to the people of Egypt?" he asked.

Kasa took a deep breath. His story was also Anat's. She, like him, wore the blue tattoo, mark of a caravan leader. It was Anat who had made him caravan leader after her, Anat who held his hand while the tattoo was put on him. It had been the last time they had been allowed to touch each other....

Anat was dead to him. She was one of the chosen ones, destined to live the rest of her life within temple precincts. The priests of Punt had told her that she was blessed, that it was a great honor to be chosen, but Anat had wept.

She had not wanted to leave him, or her people.

Kasa remembered his anger at the fate which had come between them. He had raged and threatened, but to no avail. Anat was a believer. In the end, with their words and their strange trance-inducing drugs, the priests of Punt had worn her down.

One of Anat's last acts before accepting the living death assigned to her had been to make Kasa her heir. It was then that she told him of her people's debt to the Hyksos Pharaohs.

The blue eyed Hyksos king was waiting for him to answer. Kasa cleared his throat and began to explain, using the same words to Aweserre that Anat had used to him.

"Twenty-two summers ago there was a low river Nile. It was a bad year for the caravans. In Upper Egypt they were attacked and not allowed to water their animals. When they reached Memphis and the lands of the delta,

my people were in a bad way.”

Kasa had accepted the traders as his own, noticed Aweserre. “Go on,” he said. His generals, too, were listening.

“The governor of Memphis was a corrupt man who used the power of his office to bully those beneath him. He accepted my people’s bribes, but then would do nothing to help them.

“His wife, though, was virtuous. She sent word to the royal court at Avaris, begging that the people of the caravans be saved from starvation and death.

“And the King sent a nobleman to Memphis called Pepi—”

*Uncle Pepi.*

“This Pepi brought a child with him, to show how much he trusted the people of the caravans. He stripped the governor of Memphis of his post, and gave the caravan people letters of safe-conduct and an armed escort, so the traders could water their beasts wherever they liked. Pepi vowed an oath of eternal friendship between the Hyksos kingship and the Canaanites.

“Since then, every new caravan leader has taken the oath of friendship, each has promised to repay the Hyksos in whatever way possible. For make no doubt, without the man Pepi’s help, our people would have perished in that pitiless summer.”

Kasa fell silent. Aweserre was sunk in reverie, thinking back on events. “It was me,” he was saying. “I was the boy.” He had forgotten it was Memphis where he had seen the caravans. Suddenly he lifted his head.

“There was a child of the Canaanites who had been mute from birth, like your sister. I watched one of their healers cut his tongue free.”

Kasa stared at the smaller man in amazement. “That was Anat’s cousin. He can speak now.”

Aweserre nodded, satisfied to hear the outcome of the operation. “Now, how can you help me, Kasa?” he asked.

Kasa walked out of the shadows. Anat had made him caravan leader after her. It was time for his people to repay their ancient debt. “I have fifty men and fifty camels ready to fight at your side, lord.”

The Hyksos Pharaoh took the tall man’s hand and shook it. “You and your men are welcome,” he said.

A hum of whispered conversation had broken out between the generals. It was clear that they were dissatisfied with the smallness of Kasa’s forces.

“What are ka-mels?” one man shouted from the darkness. Few of the Egyptians there had seen a camel.

“Come into my camp and see.” For the first time since he had begun to speak, Kasa smiled. “Whatever you think now, I swear that you will not be disappointed.”

Food and torches were arriving by then. Aweserre leaped down from the terrace wall, seized a lighted torch in one fist and a handful of figs in the other. “Grab what you can. Eat on the way!” He thrust the torch at Kasa. “You lead.”

\* \* \* \*

“How’s your head?” Kasa asked as they left the palace grounds in Aweserre’s chariot with a stream of men and cars following.

“As though crocodiles have played with it.” Aweserre grimaced. “I’d forgotten how bad it was until you reminded me. Speaking of memory, who is Anat? The name seems familiar. I think Tiyi mentioned her....”

“She was my wife.”

“Was? I’m sorry she’s dead.”

Kasa’s face was as unyielding as granite. “Anat is not dead. She was chosen by the priests of Punt for a higher state than marriage.”

“What does that mean?”

Kasa’s expression did not change, but his whole body shuddered as the chariot jounced along the cobbled road. “It means that Anat is a sacred temple prostitute, who for a single silver coin must lie with a stranger but never again with her husband.”

One thing he did not add. In a final act of piety, Anat had divorced him when she entered the temple.

## Chapter 49

Kamose stalked round his chariot, kicking each of its parts. The chariot pole was beginning to splinter.

“Is nothing ever done in this camp?” Turning on the general of the chariot corps, Kamose seized the warrior’s golden collar of office. He gave the collar a vicious twist, half-throttling the smaller man. “I want repairs done now. Per-hor will take an inspection of this division at midday. If he finds one torn binding, one loose whip handle, then you will die.”

Pitching the general away from him, leaving the man clutching at his throat, Kamose ordered his escort to follow.

It was the third day after his confrontation with Aweserre. Kamose had returned from Avaris the previous evening to find that he had been removed from overall command of the army. Sekenenre had usurped his place.

He had not even been given the bulk of the chariot corps, or the elite troops. Sekenenre was commanding those units, too.

Seething with resentment, Kamose retired to the camp assigned to him. He was to be general of the conscripted infantry and the foreign troops, the least prestigious divisions of the host. His chariots—the strike force—numbered only thirty.

Every time he thought of his father’s actions Kamose’s gut wrenched. He had been made to look like a little boy playing with his father’s weapons: indulged for a time and then pushed out of the way so that Sekenenre could get on with the real fighting. Not only did the youth feel publicly humiliated, he knew that Sekenenre had enjoyed doing it.

“Let the crocodiles take him!” Kamose whispered through tightened lips as he sped back to his tent. Thoughts of murdering Sekenenre fermented in him like rotten barley-bread in a beer jar. Half-formed plans made with his sister Ahhotpe kept bobbing to the surface of his mind.

“Let no one disturb me until after Per-hor has completed his inspection,”

he commanded the escort. "No one, understand? Not even the king's messenger."

Punching his way through the tent flaps, Kamose discovered that his refuge was already occupied.

"Ah." Ahhotpe, laying aside her pen, leaned forward on her cushion. "My warrior returns." She held out a hand for Kamose to kiss. "You did not come to see me at the palace last night."

Kamose's face set in long hard lines like a bronze shield. Saying nothing, he knocked aside her hand and yanked Ahhotpe off her seat. Tearing off her wig, he crushed his mouth onto hers.

His half-sister ripped open his tunic with eager fingers, devouring naked flesh with teeth and kisses. They made love then and there, with a greed and ferocity bordering on madness. It was as though they wanted to eat each other alive.

At her second climax Ahhotpe cried out, then whimpered. Kamose felt the contractions of her womb pulsing beneath him, remembered the baby and finished more slowly. Afterwards he rolled Ahhotpe on top of him so that she would not have to rest on the sand floor.

"Oh!" Ahhotpe opened her eyes. "That was the best ever." She dangled her golden fringe of hair against Kamose's long nose. "Aren't you talking to me?"

"Of course I am." They were silent then for a moment, looking at each other, taking in the changes. Kamose's downy fringe had grown slightly thinner since they had last seen each other. Ahhotpe's bottom lip was chapped. Kamose ran a finger lightly over her mouth.

Finally the youth reached behind him for the cushion. "Here." He padded it against Ahhotpe's bulging front, "Rest our daughter on that." Since their last reunion, she had grown heavier.

Ahhotpe shifted part of her weight off him. "You've torn my robe."

"I'll get you another." Kamose lifted a lock of her hair and wound it round his fingers. He felt relaxed, almost happy. Sprawled and sated, dimly aware of work going on outside around them in the army camp, he was glad of the sentries. There would be no interruptions for at least another hour.

It was time to be serious. "What are you doing here? An army camp's no place for a girl."

His sister smiled and flicked one of his long earrings. "Still wearing the

turquoise, I see.”

“Answer me, Ahhotpe. What are you about this time?”

“I? Nothing at all. I merely asked father if we—Hathor and myself—could watch the war from the Memphis battlements. He gave permission for us to go one better and watch his final victory from the army lines.”

“Women on a battle field? Has he finally gone mad?”

Ahhotpe fluffed Kamose’s hair with her fingers. “Don’t look so shocked, my brother. The priests of Amun predict that Aweserre will indeed come to this battle ground. They say his army will be defeated and he will be taken back to Thebes bound at the arms and throat.”

Kamose, staring up at her, thought the gilt in her hair dimmed as she spoke. “Where is our Lower Egyptian?” he asked, dismissing a vague sense of unease.

“Hathor is with father. Sekenenre wished to show off his chariot to her.”

Kamose’s smothered laugh showed his displeasure. “I don’t want you or her anywhere near this war host when Aweserre’s army is sighted,” he said. “By Amun, I wouldn’t even trust our own men’s discipline in the heat of battle.”

“You know all about the way fighting stirs other instincts, I suppose?”

“Yes, I do know.”

“Oh, stop being mean, and let me have a bit of excitement for a change! I’ll be perfectly safe—a good deal safer than another three moons from now, when I’ll be fighting my own war with your child.”

Mention of the risks of childbearing—dangers Ahhotpe had been exposed to because of him—made Kamose feel guilty. “Well, if the priests say it’s safe, who am I to stop you?”

