

Heretic's Dagger

By

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Thebes, Year Five of the Reign of the Pharaoh Tutankhamun

There was a right order to things when one accompanied a living god on military training exercises. The first maxim was not to outpace pharaoh's chariot. To Meren, confidential inquiry agent and mentor to King Tutankhamun, such rules of conduct were second nature. Thus he reined in his team of thoroughbred chariot horses so that they kept even pace with the fourteen year old boy who rode at the head of a company of Egypt's finest cavalry.

The rumble of wheels over rock, the stamp of hooves and occasional crack of a whip bounced off the high desert cliffs to their right as they rode south from the palace. Meren glanced to his left past the green fields that bordered the Nile and caught sight of the opposite east bank. There, more fields bordered the river with the city districts perched close behind them, and after that, the eastern desert. This was Egypt, a narrow band

of luxuriant life hemmed in on the east and west by vast deserts that were the home of sand dwellers, outlaws, and the dead.

The company proceeded at a walk so as not to tire the horses before the training exercises. Pharaoh, who could hardly contain his impatience to attain the status of seasoned warrior, had brought with him an unusual companion. Sa, The Guardian, a black leopard stalked beside the king's chariot, tethered to pharaoh by a gilded leather leash. Meren smiled as Tutankhamun leaned down to stroke the animal's sleek head. Sa had been with the king almost from birth. Anyone wishing to harm the boy would have to kill Sa to get to him. Sa lifted his giant head and gazed calmly at Meren. Meren bent over the cab of his chariot and made a low trilling noise in the back of his throat, holding his hand out to the big cat.

Sa rubbed his head against the hand, then jerked it away and lifted his muzzle to the sky. Meren heard a loud sniff. Sa dug in his paws. The leash tightened and the king hauled on his reins.

"What ails you, Sa?" the boy asked as the company slowed to a halt behind him.

Meren watched the cat begin to circle, his tail lashing, his nose quivering. Suddenly a low growl made Meren grip the hilt of his scimitar.

"Majesty, he scents something." Meren signaled to the commander of chariots, and scouts broke from the ranks. At the same time orders were shouted. Chariots wheeled and turned, drove ahead and around the king.

Tutankhamun rolled his eyes. "Meren, it's probably a dead animal."

"No doubt, Golden One."

When Meren failed to recall the chariots, Tutankhamun sighed and tugged on the gilded leash. Sa ignored his master. Just then the north breeze picked up, and Sa gave another rumbling growl. Backing up against the leach, Sa gave a hard tug. The king lost his grip, and Sa whirled, springing past horses and chariots alike.

"Sa, return! Sa!"

"Majesty!"

Meren cursed as Tutankhamun launched his vehicle after the leopard. He slapped his own reins and hurtled after the king. Executing

a tight turn, Meren followed the king through the ranks of charioteers. In moments he had broken through the lines and was careening after the youth in the golden chariot that gleamed like the solar orb in the early dawn light. They raced across the rock desert after Sa, their wheels sending grit and sharp rocks flying as they headed west toward the wall of limestone cliffs. Here the land undulated toward the base of the escarpment where the cliffs dropped back to form a small bay. Ahead, Meren saw the black streak that was Sa angled sharply to the north and vanish over a small hillock.

Shouting for the king to wait, Meren watched with dread as the boy vanished over the hillock without slowing. This was danger, a young king rushing into the unknown, heedless of peril. For Tutankhamun ruled over a kingdom in disarray. His brother and predecessor, Akhenaten, had almost brought about civil war with his heretical policies. Obsessed with his god of the sun disk called the Aten, Akhenaten had disestablished the old gods of Egypt who had protected the kingdom from the beginning of time. He persecuted those who wouldn't follow his precepts, and Egypt suffered. Only now had order been restored, but there were factions in the

land who hated anyone who shared the blood of the heretic, even an innocent boy. Other groups wished to restore the heresy, and others lusted for the power invested in this slim youth with the great dark eyes and compassionate nature. All this flashed through Meren's thoughts as he gained the summit of the hillock. So many lay in wait for a chance to catch this youth alone and unprotected, where a seeming accident could cut short a promising reign.

Meren caught sight of pharaoh as he plunged down the opposite side of the hillock. The boy was drawing close to Sa, who had stopped at a lump on the desert floor, a smudge of dark brown against the cream of the limestone rock. Vultures flapped their wings and retreated from Sa in an ungainly stumble before they launched into the air. Meren scanned the area for danger as the rest of the charioteers rumbled up behind him. Satisfied that there was no peril lurking nearby, Meren jumped out of his vehicle and walked over to where the king was stooping to grasp Sa's leash.