Ahhotpe knew she had won and nipped her teeth into his forearm. “Let me up.” She was beginning to feel rather foolish slouched on the floor, not to say uncomfortable.

Her brother helped her to rise and retrieved her writing materials. “Do you think Hathor can be trusted?” he asked suddenly, taking himself unawares with the question.

Ahhotpe, poised to replace her wig, froze. Her eyes narrowed. “Why do you ask?”

Kamose told her about his encounter with Tiye. “I know it probably does not mean much, but Hathor had not told me that my father’s mute could



talk.”

“Aweserre’s mute,” Ahhotpe reminded him.

“Yes,” agreed Kamose absently. He continued as though his sister had not interrupted. “She has been with us now for almost four months, yet what do we know of Hathor? Only that she was Ramose’s wet-nurse.”

“I trust her,” began Ahhotpe, thinking first of her own unborn infant. Then, remembering something else, she frowned. “Hathor did not tell me about Mose.”

“Who?”

“Ramose’s son. Well, possibly Ramose’s son. There is some doubt as to his parentage.” Suspicion grew in Ahhotpe. Could it be that Hathor was as good at dissembling as herself? That seemed unlikely, yet it was best to be prudent. She dropped a little poison in her brother’s ear. “Mose might have been useful as a hostage, yet Hathor did not point the boy out to me.”

“When was this?”

“The night we spent in the palace of Memphis. The evening I interrogated Ramose.” As she spoke, Ahhotpe was considering Hathor and Sekenenre and where that might lead. Hathor, she could see, might easily become a threat to her own plans. She had to think of the future, and of her child.

Regretfully—she sincerely liked Hathor—Ahhotpe decided to plant another seed of doubt into Kamose’s mind.

“And do you know what she said when I told her that Ramose’s wife was dead? She said this: ‘If only it had happened sooner.’”

It was the truth, almost. Hathor, when she learned of Neith’s death, had been first shocked, then filled with pity. When she said, “If only it had happened sooner,” she had been thinking of Neith and Ramose and the reconciliation between them which had come too late.

Kamose, as Ahhotpe intended, attached a different meaning to Hathor’s remark. He had given Hathor honor and freedom, promised to make her his wife. He could have sworn that she was loyal.

“You think she still cares for the priest? Enough, say, to be a spy for him?” It hurt Kamose to ask such questions. He loved Hathor.

“You should be able to tell that, better than I,” answered Ahhotpe softly, taking pen and paper from him. I had to warn him to be on his guard, he’s so trusting, she thought, killing guilt. Walking to the entrance of the tent, she

dipped out into the sunlight, leaving her brother alone with his thoughts.

\* \* \* \*

Sekenenre was not thinking about Hathor or Ahhotpe or any woman. He was remembering Zoser. Two days from now, Zoser should have been riding with him in his chariot, smiting down the Hyksos and driving them into the sea. Instead, Zoser was dead and Kamose sulked in his tent because he, Sekenenre, had taken back what was rightfully his.

"I am the one true Pharaoh," he said, trying to recapture the exhilaration he had felt in the temple of Set, when the priests told him his worship had been accepted. Strangely the mood would not come.

His fingers tightened round a standard. Ahhotpe had told him she was expecting Zoser's child. Time would show whether she was lying. Until then he was stuck with Kamose as heir.

Sekenenre shook his head. This would not do. He must be happy. According to the priests of Amun, he would be ruler of The Two Lands the day after tomorrow. He would complete the task he had started in Khufu's pyramid and finish off Aweserre.

Thinking of what he would do to the Hyksos Pharaoh, Sekenenre began to feel better. He remembered where he was and what he was doing: showing the woman Hathor the sacred intricacies of the royal chariot.

He smiled and patted her hand. "Forgive me my little lapse. You must think my manners are truly appalling."

Hathor, wanting nothing more than to be with Kamose and Ahhotpe, forced herself to lie. "I could never think that, Great House." Sekenenre, the double of his son, frightened her. Perhaps it was the lifeless voice, the way his eyes never smiled. Her skin took on a flush of color.

She was quite pretty when she blushed, decided Sekenenre. It might be interesting to court her, steal her from Kamose. But such trifles could wait until after the battle.

"Come, I will take you back to the boy." He handed her into the chariot, admiring her grace in movement, the swinging hips.

Children. He must have more of them, decided Sekenenre. He pulled himself up beside Hathor and cracked his whip above the horses' heads to set them going.

\* \* \* \*

“Show the people what the beasts can do,” Aweserre said to Kasa. He jumped down from his chariot and ran back among his war host, shouting orders.

Despite Kamose’s claim that all the country was against them, Aweserre’s forces had not been attacked or delayed. The small war host of five hundred men and eight score chariots had made good time.

They were now only a day’s march from Memphis. They could rest at this village tonight and travel more slowly tomorrow to conserve their strength. Aweserre did not want tired men fighting for him.

Glancing after the smaller man, Kasa marveled at ‘Serre’s inexhaustible supply of energy. With each hour that passed, Aweserre had grown stronger, more determined.

Kasa smiled to himself. The gods and nobles of Memphis might have deserted the Hyksos, but Aweserre was not giving up yet.

The villagers gasped as Kasa mounted a camel and urged it to its feet. It was probably the first time that any of them had seen such an animal so close. Several looked disgusted. As a distant silhouette on the desert horizon, a herd of wild camels appeared mysterious and exciting. Coming face to face with the beasts themselves was quite a different matter. They spat and broke wind incessantly, their teeth could bite through a man’s finger, and their huge padded feet could deliver a kick worse than any mule’s.

Kasa remembered Anat’s face when they had first been within spitting distance of a camel in Punt. Her deep brown eyes had widened, her square jaw dropped and then she wrinkled her nose. He could see similar expressions now on the upturned faces while he paraded his own camel round the threshing floor, letting the villagers have a good look.

It had not taken Anat long to see the possibilities of camels, nor had it taken her or her people long to master the riding of them. Perhaps that was because of some inborn skill of desert races, yet Kasa thought it was probably due to Anat herself.

Anat’s eyes were light brown, steady. Hathor’s eyes were dark brown. Since his return to Egypt, Kasa kept thinking about Hathor, perhaps because

she had been mentioned so often. Yes, that must be the reason.

Kasa dug his knees harder into the camel's sides and, using stick and voice, urged the grumbling beast to a lumbering trot.

Suddenly a chariot burst through the ranks of the war host and came thundering towards Kasa at full gallop. The villagers backed up several steps, eyes shining by the light of the sun's half-disc settled low on the horizon. They were too surprised by what happened next to make a sound.

The camel burst into a gallop faster than that of the horses. With Kasa bouncing up and down on its humped and bony back, the beast swerved round and charged the chariot.

The camel's long legs ate the distance between it and the horses. It changed direction when the chariot jerked aside, moving at the same time as the horses but at much greater speed.

Again and again, the horses wheeled left or right, skidding on the hard packed earth as they performed seemingly impossible turns. Yet such skill made no difference. The camel and its rider were more maneuverable and above all faster than the horses and chariot.

Kasa was also higher than the charioteer. As he closed down the remaining gap and passed the camel within a leg's length of the car, he leaned down and poked the long-haired driver with his stick. The driver cursed in a strange tongue and shook his fist at the retreating rider.

The villagers laughed. They were beginning to see the advantages of this brute, the camel.

Aweserre brought his sweating blacks to a final halt and vaulted down to remove their harness. He and Kasa had put on this show at every settlement they came to, and everywhere the result was the same. He prayed now that the camel's magic still held. It did for him. The sight of a sandy-colored, thick-lipped beast with a hill on its back bearing down on him out of the sunset was not easily forgotten.

Still Aweserre was glad that it was Kasa and Kasa's own Canaanites who rode these uncanny beasts into battle. None of the Egyptians, including him, felt comfortable on a humped back.

"Who wants to join us?" he shouted. "We have fifty of these creatures, a whole army of camels! These will keep the Theban chariots and the Medjay out of your hair!"

A few villagers laughed, but no one stepped forward. They, like so

many other delta villages, had been stripped of any desire to fight by hunger.

Looking round the famine-stricken faces, Aweserre sighed. "To every man who joins me, I will pay his weight in food." Kasa's caravan had brought in some much-needed supplies, but not enough. All Aweserre could hope was that the army's rations would last as far as Memphis.

As it had at other settlements, the food offering worked. Young men surged forward and were met by army scribes. Women mobbed Kasa as he dismounted from the camel. By tomorrow when the army moved again, there would be another new platoon.

Aweserre, tending to his horses, thought of one more man whom he dearly hoped would join them before Memphis. He lifted his head and looked south west, towards Mazghuna.

"What are you doing at this moment, Ramose?" he asked aloud in the Hyksos tongue. "Have you forgotten us? Do you no longer care for politics?"

He received no answers to these questions, but someone did.

## Chapter 50

Ramose knew he was going mad because he could not hear Neith. Others assailed him, called to him out of the desert.

Aweserre, on his left. *Where are you, Ramose? I need you.*

Mose, to his right. *I hate you. You're not my father!*

Sekenenre, a dry voice behind him. *I am ruler of the Two Lands. The usurper is dead.*

*Be wise, like the people of Memphis.* Ahhotpe. Sometimes Ramose caught glimpses of the Theban princess in smooth curves of white sand.

The desert was alive around him. Cool yellow eyes assessed his stumbling progress, red tongues tasted the moistureless air. A solitary jackal trotted to within striking distance and thereafter kept pace with him. Once it found a bird's egg and drank that down while Ramose drained one of his water bags.

Ramose ignored the watchers. He had not run the gauntlet of Sekenenre's soldiers out of Memphis to fall to jackal or lion. He had crossed the Nile and its field of reeds and walked to the city of the dead to summon his wife.

Outside the entrance to the tomb and mortuary chapel which would be Neith's resting place and one day also his own, the priest made his final preparations.

He had found a statue done in Neith's likeness in the chapel and dragged it into the sunlight. The half-life-size statue was of hard stone, painted in the tints of flesh and hair and clothes. It had been fashioned with great care, for, if some misfortune befell Neith's mummy, this statue would be a refuge for her ka. For as long as the statue survived, Neith would be immortal.

Ramose set four small vessels of water, one for each quarter of the earth, around the statue. He sprinkled water from these four over the stone,

praying to Ptah, god of creation. He touched the head of the statue. Thanks to these secret rites, the head should now be alive, even without any touch from the hooked tool the embalmers used in their Opening of the Mouth ceremony.

“Neith, I summon your soul to this statue.”

Next he struck a spark and made a fire. He took from his carrying pouch four small vases and set alight the incense within them. As the sweet stuff burned, Neith’s breath should be re-animated within the stone.

“I summon your heart to this statue.” He kissed the painted lips, an act not part of the ritual.

Taking in a deep breath, Ramose untied the strings of the second cloak he had brought with him and unwrapped what was inside. The foreleg of a dead bull, a beast sacrificed at the temple of Ptah two days before, rolled free of the cloak.

The stench was appalling. Reluctantly Ramose picked up the foreleg and cut into the blood-crusting stump so that it would bleed again. A thin stream of red-brown dripped into the sand.

Quickly the priest touched the foreleg to the statue’s mouth and eyes and spoke the words as passed down to him through the priesthood of Ptah. Carefully, he wiped the smear of blood from the statue’s face.

Images of Neith came and went before his eyes. They were all of her working in her garden, the place she had loved best. The bats from the pyramid of Khufu seemed to chatter in his ears. He had not eaten for a day. Food was no longer important.

*Ramose.* Ahhotpe again, interrupting with no regard for the ritual.

“Go away!” muttered the priest, throwing the bull’s foreleg as far away as possible.

The jackal, drowsing on a rock, snapped to its feet and slunk forward. There was the crunch of bone as its jaws gobbled down the rotting meat.

Ramose drew out from his robe the long ostrich feather which he had taken from the stores of the temple of Ptah. This he fanned over Neith’s statue, twice to the North and twice to the South. He did not know why that was done.

*I need you.*

“You’ve an army, ‘Serre. Leave me alone.”

*None of this will work.* Sekenenre mocked him.

Ramose pointed west into the land of the desert and the dead. “Go from me, evil spirit!”

He fumbled in his carrying pouch for the red stones and cornelian to restore the statue’s lips and eyelids to their proper color. When he had done that, Neith should be able to speak to him.

Ramose’s hands were shaking so much that he smeared cornelian across the statue’s chin. Hastily, he rubbed off the mark, added two thick dabs of color under the eyebrows and stepped back.

“You are pure with the purification of Ptah.” The priest smoothed oil over the limbs of the stone. The oil had magical properties that would preserve Neith’s youth forever.

Ramose put aside the oil bottle and knelt over the likeness of his wife. “Live within this statue, Neith,” he whispered. “Come to me again.” He closed his eyes and touched his forehead against the hard stone breast.

The wash of memories stopped abruptly. He was a middle-aged man with no wife, no son and no future. Another moment passed, without a sound. Ramose clasped the shoulders of the statue, putting all his great strength forth in an embrace.

Nothing.

He kissed the cool lips stained with carmine, his mind seeking feverishly for the least sense of life.

“Be that way!” Ramose let go. He turned his back on the statue and leaned against it. His head ached with the incense. It was not enough that she had been unfaithful to him in life, now Neith must be the same in death. Their whole marriage had been a lie. Mose was some general’s brat.

Wearily, Ramose scooped together his things. He would try again at midday, repeat the rituals of water sprinkling and incense burning. There might be some part of the ceremony he had missed.

The jackal watched him through solemn eyes as Ramose carried the statue back into the shade of the tomb.

\* \* \* \*

“This is madness,” said Kamose through gritted teeth. “I don’t care what the auguries say, it’s still madness.”

Beside him in the chariot Per-hor shifted uneasily. What Kamose was



saying was treason, yet privately Per-hor felt bound to agree with the youth. With the enemy in sight of Memphis, what Sekenenre had chosen to do was crazy.

Sekenenre quite simply had ordered the entire Theban army to take position outside the walls of the city. There was no possible military advantage to be gained from this mad maneuver. If anything it would give the initiative back to Aweserre.

Per-hor spotted a scorpion scurrying near the right wheel of the chariot and speared it with his javelin. Leaving his tent at first light, he had seen a dead scarab beetle, another unlucky sign.

“We’re stranded out here.” Kamose ran a seasoned eye over the ranks of the Theban army. At the rear of Sekenenre’s battle van there was a flash of gold. Ahhotpe and Hathor: of that Kamose had no doubt. His father had given them a chariot, which Hathor would be driving.

“Take care, Delta-woman,” said Kamose under his breath, unsure whether that was a warning to Hathor or a plea for her safety. These days, the only person he felt he could trust was Ahhotpe, and he wasn’t entirely sure of her.

Kamose checked over his weapons. These he trusted absolutely. In less than an hour he would be using them against Aweserre’s men.

He wished he could stop worrying about his sister’s presence and look forward to the fight.

The plain before the city of Memphis was flat. He could see a long way. Somewhere in the middle distance, standards and shields gleaming, their marching feet swallowed by the heat haze, came the Hyksos’ army. They were taking their time. No doubt of it.

Kamose thought about the bronze swords and spears of the Lower Egyptians. Most of his men were armed with copper-tipped weapons, another advantage to Aweserre.

When Kamose had pointed this out to Sekenenre he had been made to feel like a coward. He had spent the rest of the war-council fighting down his anger, saying nothing against his father’s battle plans. Sekenenre would have to find out for himself that the archers should be further forward in the chariot ranks. Their double-curved bows—ironically another innovation of the Hyksos—had a long range which needed to be used. As with his disdain of Memphis’s walls, Sekenenre was squandering his resources.

“By Amun! Why can he not see sense?” Kamose settled to a moody waiting, half-hearing the scrape of stone on metal as Per-hor sharpened his sword.

A platoon of Medjay infantry under his command started to sing a bawdy tune. Soon the other ranks were humming the refrain. Towards the back of the lines of massed soldiers the air was turgid with the smell of roasting meat and singed by braziers. Army cooks were preparing Sekenenre’s evening feast from the desert gazelles hunted down that morning.

Kamose recalled that it was the month of November, when the Nile floodwaters begin to recede and the god Osiris puts forth violets and narcissi. Yet even here, in the cooler north of Egypt, the heat leeches at his mouth and eyes.

The dust cloud of the Hyksos army, growing bigger as it approached, started to divide into two wings or horns. Kamose rubbed at a few scales on his body armor, brightening them to match the burnished appearance of the rest. If the battle were up to him, he would be attacking now. Sekenenre wanted to make the war a series of set-pieces and as he was the commander he had gotten his way.

Shading his eyes, Kamose looked across the waiting Theban forces at his father. From his position on the left horn or flank of the war host, the youth could just make out the twelve red sun-discs on Sekenenre’s hemhemet crown, the largest and most extravagant of all the royal diadems. His father’s body armor, bronze overlaid with silver, shone out like a star amidst the glowing ribbons and tall plumes of the chariot corps.

With all his heart, whatever the dangers, Kamose wished he were part of that central group. Sekenenre’s tactics might be folly, but if he won today then all the glory would be his.

Aweserre’s troops—a thousand men now, a hundred and fifty chariots and a muddled platoon of Canaanites, according to Kamose’s scouts—were ready. On the plain, without the advantage of gathering on a ridge, they grouped in the time-honored manner: a strike force of chariots in the center and infantry behind, with the strongest spearmen on the two horns.

Kamose was disappointed that the Hyksos had turned out to be so conventional. He had expected greater things of Aweserre.

In numbers of chariots, the two forces were equal, the Theban hundred

chariots being swelled at the last moment by men and cars from provincial governors who had finally chosen their side. In numbers of infantry, the two Theban divisions—named after the gods Amun and Ra—outnumbered the Lower Egyptian forces two to one. Aweserre and his men would be fighting with the sun in their eyes.

Trumpets sounded, and the chariots in both armies burst into action, streaming forward over the hard-packed sands to make the first assault on the enemy. Kamose saw his father's flashing crown at the head of the Theban forces and was sick with envy. Until the chariots had engaged, he and his men were spectators. Only when the battle cars wheeled aside would the infantry and foreign troops on the left horn go in.

Determined not to watch Sekenenre, Kamose fixed his gaze on the bit of gold that he had spotted behind the Theban lines of chariots and infantry. "By Amun, I wish you weren't there."