"Meren, look!"

The big cat was sniffing a bundle of linen covered with flies. As Meren got closer Sa pawed at something—an arm. The king's guardian had scented the blood that smeared the rocks in a trail that originated somewhere at the base of the cliffs.

Meren glanced over his shoulder at the commander of charioteers. "Stay back and deploy the guard."

The body was lying face down and was clothed in a kilt and cloak, both of which were caked with blood. Meren thought briefly of sending the king away, but the boy would see more carnage than this at the head of the army.

"The poor man. Turn him over, Meren."

Complying, Meren beheld a man of middle years, neither a youth nor an elder, with a wound in the abdomen that must have caused a slow and painful death. Quickly Meren noted the short-cropped hair, the swelling, overfed stomach that seemed at odds with work-roughened hands. His clothing was made of ordinary smooth cloth, the quality used by most Egyptians. It was a much thicker grade of textile compare to the fine royal linen worn by pharaoh and the aristocracy.

"Do you know him?" the king asked as they stared at the corpse.

"No, majesty, but he's most peculiar. He has worked hard with his hands like a peasant yet had enough food to get a paunch, something one seldom sees in a farmer."

"And his nose is red under all that dirt."

"Yes, majesty, from drink rather than the sun. Do you see those spidery veins?"

"Someone stabbed him, didn't they?"

"Aye, majesty. I'll have the city police investigate."

Tutankhamun handed Sa's leash to a bodyguard. "But we should follow his trail now."

Meren hesitated, knowing the king's curiosity had been aroused. He chaffed at the constraints placed upon him by his position, and Meren couldn't blame him. To be a living god was to live surrounded by ritual and formality. To govern an empire required exhaustive training in the ways of Egypt's vast governing bureaucracy, in diplomacy and in military affairs. The boy rarely had a free moment. When he wasn't reading and interpreting reports of the season's harvest he was receiving envoys from

foreign kings or studying with his tutors. Most important of all, pharaoh was the mediator between the gods and his subjects, and through him the balance of the world was maintained. The son of the chief god, Amun, the king propitiated the deities of Egypt to hold at bay the forces of chaos and evil when he celebrated the secret rituals in the temples of the gods. Thus Tutankhamun lived with a great burden for one so young. Meren noted the sympathy in the king's eyes as he gazed at the dead man, and the spark of inquisitiveness. Perhaps this was an opportunity to teach the king something of his methods of investigation and at the same time relieve the tedium of royal duties.

"Thy majesty wishes to follow the dead one's path?"

"Yes. Are you going to let me?"

"Thy majesty's will is accomplished."

Tutankhamun gave him a skeptical look. "Is that so? Then why didn't you let me go on that raid against the sand dwellers last month? Ha! The whole kingdom thinks I rule unchallenged when the truth is I must obey far too many people. Well this time my wishes shall prevail."

"Of course, majesty." Meren bowed before the king.

"Oh, stand up straight, Meren. There's no use pretending you haven't already decided to let me do this."

"As thy majesty wishes."

"Humph."

The trail of blood led straight to the base of the cliffs that rose at least thirty cubits high above the desert floor. They formed undulating vertical shafts like pleats in a linen robe, and the cliff face was riddled with hollows and caves. The trail ended abruptly about thirty paces from the cliff base, but Meren was able to discern dragging footprints that took him to a fan of debris. He climbed over the rocks with the king and his bodyguards close behind only to find nothing but a blank wall with a spray of boulders in front of it. They stared at the area for a few moments before Meren noticed a shadow. Walking between two of the boulders, Meren found the mouth of a small cave, and lying in the sand before it was a dagger. The king stooped, his hand outstretched.

"Majesty, no!" Meren thrust his arm in front of the king. "There is contamination here, and evil. Pharaoh must not touch the blade of a murderer."

Meren explored the small cave and found more footprints and signs of a struggle between two men. Evidently a fight started in the cave and continued outside. Together he and pharaoh knelt to examine the weapon. The bronze blade was encrusted with blackened blood, but what surprised Meren was the quality of the object.

"Majesty, this isn't the blade of a commoner."

"I know. Look at the engraving on the blade."