"My lord?" Per-hor had heard him.

"Nothing," said Kamose, checking his turquoise earrings.

Per-hor gave a shout, clutching tighter at his own shield. "There's the Hyksos. Would you look at that chariot! He's charging straight at Sekenenre!"

Unable to help himself, Kamose whipped his head round. A single black chariot, hung with all kinds of mirrors and pennants, was way ahead of the Lower Egyptian group. Kamose saw Aweserre, smaller and whiter than those near him, black hair tufting out of his leather helmet and blowing back from his shoulders. He was shouting something, the words distorted by dust and the smothering baffles of heat and the boom of hooves. His two black horses moved superbly.

He has no driver with him, thought Kamose, as Sekenenre notched an arrow. "Fire it!" Kamose urged his father.

Sekenenre waited for a few more beats of the horses' racing feet until Aweserre was almost in javelin range and then drew.

It was impossible, but Kamose believed he heard the hum of the bow. One arrow and then a second and third arched in the blue heaven, hovering an instant like kestrels before stooping to the target. Both car and horses had streaked sideways, moving fast as a sidewinder, but the lead black of Aweserre's team screamed and dipped as the third arrow grazed its neck.

Kamose, seeing the horse lurch, cheered as the two chariots closed

down on each other. He saw the discs of his father's hemhemet crown gleaming like twelve red eyes, saw Sekenenre standing straight and perfectly balanced, hurling a throwing stick to knock off his enemy's head.

Kamose never saw where it fell. The two chariot corps had finally caught up and, in a swirling mass of spinning wheels and churning horses, sand-clouds, arrows and sun-dazzled shields, the battle proper began at midday.

## Chapter 51

The solitary jackal still lounged near the tomb. Ramose muttered a charm against it. "Get away!" He threw a stone. Gobbling softly, the jackal limped off.

Ramose was relieved to see it go. Somewhere towards midday the voices, too, had stopped pestering him. He hoped these were signs that Neith would speak.

Meditating until he was calm, the priest went slowly through the long rituals involved in summoning the dead. His head rang with the final words of the ceremony as he strained with every part of his body and spirits to hear.

There was no answer.

"Neith!" He tried thinking of her, closing his eyes and grinding carmine-sticky fingers into his black eyelids. Yet the memories which came were elusive and static, not a living woman at all. It was as though he had already begun to forget her.

Bewildered, alarmed and ashamed, Ramose slumped down with his head on his knees. Sitting in a grubby pool of sand, water and incense beside his wife's half-life-size statue, he wept.

Anyone who knew him from court or temple would have been astonished. Ramose cried and moaned, striking himself with his fists, hugging the tiny fragment of carmine because it had once been hers. He felt he should die.

Yet he did not want to die, and that made him guilty. Why should he not wish to join his wife in the afterlife? Why must he be selfish?

Ramose had stopped crying by then and sat sullen and quiet in the blistering midday sun. He did not know what to do.

The jackal crept back to investigate. Ramose rose quickly to his feet and the creature bristled, snarling and showing its teeth.

Ramose thought of Mose shouting, “He’s not my father!” He thought of the boy’s long skinny limbs, the long narrow head, the bright black eyes, the tawny skin which would darken as he got older. Mose liked to run and was good at it, like himself.

Mose with his spinning top. Mose staring with a child’s gruesome fascination at a scratch on his knee. Mose as a baby, learning to crawl.

The boy was his.

Mose...was his child.

Suddenly that was not an idea but a certainty.

Ramose touched the statue. “Sleep, my wife. Journey safely through the Field of Reeds into paradise.” He need trouble Neith no longer.

Finally accepting her death, Ramose cradled the heavy stone statue and carried it for the last time into the tomb, setting it down opposite the head of the underground staircase. He drew a single lotus flower for her in the dust, then sped into the sunlight, running because he was alive and because there were others alive who needed him.

The jackal followed as Ramose set out for Memphis.

\* \* \* \*

Hathor, driving Ahhotpe in a war chariot, glanced backwards over her shoulder. Through the heavy pulse of heat she glared at the white walls of Memphis, at the nobles, lifted high on their carrying chairs, gathered at the wall’s lowest points to watch. She hated them.

She no longer hated Neith. It had surprised her, how much she could appreciate a dead Neith. Perhaps it was the manner of the woman’s fate, dying for her husband, which Hathor felt to be so pitiful. To her, Ramose was not worth the sacrifice.

When she remembered the High Priest of Memphis, Kasa—and lately Aweserre—were not far behind. Hathor could not understand why these two, Kasa and Aweserre, so different from each other, had suddenly become interwoven in her memories. It was almost as though they were brothers. Yet Kasa’s closest male relative had been a cousin, a pig-keeper called Nakht.

Hathor did not know yet about Tiyi’s marriage to Aweserre. Kamose had not told her—an omission he justified to himself by deciding that such

details could wait until after the battle—and Ahhotpe kept secrets as other men hoarded gold.

Hathor tugged at her wig—why had she worn one, today of all days?—then tugged at her lower lip, tightening the fingers of her other hand around the reins. With one last baleful stare at the Memphis nobility, she swung back to the quickening beat of battle.

Sekenenre's throwing stick had missed Aweserre but struck and killed the driver of the car behind. Packed together with others of the corps in close formation, the driverless horses ploughed sideways into two more pairs, creating instant havoc.

Forced to break early from the struggle to regroup, a third of the Lower Egyptian chariots exposed their backs, and the Theban infantry rushed forward.

In another moment the line which included Hathor and Ahhotpe would begin to move. Up ahead the battle was already so noisy that Ahhotpe, leaning towards Hathor, had to shout. "I want us closer! I want to be in the thick of it!"

Taking in Ahhotpe's flushed face and wide eyes, her smiling mouth, pouting as though to gobble up every scrap of excitement, Hathor knew she would get no sense from the Theban princess. Somehow she must protect Ahhotpe, deep in this new role as Egyptian patriot, and keep them both alive.

"I shall smite them with my sword! I shall kill!" Ahhotpe broke into a war chant in the chariot, pounding her feet.

"Careful!" cried Hathor. Ahhotpe would burst through the wicker frame of the chariot, stamping as violently as that.

Ahhotpe whirled on her as though she were the enemy. "Do you think that because I am with child I should be weak? By Amun, I carry royal blood in my veins, and so does my unborn daughter! She will be a great warrior, like her father—like her mother! I will not hide while the fate of the world is being decided."

Ahhotpe, who knew nothing of fighting, had seized sword and shield from a hapless conscript. She was dressed in the short, unbleached sleeveless tunic of an infantryman, and before first light Hathor had spent hours plaiting Ahhotpe's long golden hair into the many small braids of a Nubian warrior.

What was wrong with this family today? Sekenenre with that massive crown, dazzling armor. “Ahhotpe, calm down,” begged Hathor.

“Drive, Delta-woman. The column’s starting to move.” The Theban princess spoke as though she were a servant.

Hathor, speechless with astonishment, sensed a shadow fall between them. Perhaps it had something to do with the air of Memphis, she thought, stung into flippancy. It was her and Ramose all over again. What was it in her that people did not trust? Was it because she had killed her baby? It seemed that murder had put a mark on her forever.

She needed to start afresh. She needed to leave Egypt, yet where could she go? And there was Kamose. She would be Kamose’s second wife.

Oh yes? screamed a voice within her. Bata and her father, Ramose and now perhaps Ahhotpe. She had been rejected so many times. Why then did she hope for Kamose?

Hathor relaxed her grip on the reins and coaxed the horses into a trot, matching their steps to those of the pair alongside. She would need to work the horses a little, find out what they could do, before attempting to move up the lines. She smiled at Ahhotpe, grateful when the princess winked. Nothing was ever certain for her, she concluded, but let it be others who broke faith first.

“Here we go.” The two young women spoke at the same time and laughed nervously, feeling themselves drawn inexorably into the shining coils of war.



## Chapter 52

Ramose stopped, and the jackal stopped. “What do you want?” Ramose was hungry and thirsty. So, he suspected, was the jackal. “I’ve nothing for you.”

The small jackal humbly lowered its head. Ramose, who had been watching its mouth, now found himself staring down the gap between two pricked ears. Between the gap, the white walls of Memphis, small in the distance, and something else.

The priest strained to make out what it was. The scene flexed like a wave, coming and going with the lethal daylight. In the desert the eye of the sun-god Ra became as pitiless as that of Sekhmet, the lion-goddess destroyer.

It was a great force of men and chariots, Ramose decided. Aweserre must not only still be alive, he had done what Ramose had promised Ahhotpe he would do and brought his army to Memphis.

Thoughts of the Hyksos Pharaoh, Ramose’s closest friend, were submerged in panic. Why, after Neith’s death, had he not learned? He had been a fool to leave the boy in the city. If the army were attacking Memphis, Mose would be in danger.

*Do not be concerned. Your son is quite safe.*

At first the priest thought that the jackal had spoken. That being impossible, he looked round over his shoulder.

No one was there.

It was one of the desert’s tricks. He had not eaten in over a day, and his mind was making its own pictures, its own sounds. He was like the man on the battlefield who lies wounded. Weak through pain and loss of blood, he thinks he hears the voices of his family, though they are a hundred leagues away.

*Follow the creature.* The voice spoke again, but this time the priest

would not look round. It was all illusion.

Ramose took a drink of water to clear his head. Replacing the flask in his carrying pouch, he realized that the jackal had vanished. Strangely, he felt disappointed.

*Follow him.* The voice was growing insistent. From behind a sand-buried tomb, the jackal yapped like a dog.

Ramose readjusted his carrying pouch and set off in the opposite direction, running away from the city of the dead. Spectral noises were no concern of his. Mose in Memphis was not safe.

He needed to be sure Mose was safe. He wanted to embrace the child, feel that dark narrow head against his breast. He needed to know that the bitterness and distrust between them could be put right. He needed that most of all.

He wished he could run faster. He, Ramose, the one who could always be patient, wanted to be there, now, no waiting. He wanted Mose. He wanted his son back. That general—it was just a name on a scrap of paper, a paper destroyed. He knew no Ubaoner.

Ramose's feet drummed against the hard packed earth. He was running as Sekenenre had done in the Heb Sed, with great speed and long effortless strides. Mose was his seed, the precious fruit of his loins. Let him be safe. Let his son forgive him. Let Mose be safe. Safe....

He did not see the shattered animal skull jutting from the sand until almost too late. Swerving sharply, Ramose managed to avoid impaling his foot on the broken spike of bone but continued sliding sideways. The sand took him, and he spun over and over, just as a piece of used papyrus rolls itself up with a snap. He was deposited, winded, shaken, face-down at the bottom of the dune.

Feverishly, Ramose groped in his carrying pouch. The water flask was still intact. He pressed it to his dirty mouth and drank.

*Careful, my dear. You're spilling it.*

It couldn't be her, Ramose told himself. It was only a dream. Yet his hands shook as he replaced the rag stopper, and he felt a shadow prickling the back of his neck.

The laughter was so like hers that, for an instant, he almost looked.

*For a priest you're very difficult to convince of my reality.* She sounded disappointed, and Ramose could not bear that, not when he'd disillusioned

her so much in life.

“Neith.”

He started forward on his knees and grabbed at the shadow, expecting it to melt away and for him to be left alone. Something slid through his fingers like water, and then his wife was standing before him. Neith as she had been in her youth, firm-breasted and with shining hair.

*I’m glad you remember me as I was, said the ghost of his wife. But I should scold you, Ramose, for doubting.*

Yes, this was Neith, wanting him to apologize. Ramose shaded his eyes from the whiteness of her robes. Her face gleamed with light. “I’m glad you’re here,” he said, ashamed because part of him wanted to demand why she had not appeared earlier.

Neith laid a shimmering hand on his forehead, her touch wonderfully cool. *I didn’t want to see you when you were thinking that Mose wasn’t our son. You were too quick to believe the worst, Ramose. I did think once that I could be pregnant by Ubaoner, yet that was before we were betrothed. We had only just met. I waited two whole months to be sure I was not with child and only then would I accept your suit. We were married a month later. Have you forgotten how I made you wait?*

“I’m sorry.” She had made him apologize after all. Worse, he felt a fool, recognizing the truth of her words, such a simple explanation. And he had hoped that their reunion would be perfect.

*That was part of the trouble, Ramose. You always demanded so much. It made you hard to live with.* Neith withdrew her hand, and his head ached. He wanted her to touch him again.

*Now you must listen to me. I can’t stay long. You must follow the jackal, do you understand?*

Puzzled, Ramose squinted up at her bright face.

*The fate of Egypt lies with you. Mose’s safety too: it’s one and the same. Do not go to Memphis yet.”* Neith’s hand glided to his lips. *“I await you in our Field of Reeds, Ramose. You shall have a long life, and when we meet again there will be no more questions, only the perfection you seek.*

Her fingers pressed lightly against his mouth, like a kiss, or a blessing, and the whiteness vanished. Neith was gone.

\* \* \* \*

In the divine sun-boat, the gods were jammed against one side of the gunwale to watch the battle. They saw the mortal Hathor and Ahhotpe moving gradually through the battle lines, closer to the Theban chariot corps and the fiercest fighting.

“What a natural!” exclaimed Hapi, god of the inundation, as the golden-haired princess speared another victim. She clearly had taken to warfare, twisting her weapon on impact to inflict the greatest injury.

“Ahhotpe is slaying those men with the same relish as a pregnant mantis eats its mate,” remarked the goddess Hathor. “Aren’t appearances deceptive?”

“With her looks, she’s as strange as a mantis,” answered the goddess Nephthys sourly, “so it’s not surprising.”

The blue god grinned. War was one of his provinces, and he was enjoying everything. He dug his elbow into the diaphragm of the god beside him. “Good sport, eh, thunderer?” he said, using one of the epithets appropriate to the god Set. The god gazed at Amun with solemn eyes, but said nothing.

“Look, here comes Kamose!” Hapi was acting as commentator on events. “He’s leading his men in from the left horn!”

Even as Hapi spoke, Kamose’s chariot swept in a flashing curve, bold as a kestrel’s wing, against the main force of the Lower Egyptian infantry.

“He doesn’t want to be left out of the kill,” said Nephthys.

“Or be bested by his sister,” said the goddess Hathor.

“What’s all that racket? Where are Sekenenre and Aweserre?” demanded the sun god Ra. Petulantly, the old god brought his flail down on his fan-bearer’s back. “A thousand curses upon this infernal dust. I can see nothing!”

Unas dropped himself and his fan upon the deck, shielding his ears.

“Get up.” Ra prodded his unfortunate servant with his sandal and glared at the other gods. “I want Sekenenre and Aweserre. Why aren’t they on the plain where I can see them? When I was Pharaoh on earth, long ago—”

Knowing what Ra’s reminiscences were like, the gods moved in a body to make the scene clearer for his rheumy eyes. Amun stilled the dust, Hathor cast drops of moisture to polish and refresh the air.

The din of battle increased as men could see farther. Rank after rank of

infantrymen, gory as butchers and slipping in blood and horse manure, tried desperately to slaughter each other. The woman Hathor whipped the dagger from her long sea-blue dress, which by then was neither long nor blue but ripped halfway up her legs and black with dirt, and slashed open another driver's throat. Losing the dagger, she tore the wig from her scalp and hurled it at the head of a closing infantryman. The man shrieked, threw up his hands as though a scorpion had landed on his face, and Ahhotpe finished him off.

"There they are!" cried Ra, drooling onto Unas's shoulder in his excitement. "Look at them go!"

Far below, the two opposing chariot corps were wheeling off to regroup and charge in again. Sekenenre's chariot was red up to the wheel hubs. Aweserre's car had lost most of its swinging ornaments.

"Who'd be a soldier?" asked Nephthys, watching the antics of the mortal Hathor and fussing over her own long, bejeweled wig.

No one answered. Most were tracking Kamose, who commanded attention by the vigor of his slaughter, the speed and accuracy of his attacks.

In all of this, not one of the gods in the sun boat gave a thought to Kasa and the small force of Canaanites, out of range but standing ready. Kasa for the moment was forgotten, as was Ramose.

Which was a pity, for though Kasa was merely waiting, Ramose was about to discover something.

## Chapter 53

Ramose and the jackal went deeper into the city of the dead, going towards the western horizon. As he walked, Ramose became aware of the same change taking place within him as occurred when he underwent the purification rituals in the temple of Ptah. The past and the future were one. Emotions—which are all part memory, part anticipation—no longer had meaning.

He followed, no longer asking himself where the jackal was leading him. His mouth burned and his eyes were raw with grit, but Ramose felt neither.

For an hour he walked without thought, aware of nothing but sun and endless desert. Threading along a once flagged causeway that led towards the half-buried pyramid of Unas and the massive stepped pyramid of Zoser, a way which seemed familiar, Ramose saw the jackal lunge off the causeway towards the smaller pyramid.

Skirting the ordered pattern of sand hills which marked courtiers' tombs, the jackal jogged to the north side of Unas's pyramid. Stopping halfway, it began to dig in the sand.

When the priest caught up, he also began to dig. Side by side they toiled, the jackal thrusting the soft, red sand back with its hind legs, while Ramose scooped it away with his hands. A powerful compulsion was on both of them and they worked without pause.

Time no longer had meaning, so Ramose was surprised when their efforts were suddenly rewarded. Stretching out his cupped hands, he found wood.

In a matter of moments, Ramose had cleared away the rest of the sand to reveal the entrance to the pyramid. Three wooden beams blocked the way, their dryness showing their extreme age. Beyond them, the air in the pyramid smelled musty but sweet.

Ramose smiled. "And we have a ready-made torch to hand," he said, prizing out the thinnest beam. He glanced at the jackal, glad even of such a companion to share his discovery.

The jackal was gone.

Ramose touched his fingers to the spot where the jackal had been, then found his fire-maker and lit his torch. The wood was so dry it burned easily and he was able to push the other beams aside and duck into the entrance passage. He enjoyed its coolness after the aggressive aridity of the desert.

Unas' tomb was easier to move in than Khufu's had been. The passageway was slightly bigger, and the descent into the pyramid was not as steep. Walking in a crouch, Ramose scrambled over three heaps of rubble, marking where three separate blocking stones had once been in place, and came to the first chamber proper.

He entered the chamber and straightened, raising the torch above his head.

He saw stars, and for a moment did not realize they were painted on the granite roof-beams. He saw walls alive with writing. Reading the first of the texts, he gasped.