The maker had etched a central groove down the blade that ended in a palmette design. The hilt was dusty and smeared with more blood. A bodyguard handed Meren a rag, and he cleaned the weapon as best he could.

"The hilt is ebony," the king said.

"Aye, majesty, and the pommel alabaster that was once carved and stained with black and red ink to bring out the design." Meren held the weapon up to the light. "There may be words engraved in the alabaster."

Meren called for the scribe of charioteers, who provided ink and water. In a short time he was smearing black ink on the alabaster pommel. Holding the dagger to the light again, Meren read, "The good—

something—lord—something—valor, Nefer-khep--something." Meren looked at the king, who met his gaze in silence, his eyes wide.

"Meren..."

"I know, Golden One."

The king drew closer and lowered his voice. "What is this blade doing here?"

"I know not, majesty."

Meren turned the blade over, but could see no other distinguishing marks. It mattered little, however. The words engraved on the alabaster pommel were fragmentary but more than enough. Both he and the king possessed daggers engraved with similar phrases. In the king's case, almost identical. The alabaster pommel had been carved with the formal phrase, "The good god, lord of valor, Nefer-kheperu-re."

Nefer-kheperu-re was a throne name, the name a king took upon his accession to the throne of Egypt. Tutankhamun's throne name was Neb-kheperu-re. But this name was slightly different, Nefer-kheperu-re, and that difference was enough to send dread racing through Meren's body.

For Nefer-kheperu-re was the throne name of the king's dead brother, the reviled and cursed heretic, Akhenaten.

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On the east bank of the Nile in Thebes lay the massive temples of Amun and his goddess consort, Mut. Protected by high walls and pylon gates, within gold and electrum encrusted doors, rested the statues of the gods. On the west bank, between emerald fields of grain and the barren mountains soared the mortuary temples of Egypt's greatest pharaohs. Within these offerings were made to deceased kings like Thutmose the Conqueror, who had extended Egypt's empire far to the north and south. In the mountains nearby, in a steep-sided valley, was the Place of Truth, the site of the secret burials of the kings of Egypt. Just south of the mortuary temple of Amunhotep III, the king's father, sat the glorious palace of pharaoh. Surrounding it were lesser palaces of the chief royal wife as well as those of the household of royal women. The dwellings of

those who served the king and his family clustered close to the walls of the royal enclosure along with barracks and workshops.

In the royal precinct Meren had just arrived at one of the servants' houses where Kar, the dead man, had lived. He'd seldom had occasion to go into so modest a dwelling, and for Meren the experience was enlightening. He was in the tiny reception area, no more than an empty space before the living room, and he already felt cramped. This place was less than a tenth the size of his town house.

Yesterday after he returned to the palace with the king he'd sent his adopted son Kysen to find out who the dead man was and to investigate the circumstances of his death. It turned out that Kar belonged to a family in service to pharaoh, one of thousands spread throughout the kingdom. Kysen and Meren's chief aide, Abu, had been investigating all morning. So far no one knew what Kar was doing in the desert last night or how he came to be stabbed with a dagger that had once belonged to the heretic king. Because of the dagger, the death had taken on much more importance than it would ordinarily have had. Meren was by nature suspicious, and the link to the royal family must be followed.

Walking into the deserted living area, Meren examined his surroundings. Along the far wall there was a low platform upon which rested a table with a water jar and clay cups. Reed mats served as rugs, and the roof was supported by a central column. An interior stair probably led to a bedroom. Meren heard voices, and Kysen walked in with Abu from the kitchen that lay beyond the living area.

"Ah, Father. You persuaded pharaoh not to come," Kysen said.

"Indeed. I explained that his appearance would cause a riot and impeded the investigation. The Golden One was most annoyed."

Kysen grinned. "We've talked to Kar's family and friends, what few of them there are. Did you know his brother is assistant to the master of royal unguent makers? What was his name, Abu?"

"Onuris, lord."

"And the parents?" Meren asked.

"The father's name is Wersu, lord. He used to be an unguent maker. The mother is Qedet." Abu nodded toward the kitchen. "They are in there. The woman is weeping, and her husband is staring at her."

"I hope you have something to tell me. All we got from the scene at the cave were imprints of palm sandals, and there are tens of thousands of those in the city."