Behind him a voice said, "Sekenenre thinks that my main nature is rather bullish. Certainly he has worshipped me as such."

A beautiful young man was beside him in the chamber, looking at the writing with him. "What do you think?" said this vision.

Ramose dropped the torch. He let it lie burning between him and the stranger.

"I am disappointed that you do not recognize me," said the beautiful young man. Stretching out his hand, he stroked the writing on one wall, touching the symbol for a blue lily. When he drew his fingers away, a blue lily blossom grew out of the wall. "Feel it," he invited the priest. "It is real."

He touched the symbols for bread and beer. "Let us eat." He lifted a loaf and jug of beer out of the flat wall.

This could not be happening, thought Ramose, but the beer, slipping down his desiccated throat, was real enough. Sitting cross-legged across from the stranger, the torch still between them, he drank and ate well. The bread was as hot as if fresh from an oven.

They finished their meal with fat shiny dates plucked from the wall, and the beautiful young man sat back with a contented belch.

"Immortal food is always the best," he said. "You have tasted heaven here."

Ramose chuckled. He could not disagree.

"Ah, I have missed that laugh of yours, these past days."

"Not so much surely, my Lord Set, as you have missed Aweserre's?" asked Ramose blandly.

The god slapped his thighs in his delight. "Well said, priest! I knew you would recognize me in the end."

Ramose bowed his head. "I was under the impression, Lord, that you had finished with Aweserre and myself. If, as you say, Sekenenre has already worshipped you as you demanded of him—"

"Perhaps as I demanded, master priest, but not, I fear, as I would have wished—"

"Yet still," continued Ramose, refusing to be put off, even by a god. "If Sekenenre has fulfilled all the conditions of the bargain you made with him, then Aweserre and I are already doomed."

"You seem very calm about that idea."

Ramose smiled. "My own fate is not important. The only thing I would beg, Lord, is that my son Mose is saved."

The god Set took up the torch and rose. "Everyone, you included, is being premature," he said. "Sekenenre calls me an unlovely title which he gleaned from an inscription on the lid of an old red-granite sarcophagus. You of course know where he got that from. But no matter. The thing which is important is that our Pharaoh of Upper Egypt now assumes that he holds all the answers to my nature."

He paused, but Ramose would not venture an opinion. He did not know what to say.

Set smiled as though the man's silence pleased him. "Sekenenre's priests think that the hasty worship they gave me left me satisfied. I assure you, Ramose, it did not. They merely saw what they wished to see."

"What do you wish of me, Lord?" said Ramose, asking the same question which had begun his own search for Set.

"The same as before," said the god. "What am I?"

His beautiful face changed, becoming the face of a bull. Then a pig. Then a jackal. Then a camel.

Anteater, antelope, bear, heron, hippo, fox, okapi—the transformations



continued, blurring into each other until Ramose was dizzy.

The priest closed his eyes. Set could be all these creatures or none of them, and in the end they were irrelevant. Appearance was not important for a god.

Ramose opened his eyes into total darkness. Set had vanished. He was as he had been before meeting with the god: bone dry with thirst, parched with hunger.

The priest moaned and slumped face-down on the sand floor of the chamber. He had been tricked. It had all been for nothing.

## Chapter 54

A dim light was burning to his left, where none had been before. Ramose turned his head and squinted at it. He had forgotten the torch. He blew on the tiny flame emerging from the wood, keeping it alive.

He was in the pyramid of Unas. Something had tricked him there. Neith's ghost had been mistaken. He was not going to live a long life. He was going to die here, in this stone chamber.

Ramose laughed till his lungs were full of cold pyramid dust, and then he choked. Saving up the last mouthful of water from his flask, he looked again at the writing on the walls.

Idly the priest began to read.

In moments his hands and face were pressed against the wall as he strained to make out every detail of the ancient script. Here was the answer, it must be—

In hieroglyphics, the drawing which represented Set was a strange long-snouted, stiff-tailed, four-legged creature. That symbol now occurred again and again in the pyramid of Unas.

"If famine should fall upon the lands of Egypt," Ramose read aloud, "Pray to...." The text broke off, but there was a picture, skinny men with their ribs showing, their arms and legs nothing but skin and bone.

The image disturbed Ramose, reminding him of how thin Mose had grown. He left that section of writing and passed to the next wall.

Behind him the pictures on the first wall changed, though Ramose, half-delirious with thirst, was not aware that he had imagined the grim scenes of famine. He continued to read aloud.

"Set is the vessel on which Osiris sails the waters of mortality."

It was a clever way of disguising the fact that Set had murdered his brother god, thought Ramose, but then he dismissed his automatic reaction. The words belonged to a simpler age, a more literal age. Set carried Osiris.

He was not an enemy.

“Set stands in the prow of the sun boat, stands ready with his spear to do battle against the enemies of Ra. His lance is thrust into the serpent of the Duat, and his magic is powerful.”

Set was known as the god of chaos, yet here he was the preserver of order.

“The lightning-bolt of Set opens the mouths of the dead and restores life. Set is the falling rain which nurtures green Osiris.”

Ramose touched the writing, tracing the deep grooves which the artists had made in the granite. This part was colored with green paint to show new life.

Accepting that he would die, he sprinkled the last of his water against these symbols and began a hymn of praise to the god Set.

Outside the pyramid it began to rain.

\* \* \* \*

“What is happening? Where have those clouds come from?” Amun leaned so far out of the sun boat that the entire ship listed. “Is this your doing, Set? Some final trick?”

The god beside him said, “My trick has already been played,” and with those words he changed back into his true shape.

Amun, to his fury, found himself staring into the calm features of the Memphis creator-god Ptah. All the other gods in the boat burst out in laughter at the bewildered expression on the blue god’s shining face.

“What’s this? Why? Why did you do it?” In a temper, Amun tossed his silver flail down upon the boat-reeds, which were flowering in honor of the risen Osiris. The older god watched his antics with amusement.

“Do you think you can insult my priests with impunity?” he asked after a moment. “Ramose, whom you called an ‘accursed foreigner’ and ‘a dung ball’, is my priest.” Ptah folded his arms across his chest. “And Memphis, may I remind you, is my city.”

“I see,” Amun wagged a finger. “I see it all now. You and Set have hatched some nasty little plot behind my back...” He whirled round to the sun god Ra. “I demand justice. I demand satisfaction!”

“Really, my dear,” said the goddess Hathor to the goddess Mut. “Can’t

you do anything to control that husband of yours?"

Amun strode up to the goddess of love. "Oh, I know you're in this, too. Don't think I haven't seen you and Set whispering."

He whipped round again to the god Ptah. "Where is he, then, your stand-in? What's Set been up to while you've idled here, pretending to be what you're not?"

"I thought one of your claims was that you were omnipotent," came a new voice. "It doesn't seem to be working."

Set had appeared in the prow of the sun boat. He was carrying two pennants, one belonging to Sekenenre's army, the other to Aweserre's.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "I find that your Pharaoh has not really fulfilled the task I set him. He has learned only one of my sacred titles, and his worship—"

Set shrugged his shoulders "Did you know he only burned one censer of incense for me?"

"Shocking!" said the goddess Hathor, who laughed.

"What do you mean?" said Amun, glancing anxiously over the sun boat at the increasingly black clouds. "What have you done?"

"You should ask rather what Ramose has done, or is doing. This weather change is down to him. When he sacrificed the last of his water to the wall, he made a powerful spell."

"Even the gods are bound by magic," put in Ptah. "It is the order of the earth and heaven."

There was a moment of silence on the sun boat. Amun, straining out the sounds of battle, could hear a single deep voice, endlessly reciting.

"He is calling you the twin brother of Osiris."

"So I am," answered Set mildly.

Amun glared at the older god. "You are not called the twin of Osiris in any sacred writings that I have seen."

"Perhaps not, but it is implied. And through his meditation and prayer, Ramose has discovered this truth."

"You must have told him!"

"I did not," answered Set. "I merely gave Ramose a few pointers, by way of our own fan-bearer." He pointed to the once mortal Unas, who blushed and modestly lowered his head.

"Unfair!" cried Amun.

“You gave Sekenenre that presentiment to go to Memphis,” the goddess Hathor reminded him, and the rest of the immortals. “What’s the difference?”

“He said that Sekenenre had won!” cried Amun.

Set shook his head. “I did not,” he said a second time. “I think you will find that you assumed Sekenenre’s victory.”

“You said that the first Pharaoh to find an answer would have the satisfaction of killing the other.”

“Did I?” Set gave a yawn. “Ramose was, of course, acting on his Pharaoh’s behalf—”

“Ha!” Amun by then had thought of something else. “It’s two against one. Aweserre and Ramose against Sekenenre. That’s unfair.” He shook his fist at Ra. “I demand justice!”

“But my child,” answered the old god mildly, “Sekenenre had the High Priest of your own order to help him in his search. I would say that the two Pharaohs have been equal, wouldn’t you?”

Amun snorted. “The battle’s not over yet. I will go down to earth.”

“That, I regret to say, is not possible,” said Ra with a breathy sigh. “If you were to go, then so would Set, and I need him tonight in the Duat.”

“Unless Amun wants to argue with the serpent of the underworld,” said the goddess Hathor.

“You’re all against me!” exclaimed Amun.