Kysen leaned against the central column and sighed. "There's not much to be learned. The parents were at home all night, and thought Kar was home sleeping too. Since he was probably killed late last night, he must have slipped out unseen. He was a sweeper and doorkeeper with the royal women's household. The steward had assigned him to watch the garden gate from late afternoon until about three hours past sunset. But the parents say he lost his position there a few weeks ago. Before that he was a tender of animals at the royal menagerie, and before that an assistant to one of the royal unguent makers like his brother."

"And what about the dagger?"

Abu shook his head. "Neither of them know where it came from. They swear they've never seen it before."

"We were going to talk to Onuris," Kysen said. "He's at work in the royal workshops."

"Very well. I'm going back to the palace after I'm through here. I'll talk to the steward who oversaw Kar."

Kysen presented Kar's parents to Meren before he left. Wersu was sitting on the floor in the kitchen at a low table. He was tent-pole thin, with a few wisps of silver hair remaining on his head, and a few brown teeth still left in his head. His wife was younger and retained some of the agreeable features of youth. Her hair was thick and curly, her skin soft from the application of oils. Qedet had a wide face and large, heavy-lidded eyes, and Meren could imagine she had once commanded admiration from many men. At the moment, though, she was squatting on her heels, rocking back and forth and moaning. Her eyes were red, and she kept wiping them with a length of a large piece of linen. Qedet was cleaning the linen by dipping a corner of it in a solution of water and natron salt and rubbing it to get rid of an ink stain.

Wersu shook his head over and over. "He wouldn't listen to me, Lord Meren. He just wouldn't listen. Just wouldn't listen. Paid me no heed at all. Just wouldn't listen."

"About what?"

"Work." Wersu regarded his wife sorrowfully while she rubbed the stained linen furiously "He wouldn't work. He thought it was owed him, his position. He was an unguent maker like I was. Could have been one of the best. He was apprenticed to the royal workshop. How many can say that? But Kar never saw it that way. Ungrateful, lazy. I tried to tell him, but he never listened. Just wouldn't listen."

Meren leaned against a wall beside the archway between the kitchen and living area. "You're saying Kar was too lazy to work."

"Ohhh," Qedet moaned and dabbed her eyes with a dry piece of the linen in her hands.

Wersu rubbed his forehead wearily. "Forgive me, great lord, but that is true."

"What did he do, then?"

"He drank, lord. He ate, drank and slept."

"My poor son," Qedet wailed as she wrung the soaked linen. "You didn't understand him. He was sensitive. Not like other boys."

Wersu scowled at his wife again. "He wasn't a boy. He had almost three decades, and he was a lazy sot."

Qedet shot her husband a venomous look, then saw Meren staring at her and lowered her gaze to the stain in the linen that was almost gone now.

"You told my son you could think of no one who might want to kill your son."

"Everyone liked Kar," Qedet said.

Grunting in disgust, Wersu pursed his lips. Meren lifted a brow, and the old man sighed.

"Kar was annoying, but that is all."

Meren spent a few more unproductive minutes talking the Wersu and Qedet. Then he went on a tour around the house, leaving the parents grieving in the kitchen. They seemed to be much like other parents, the mother doting, the father stern, both disappointed in their younger son.

He didn't expect to find anything incriminating in this house, but he liked to get a sense of people from their homes and possessions. Kar lived with his brother and parents in this house all his life; it might have something to say to him.

Beginning in the living area, Meren noted the only furniture besides the eating table was a stool made of cheap sycamore wood with a woven seat. The kitchen had baskets of food, but not in any great quantity—bread, onions, dates, leeks and a couple of wrinkled cucumbers. Bread and onions were the staples of the commoner class, Meren knew, as was beer. He'd seen no beer jars, but if Kar was a drinker...

Meren took an interior stair down to the cellar. Here he found one jar of dried peas, one of beer and one of fish oil. He opened a small reed basket filled with dates. Onions hung from the ceiling. A dozen or so jars stood empty along with several wicker boxes.

"No spices," Meren muttered. "No dried fish."

Leaving the cellar, he went upstairs and found himself in the main bedroom. Here sat a wooden bed with a plaited rush base and straw-filled mattress. The sheets were askew and looked as if they were seldom straightened. However, they were of good quality, probably the grade called fine thin cloth, almost as good as royal linen. Evidently unlike the linen in the kitchen, Qedet didn't wash these delicate sheets, for they had laundry marks. The portable stool that served as a lavatory stood over a

pottery jar filled with sand. It hadn't been emptied. In a corner, rumpled and dirty, were a couple of loincloths and a kilt. Half a dozen empty beer jars stood around the bed. Meren surveyed the room with a frown. It appeared that the drunkard Kar had slept in the large master chamber.

In the remaining room opposite Meren found three sleeping mats, more clothing in a rickety wicker box, and a tarnished bronze hand mirror in a bag along with a comb and cosmetic set. It was peculiar that Wersu and Qedet shared a chamber with their oldest son. This was Wersu's house; he should have occupied the larger, better room.

Mounting the stairs again, Meren went onto the roof where a loom sat under an awning of palm leaves. Nearby he saw a small fireplace over which rested a tripod. Looking over the roof to the courtyard in front of the house Meren saw a beehive shaped grain bin. One lonely goose pecked at grain scattered on the ground. Beyond the courtyard the street was busy. A herdsman ushered cattle down narrow road while a man led a donkey loaded with palm fronds the opposite way. A self-important priest wearing a leopard skin cloak and carrying a walking stick thrashed at a group of boys who danced around and taunted him. Groups of

women passed by with laundry in baskets on their heads; some carried water jars. It was a typical busy city street, dirty, noisy and cheerful. Kar's house was barren, deserted, quiet. The family hadn't even hired professional mourners to stand about crying and throwing ashes and rending their garments as people usually did. Meren doubted that Wersu could afford them.

Meren was glad to leave the house. It oppressed his spirits with its air of lost prosperity and strained relationships. The family of Wersu wasn't a happy one, but there seemed to be no undercurrents of violence that could have led to murder. Meren headed for the royal precinct.

The main Theban palace occupied by the royal women's household was called Hathor's Ornament. The steward who oversaw the running of the household, Lord Peya, sent Meren to the master of doorkeepers and porters, a man of foreign descent called Uthi. Uthi was one of those men who glided when he walked, spoke with hands fluttering and lisped.

"Kar?" Uthi's hands fluttered as he stood before Meren in the lofty reception chamber of the palace. "What would the great Lord Meren want with that lazy donkey?" When Meren didn't answer, Uthi went

on. "Kar worked as a doorkeeper here for almost a year, great one. But he was never satisfactory. He fell asleep on duty, showed up late.

Sometimes he left his post, but worst of all, he was drunk most of the time. The other doorkeepers and porters told me that when he received his ration payments he would at once spend them on more drink."

"What finally caused you to get rid of him?"

Uthi sniffed. "I like to think of myself as a tolerant man, o great lord. But three weeks ago when I told Kar his wages would be reduced because he was sleeping on the job, he abused me and tried to strike me. I fended him off with my staff. Luckily my assistant was with me, and he wrestled Kar to the ground. I think all that beer finally pickled his wits. That's the thanks I get for trying to serve the royal ladies so faithfully. Why, I only kept him on because he was in Princess Iaret's favor. If it weren't for her, he would have been cast out long before. And after all, what did he have to do but stand at a garden gate and open it occasionally."

"Princess Iaret favored a doorkeeper?"

Uthi must have sensed Meren's skepticism. "Oh, yes, mighty lord. Princess Iaret is a sweet lady, full of kindness and compassion. She is always giving aid to the lowest servants. She even speaks up for slaves accused of stealing. Her reputation for goodness is well known to the royal household."

"Of course."

Meren remembered Iaret now. She the half-royal offspring of the heretic Akhenaten and a lowborn concubine. Had Iaret been a male child, she would have had a chance of becoming pharaoh, but as a woman, she was just one of many superfluous royal children. Most such half-royal princesses lived uneventful lives in the royal women's household forgotten by the court. Meren asked a few more questions.

Soon Meren dismissed Uthi and started pacing the reception room. He had a murder weapon that had once belonged to Akhenaten, and now he learned that the dead man had been favored by one of Akhenaten's half-royal daughters. Was there a connection? He couldn't imagine Princess Iaret stabbing a doorkeeper, but perhaps the dagger was an inheritance from her father. Kar might have stolen it. Uthi had denied

that Kar was a thief, saying that the man was too drunk to steal most of the time, and at other times he was asleep.

Meren requested an audience with Princess Iaret, who quickly appeared in the reception chamber carrying her pet cat. Iaret's mother had been beautiful, as was the case with most royal concubines.

Unfortunately the nineteen-year-old princess had inherited Akhenaten's horse face, hollow shoulders and spindly legs. However, Meren hadn't spent more than a few moments in her company before he understood why Uthi had been so effusive in praise of her.