The goddess of love tutted. “These young gods....”

“Pah!” Amun stalked to the other end of the sun boat, where he would remain for the rest of the day.

Ra beckoned to Set and Hathor. “Have you been teasing the poor lad?” he asked.

“Well, possibly,” the goddess. “But it’s all out of our hands now. The final outcome is up to Aweserre and Sekenenre, and what they can make of Ramose’s rain.”

“Good,” said Ra. “I like an equal fight.”

\* \* \* \*

Kamose had never known weather like it. In Thebes a rainstorm was more of a warm shower, not this roaring torrent of hard water bouncing off

his armor like pellets of grain. He could scarcely see past his sword point.

Beside him in the chariot Per-hor sneezed.

Kamose chopped his curved blade against another rushing body, unleashed his arm again and slit open a man's gizzard. Too late, Kamose realized that he had killed two of his own men.

"Signal to fall back!" yelled Kamose to his trumpeter. They had to regroup quickly, keep up the pressure. The rain made it almost impossible.

Groping ahead, trying to select the next man to kill while Per-hor struggled to bring the horses round and the entire left horn of the army turned ponderously on its axis, Kamose glimpsed his father's chariot, gliding ahead of a mass of infantry.

Sekenenre would be dangerously exposed if he continued stranding himself like that without chariot protection. Yet if his father chose to be the fool then it was no concern of his.

Where were the rest of the chariot corps? Kamose cut down another infantryman—this time an enemy—and strained to find a gap in the darkening murk.

What was that?

A creature with legs twice as long as a horse loomed over the chariot. Kamose had time to register that it was a camel, that a man was actually riding a camel, when the fowling net came down on him and Per-hor.

The man on the camel had the advantage of height. In seconds they were enmeshed in the net like trapped birds. Kamose hacked at the heavy mesh and became more entangled. Per-hor was momentarily stunned and could know nothing. Their horses, like a rudderless ship, were madly out of control.

If the camel rider had stayed, he could have speared them at his leisure, but the man had already gone, leaving the wreckage of battle to do its own deadly work.

A chariot wheel from a wrecked car was rolling straight at them. Kamose made one last desperate assault on the net, sawing, chopping and hewing with his sword. The ropes enmeshing them suddenly burst open, and Kamose grabbed the reins.

The leather slashed his unstrapped hands, but he got the horses round in time. The spinning wheel bounced past their chariot and smashed into another car, killing driver and archer outright.

Throughout the Theban lines, chariots were being decimated by these attacks. Mounted on faster, taller, heavier beasts than horses, this new force had all the advantages, including the vital tactic of surprise. The Hyksos' filthy foreign allies were tipping the battle Aweserre's way.

The Theban archers, bemused by the unrelenting rain, seemed unable to stop them. Moving, it seemed, almost at will through chariot and infantry, the camel riders brought turmoil and a fatal weakening of purpose to Sekenenre's forces.

Kamose knew what they were doing. The riders were stopping the central and right horn of the army—his army!—from reforming.

And Ahhotpe was somewhere in those lines.

"By the Duat, are you pleased with this work, Sekenenre? Stupid, stupid!" Raging against his father, Kamose jerked the horses to a dead stop, hurled the reins at the shaken Per-hor and bawled to a Medjay infantryman, "Get me a trumpeter!"

The silver gleam of his father's armor showed itself in the middle of the plain like the new moon breaking through a cloud. It shimmered above the dissolving lines of infantry, a moment of beauty amidst war.

"Ahhotpe," said Kamose under his breath.

A trumpeter came pounding out of the rain.

"Sound the order...."

He was too late. Thrusting through the churning Theban chariot corps engaged in chasing its own tail came a black chariot and two huge black horses.

Aweserre whirled the long sword above his head. When Kamose had spotted the Hyksos Pharaoh in the van of battle less than an hour before, the colored streamers of the man's pig-skin helmet had hung limply round his sagging shoulders. He and his horses had been streaked with dirt. Now he and his blacks, bathed by the bouncing rain, were filled with a renewed energy which seemed almost demonic.

They were making for Sekenenre. If Sekenenre were killed in this charge, Kamose would be the next true Pharaoh.

It was his destiny. He, Kamose, was the one who would finally cleanse the two lands of foreign invaders.

Ahhotpe's baby would be born of a king.

Ahhotpe had told him to make sure that Sekenenre did not come back

from the war.

As Kamose hesitated, Aweserre's sword flashed down against Sekenenre's. Their blades rang together.

Around them, the rest of the battle was slackening as men were worn down by the day's fight. Yet now the two Pharaohs fought each other with the noise and urgency of starving jackals, leaning their full weight against the wicker guards of their speeding chariots.

Howling like some animal, Aweserre slashed at Sekenenre's body armor. Sekenenre retaliated with a blow at Aweserre's head while Sekenenre's driver stabbed at the smaller man's body with his dagger. Momentarily off balance from his own lunge forward, Aweserre slipped on the damp wicker floor of the car and almost stumbled onto the dagger point. He wrenched himself sideways in time, but only the reins wrapped round his middle saved him from being thrown out. Loosening his fingers on the sword, he hurled it like a javelin at Sekenenre.

Kamose saw three red sun discs of Sekenenre's hemhemet crown break off, flaring like bloody shooting stars against the gray skies. "Father!" Yelling at Per-hor, he cried, "To Great House! Quickly!"

Sekenenre heard him coming, knew it was Kamose's gray horses thundering towards them through the wastes of battle. The boy would be too late to steal his thunder. Aweserre had missed and was weaponless. He had no tricks left, except that of dying.

And after the Hyksos, Avaris would be destroyed.

Sekenenre lifted his sword to bury it deep in Aweserre's body.

"Serre!" Something hard and bright was flung into the chariot beside the Hyksos and Aweserre snatched at it. As Sekenenre's thrust came down, his counter stroke flashed up.

His new weapon, an Egyptian battleaxe, caught Sekenenre's cheek in a glancing blow. The man shied away instinctively, slipping, as Aweserre had done a moment before, on the rain-sodden floor of his chariot.

Aweserre chopped into the back of Sekenenre's head.

Sekenenre screamed, writhing in mortal agony.

A final blow mercifully severed his spine and killed him.



## Chapter 55

Kasa had saved Aweserre's life by throwing him the axe, but the battle did not end with Sekenenre's death.

Kamose saw his father fall. Ahhotpe and Hathor heard his death-cry. Sekenenre's driver was already dead, clubbed by a Canaanite rider.

Somewhere above the battle ground a bird began singing as the rain stopped abruptly. Hot afternoon sun steamed the standing pools of water and blood around and in which men fought and died.

Aweserre raised his head to his brother-in-law and nodded. Any word of thanks was out of place here.

"Tiyi asked me to look out for you!" shouted Kasa, who had to break off and turn his tall, ungainly beast from a spear thrust. His eyes widened as he spotted Kamose racing in on them, driving his chariot himself, gray eyes blazing.

"No!" bawled Aweserre. "Leave him to me!" Both men were engulfed by the press of battle.

Kamose, coming in from the left, launched a frenzied attack on Aweserre. Slashing and cutting without thought of defense. Using everything he knew, even his own Horus Snatch, he moved like a madman, with a madman's speed, for above all Kamose wanted to forget that he had ever hesitated to save his father.

'Serre, in shock after having killed his worst enemy, was now beset by a second Sekenenre, harder, faster and above all younger than the first.

Kamose's sword followed Aweserre over his chariot, smashing off the rest of the hanging ornaments. Aweserre, jumping out of the way of another thrust, had the reins cut from his body. He yelled and scrambled onto the lead horse, starting the blacks running at top speed.

Kamose stopped his team in a rearing halt and, flinging the reins to Perhor, ran to his father's chariot. Straddling Sekenenre's still-bleeding corpse

on the floor of the car, he waited, curved sword gripped in both hands, for Aweserre to turn.

Before him, only half a league away, the main gates of the white city were opening.

As Aweserre slid his horses round and faced him over a blood-glistening midden of corpses, Kamose saw a company of archers and militia march out of Memphis. From the way they handled themselves, all were conscripts.

The Theban army had confiscated what weapons were found in the guard rooms and noble houses of Memphis, yet plainly the city dwellers had hidden more away for just such a moment.

Kamose puckered up his eyes to be sure, but there was no doubt. The archers were wearing the Hyksos colors and carried the banners of Lower Egypt. Memphis had changed sides again.

“Retreat!” yelled Kamose.

\* \* \* \*

The first Aweserre knew of the defection of Memphis from the Theban cause was when Kamose lashed his father’s horses and set them going south. Half the Theban infantry went with him and suddenly the rout was on.

Kamose, at the last, had not dared to be trapped on two fronts, not even when the second front was three hundred semi-trained archers from Memphis.

Aweserre found that he was sorry for the youth, though not too sorry. Kamose would probably defeat him in the end, though not today.

“Sutekh!” yelled the Hyksos king, roaring on his tired forces. Fingers in mouth, Aweserre whistled a piercing blast to his horses to charge. “Onward, my braves! We’ll bathe in Memphis tonight!”

And after Memphis, Avaris—and Tiyi.

Anticipating his delayed wedding night, ‘Serre laughed.

\* \* \* \*

Ahhotpe and Hathor were caught on the right horn of the Theban

infantry. When those men began to retreat—many simply throwing off their weapons and sprinting away—they were borne along by sheer force of numbers.