"Dear Lord Meren, what a surprise. How are your lovely daughters? Isis is the youngest, is she not? And such a beauty."

"All are well, princess."

"And your fine son Kysen?" She asked as she stroked the cat in her arms. "I have heard that he is becoming a skillful warrior like his father."

"You're kind, my lady."

"I visited Tefnut and Bener at your town house last month, but you were away. Your daughters were kind enough to give me plant cuttings for the garden. Your house is magnificent."

"Thank you, princess."

Iaret indicated two high-backed chairs of ebony and ivory. "Let us sit, my lord. Why insist on stuffy etiquette, eh?"

Iaret seated herself and settled her cat on her lap. To Meren the creature looked like a miniature Sa—long and lean with shining black fur. This cat's eyes weren't green, though. They were tawny gold and as large as olives. Iaret was holding the cat up to her face.

"My little Miu. You got lost yesterday didn't you. Mother was frantic. Yes she was." Iaret turned to Meren. "She went out hunting and got lost in the servants quarters. She's the first animal I've ever owned, and I love her dearly. I don't know what I'd do if I lost her."

Iaret's eyes grew bright with tears. She buried her nose in Miu's black fur. "You will think me foolish, Lord Meren."

"Soft hearted, princess, but not foolish. It is never foolish to give one's love."

Iaret looked at him over her cat and grinned. "They say you're the consummate royal courtier, and now I know why."

"Forgive me, my lady," Meren said with a smile. "I have a few questions I would like to ask you."

"Yes?"

"Do you own a bronze dagger with an alabaster pommel?"

"What an odd question. Why do you ask?"

"Please, my lady. Do you own such a dagger?"

"No, I don't think so." Iaret's brow furrowed. "I own a few knives, cosmetic implements like razors and the like. I've no need of a dagger." She gestured widely. "There are plenty of guards with daggers and spears should I need a weapon."

"I thought perhaps the king, your father..."

"No, I don't remember him giving me something like that. I rarely saw him you know." She eyed him. "You're so grave. If it's that important, you should ask the steward for the latest inventory. I think it was done six or seven months ago. It should list everyone's possessions."

"Thank you, princess. I will." Meren hesitated. "I must also ask you about the garden doorkeeper called Kar."

laret was stroking her cat, her head lowered. "The doorkeeper Kar, yes. He's gone, you know."

"He's dead."

The princess' head jerked up. She stared at him with wide eyes, her mouth open. Moments passed before she spoke.

"Dead? But he was here only a few weeks ago cursing and weaving around drunk. Oh. Did he have some accident while besotted? I was so worried about him. He was drinking himself into ill health."

"No," Meren said softly. "He was murdered. Stabbed to death with a dagger engraved with the name of your father."

laret continued to stare at him in horror. "But that can't be. Wait." She narrowed her eyes. "Surely you don't entertain suspicions of me. Me? By all the gods, how could you think I would do such a thing?"

"Princess, I am the Eyes and Ears of Pharaoh. When murder touches those near pharaoh, I pursue the evil one no matter where the trail leads. You know this."

"But me. It's ridiculous. I tried to help Kar." laret was clutching her cat to her breast as if to protect herself.

"Sometimes there are false trails," Meren said, feeling guilty for upsetting this sweet girl in spite of himself.

"Oh." Iaret sighed. "I see. Then you aren't going to arrest me?"

"Of course not."

"Good. I've never been arrested before. I'm sure I wouldn't like it."

Meren shook his head. Iaret seemed guileless, dangerously so for a member of the imperial court. They talked about Kar, but Iaret had little to add to what Meren already knew. Kar was a wastrel who had been given many chances to reform to no avail. Finally even Iaret had given up on him.

Meren took his leave of the princess and requested the household inventory from the steward, Lord Peya. The official produced a leather box filled with papyri. Meren located the inventory of the princess only to find that Iaret had been right. She owned no daggers. She had lots of jewels of gold, electrum, lapis lazuli, carnelian and other precious stones. She owned many clothes, and dozens of bolts of royal linen, vessels of alabaster and granite, and a valuable mirror of silver, but no weapons. Several of the foreign princesses who had married into the royal family

possessed daggers, but none of the descriptions matched the murder weapon. Looking at the stacks of inventories, Meren considered sending someone else to plough through them. But he was already here. So he read of lists of royal possessions, his fingers tracing the columns in a fruitless search for the engraved dagger. He even sent for the few daggers he located in hopes of finding one similar to the one that killed Kar. A fruitless effort. Finally he thanked Lord Peya and left Hathor's Ornament for his town house.

At home he met Kysen in the large room on the second floor that served as his office. It was late afternoon, and he could smell antelope roasting in the kitchens. Kysen entered the office with a stranger trailing behind him.

"Lord Meren, this is the unguent maker Onuris, brother of Kar. I have brought him to you that you may hear his story."

Meren nodded, taking his seat on his favorite chair on the master's dais at one end of the office. Kysen had been born into the artisan class, the son of a tomb worker in the Place of Truth. His ear was more attuned to the nuances of conduct in commoners. In the past year he'd grown

more confident in his position as Meren's heir. Now he could intimidate a reluctant witness almost as well as Meren. They seldom had to resort to physical punishment, which was good in Meren's opinion. Beatings extorted lots of information from people, but often it was useless, given simply to escape pain.

Kysen leaned on Meren's chair and whispered to him. "It was hard going, but I got the truth out of him." Kysen straightened. "Onuris, son of Wersu, tell Lord Meren what you told me."

Onuris was a slim version of his younger brother, with thick hair and a habit of wiping his clammy hands on his kilt. He smelled faintly of myrrh and frankincense. He bowed and cleared his throat.

"Eyes and Ears of Pharaoh, to my great sorrow my younger brother was a dissolute and unworthy man who took it as a great insult that he had to work for his livelihood. I'm afraid my parents doted on him throughout his childhood and youth. They praised him when he made little effort and excused his shortcomings rather than correct them."

"Is this why Kar occupied the master's chamber in your house when it should have been your parents' room?" Meren asked.

Onuris hesitated. "In part, lord. I have explained why Kar behaved as he did, but there came a time when he grew intolerable even to my parents, about a month ago." Swallowing hard, Onuris stuttered before continuing. "I—I have been so worried. I knew something was wrong, but he was my brother, no matter his faults, so I kept silent."

"This isn't the time to keep secrets," Meren said.

"Yes, lord. You see, a couple of months ago Kar began bringing home valuable things—alabaster jars, a gold armband, fine leather sandals. He said he won these things gaming at his favorite tavern. Well, Kar was not the kind of man who won things. He was usually too drunk to concentrate. I thought..."

"He stole them," Meren finished.

Onuris hung his head.

Meren glanced at Kysen. "The dagger?"

"No," Kysen said. "It appears he never brought such a thing home."

"No, lord," said Onuris. "I followed him once, thinking to solve the mystery, but Kar only went to his usual tavern and drank until he fell

on the floor. Last week I tried again, but he saw me. After that Kar took all the valuable things and hid them. I don't know where."

"The cave," Kysen said.

Meren sighed. "Indeed. Whoever killed Kar must have taken the stolen items."

According to Onuris it was after Kar became wealthy that he demanded the best room and generally became unbearable. He used abusive language to his family and tried to strike Onuris when his brother attempted to persuade their parents to evict Kar. Wersu wanted to toss Kar out of the house then, but Qedet defended her youngest son. She reminded Wersu that Kar's new wealth would provide better for the family than he ever had. In Qedet's view, riches excused almost any evil.

Listening to Onuris, Meren began to get that irritable feeling that meant he'd missed something. There had to be a connection between Kar's death and Hathor's Ornament. Almost certainly that was where the dead man had gotten the stolen goods, and that meant he had help from someone inside the palace. But why hadn't the thefts been reported? Perhaps Lord Peya was concealing them because such evil doings

reflected badly on him. Pharaoh might take Peysa's office away from him.

Meren dismissed Onuris with a command to report anything else he remembered to Kysen.

When the unguent maker was gone, Kysen sank to the dais beside Meren. "He was stealing from the royal women's palace."

"Yes," Meren said, rubbing his temples. "And someone in a high position was covering it up. Damnation, this is going to be a scandal. More corruption. The high priest of Amun will be delighted to spread stories that the heretic's brother is incompetent and can't even govern the palaces of his women. That old man is ridden with hate for the royal family."

"I can't imagine anyone hated pharaoh," Kysen said.

"You were a child when Akhenaten did away with the old gods of Egypt. Paranefer and his priests suffered terribly under Akhenaten. Many of them died rather than renounce Amun for the king's new god. Curse it. Thinking of Paranefer has given me a headache."