“Kamose!” Ahhotpe almost fell from the back of the chariot as she leaned recklessly far out, “Kamose!”

Hathor, struggling with the horses, grabbed her just in time, but Ahhotpe was beyond any sense of danger for herself.

“Father! Kamose!” Ahhotpe was weeping, terrified that her brother had also died. Seeing for the first time the blood on her tunic, the blood of her enemies, she began to scream.

“Ahhotpe! We’ll find him—” Hathor’s reassurance was suddenly choked off. The Theban infantry surging round their chariot had begun trying to clamber aboard. Hathor skidded the car and shook a few off, but they were at once replaced by more eager grasping hands, staring faces.

Sekenenre’s chariot cut back through a puddle, galloping towards them.

A hot, bloody hand seized Hathor’s wrist.

“No!” cried Ahhotpe. Tearing at the fingers with her own hands, she made them release their grip, but overbalanced too far and slithered down, out of the chariot.

“AHHOTPE!”

Kamose’s shout sounded above the pounding feet of the retreating army. Not caring who lay crushed under his wheels, he battered his way through to the point where he last glimpsed Ahhotpe’s golden head and reined in harshly.

Miraculously his sister was shaken but not badly hurt. She was trying to get to her feet, lifting herself off the dead body which had broken her fall, when Kamose found her.

“AHHOTPE!”

Kamose ran through an infantryman who would otherwise have trampled Ahhotpe and, leaning out of the chariot, scooped her out of the mud.

There were no embraces, no sense of exhilaration, no time for relief at having found each other alive. “Hathor, Hathor,” Ahhotpe was saying breathlessly, even before her feet touched the chariot floor. Her father’s broken head rolled against her legs, and she shrieked.

Kamose lashed the horses forward, shouting to the chariot in front.

Hathor was saying something, but the words disappeared in the flood of men fleeing between them.

He could not get through the press of bodies.

The enemy forces were gaining on them.

Suddenly a throwing stick struck Hathor on the hip, spinning her right round, like a top. The reins in her hands slackened, and, seizing their chance, two foot soldiers flung themselves at the chariot.

Unable to help her, Kamose watched the Thebans claw their way aboard. He was yelling orders for them to stop, but the men pushed Hathor out.

In a flash of flying hair and limbs, she was gone.

Kamose shouted her name, but Ahhotpe was shaking his arm.

“No room!” she yelled. Unless they dumped Pharaoh’s body, an unthinkable sacrilege, the chariot could not carry three.

For an instant, the claims of the living and the claims of the dead contended in Kamose, but there was really no choice. He carried his family already in the chariot.

Forgive me, Loving One, he thought regretfully, as Hathor—alive or dead he did not know—was left behind.

\* \* \* \*

Hathor, like Ahhotpe, had fallen amongst the dead. Struck and pummeled by the soldiers before being thrust from the chariot, she lay fainting on a headless corpse, but came round sufficiently to watch Kamose and his sister turning away.

“Don’t leave me!” cried Hathor, watching Kamose and his sister speeding out of danger in Sekenenre’s chariot. She lurched groggily to her feet, despair quickly replaced by a numbing shock.

Where should she go? To both sides, it seemed, she would be an enemy. A female enemy. Hathor did not want to find out what would happen to her if either force caught her on the battlefield.

The afternoon sun, blazing more strongly through a rain washed sky, showed up the sprinting figures of Lower Egyptian soldiers. There were not enough chariots left intact for a final triumphant charge.

Dazed, Hathor spun away from the figures, running a few paces before

blundering against a wrecked chariot and its dead horses. She sank to her hands and knees, feeling drained. Her mind began to replay earlier parts of the battle, even more vividly than what she had experienced at the time. She was sweating and yet felt deadly cold.

She would hide in the wreckage of this chariot.

It seemed a good idea, better than running. Hathor crawled into the crisscross shade of severed wicker and splintered wood and lay down.

She was just in time. A rush of young men, recruited from one of the delta villages, came thumping over the mud and sand. A bare foot kicked the axle of the overturned chariot in sheer good spirits, and then the group were gone.

Hathor raised her head slightly. On foot, war looked grimly unlike war seen from a chariot. The stench of the dead was already appalling.

As she stared steadily at a nearby corpse, a young man with his eyes wide open, a vulture glided down to feed. This too was war.

The cries of the injured and the dying were fading as one army fled and the other pursued. She was already with the dead.

Hathor wearily closed her eyes. She was more tired than when she had held her son for three days and nights.

Thinking of him, Hathor began to cry.

\* \* \* \*

Somewhere in her weeping she became aware of a shadow darker than wicker falling across her. Then a voice called her name.

Hathor opened her eyes. Slowly, on hands and knees, she backed out of the wreckage and stood up.

The man, so long expected, was waiting for her. Hathor did not hurry to greet him. Instead she said, "You must know something first. I killed my son, smothered him."

"That's bad," said the man, scowling down at her from his great height, but then he held out a water flask to her.

"Drink. You'll feel better."

Hathor stepped forward and took the flask. Somewhere else she could hear the sounds of fighting: another world tasted and finished with, just as she was finished with courts and princes. She would be no man's mistress

again.

“What is it like to be a merchant?” she asked, staring now at the man’s mount, which he had tied up to the chariot wreckage. “What is it like outside Egypt?” To escape, to discover, to begin afresh in a new place....

Kasa smiled, understanding Hathor’s need—a need he shared—to move outside the narrow Nile valley. It was better this way, he thought. Though Anat had divorced him, he was not free. He kept, or tried to keep, his promises.

Kasa reached out and took Hathor’s hand: the first time they had touched. Maybe in time....

He thought of the woman’s immortal namesake, Hathor, goddess of love, and his smile deepened.

“Come with my people and find out,” he said.

## Epilogue

A year later, the god Set and the goddess Nephthys were standing in the prow of the sun boat, watching the world.

"It looks so much better," said Nephthys, admiring the green and gold fields.

Set nodded. The Hyksos had dug deep into his treasure-house to buy food for his people from the traders of Punt and Keftiu. Now a new full inundation had re-fertilized the Two Lands. The delta prospered. Famine and unrest were past evils.

Upper Egypt too was flourishing. Kamose had kept the crown of Upper Egypt against Aweserre's siege of Thebes, and strove endlessly to extend its boundaries. Ahhotpe was as able a ruler as her brother was a general and between them they managed the affairs of their kingdom in relative harmony.

"They look happy," said Nephthys, pointing to Aweserre and Tiyi, walking side by side through Set's temple at Avaris.

"Yes," said the god Set, glancing at Tiyi's laughing face. "Aweserre and Tiyi will have many children."

"And Ahhotpe and Kamose?" asked Nephthys. "Will they be content?"

"They will have their years together," answered Set. "And Ahhotpe's child, Tetisheri's great-granddaughter, will one day be as famous as her mother."

Nephthys leaned closer to her husband. "Tell me," she whispered in a low voice. "How did Ramose manage to survive?"

Set tapped the side of his nose. "Ask Ptah," he said, and laughed at the goddess's expression. "It's quite simple. Ramose re-filled his water-flask from the rain. He caught the water in an old metal pitcher from Unas's tomb."

"How very practical." The goddess was disappointed. "But I am very

pleased that he and Mose are reconciled.”

Ramose and his son were playing in the gardens of Ramose’s town-house at Memphis. Set smiled, remembering how Mose had run into his father’s arms when Ramose had returned from the city of the dead.

“Amun still won’t speak to me,” he said.

Nephthys pursed her lips. “Maybe next year he will.”

“Maybe,” agreed Set. He glanced at the letter his wife was holding. “Anything interesting from Astarte?”

“Here.” Nephthys handed him the letter from the Canaanite goddess. “It’s about your wild man Kasa and the mortal woman Hathor and the woman Anat. Read it for yourself.”

The sun boat passed gracefully over the western horizon and purple evening fell over the Two Lands.

## THE END

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lindsay lives in Yorkshire, England, where she was born, and started writing stories at an early age. Always a voracious reader, she took a degree in medieval history and worked in a library for a while, then began to write full-time after marriage.

Her first unpublished historical found her an agent and the second got a publisher in London interested. They wanted her to write with a modern setting, which she did – several romantic thrillers set in Greece, Italy or on Dartmoor in the English West Country - and enjoyed it, but historicals are really her first love. For Bookstrand, Lindsay has written books mostly set in the ancient world, especially Rome, Egypt and the Bronze Age, which have always fascinated her.

When not writing or researching her books, she enjoys walking, reading, cooking, music, going out with friends and long languid baths with scented candles (and perhaps chocolate).

Her other historical titles with Bookstrand are:

- FLAVIA'S SECRET - sensual historical romance set in Roman Britain. 4.5 Red Roses and Blue Ribbons. 4 Books. Book of the Week at LASR 4 Stars.
- A SECRET TREASURE - romantic suspense set on Rhodes. The perfect holiday read. 5 Stars. 5 Angels. 4.5 Red Roses. 4Cups. 4 Books. 4 Bookmarks.
- BRONZE LIGHTNING – historical adventure romance set in ancient Krete and ancient Britain at the time of Stonehenge (forthcoming in 2009).

Lindsay's website is <http://www.lindsaytownsend.com>

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