"What will you do?"

"Try to investigate quickly and quietly, before Paranefer gets wind of the scandal." Meren rose and stepped off the dais. "But tomorrow morning I must first tell pharaoh."

* * *

Meren's town house sheltered behind high walls. Ancient sycamores, tamarisks and willows clustered near the main house with its reflection pools and loggias. Behind the house lay a separate walled garden, service buildings, servants quarters and barracks for the charioteers serving the Eyes and Ears of Pharaoh.

That irritable feeling of having missed something important kept Meren awake when everyone else had gone to bed. Having given up chasing sleep Meren left the house and walked to the stables where his thoroughbreds resided in pampered luxury. The two stallions, Wind Chaser and Star Chaser greeted him with nickers and tossing heads. Meren fed them handfuls of grain and listened to the low grinding of their teeth as they ate. He had always liked the sound, so peaceful and regular.

He was going back to Hathor's Ornament in the morning, after he spoke with pharaoh. The scale of his inquiry would increase, and the king

must approve. Meren was worried, for what had appeared to be a simple murder of a commoner had become something far more complex. There was no telling how great the scale of corruption was or how high it had spread.

Meren rubbed his face against Star Chaser's dish-shaped jaw. The horse gently nibbled at his shoulder. Suddenly Star Chaser's head jerked back and his ears flattened.

"What's wrong, old friend," Meren asked, reaching for Star Chaser's mane.

That was when he felt a tiny current of air against his back. He turned slightly, and pain exploded in his head. Meren fell against the stall door, dazed, clutching his head. Someone grabbed him, and a fist jabbed into his stomach. Meren sank to the ground trying not to vomit. Before he could recover his attacker yanked him up by the hair. A blade appeared at his throat and pressed into his skin.

"What luck to find you alone so soon," a voice hissed.

Meren was still too stunned to do more than gasp.

"Listen to me, Eyes and Ears of Pharaoh. The doorkeeper was killed by someone he had debts with, a friend or a tavern keeper. Accuse one of them and settle this inquiry. Otherwise you're not so mighty that you can't be dispatched as easily as that drunken sot. Allow me to show you."

Suddenly the blade sliced his throat, but Meren grabbed the arm of his attacker, ramming it backwards and rolling out of his grip at the same time. As he rolled a shadow swooped at him. It fastened hands on his head and jammed it into the hard packed earth of the stable floor. Blackness took him in less than a beat of his heart.

* * *

The uproar over the attack on him caused Meren more pain than his injuries. Kysen stomped around giving orders to the charioteers to track the invader while Meren's daughters tried to put him to bed and called his physician. For his part, Meren was furious. It was humiliating for a king's warrior to be attacked in his own dwelling and beaten like a peasant who had failed to pay enough tax. Thus Meren was in a foul mood late the next morning when he went to pharaoh's palace to report on

his progress sporting a bandage wrapped around his throat. It stuck out above the gold and lapis lazuli broad collar he wore. His head ached beneath the formal wig that fell to his shoulders. When he saw Meren the king wanted to call out the royal guard to arrest someone, anyone. It took all of Meren's persuasive skills to calm the boy down so that he could point out that they had no one to arrest.

Ra's fiery orb was high in the sky before Meren was able to leave the palace and pay another visit to the house of Kar's family. Kysen was already at Hathor's Ornament with a squad of charioteers and scribes. They were going over the accounts and records of the royal women's household in search of inconsistencies. The questioning of the royal women would have to wait until Meren arrived.

Meren now knew he was looking for someone other than a lowborn thief. His attacker had known how to use a blade and had fought like a warrior. That ruled out farmers, craftsmen and many scribes and government officials. And few men in Egypt had the temerity to threaten the Eyes and Ears of Pharaoh and expect to get away with it. The

attempt spoke of desperation or a rashness that seemed inconsistent with the careful way in which the murderer had concealed many of his actions.

At Kar's house Meren noticed right away that the family's circumstances had changed. Wall hangings brightened the walls, food was more abundant, and Kar's father appeared almost cheerful.

Wersu greeted him with a sad smile. "You honor us, Lord Meren."

Glancing around the living area Meren nodded at a large wine jar on a stand. "I see many improvements since I was last here."

"Ah, yes. I am ashamed that I had to conceal many of my possessions from Kar, my lord. He would take things and trade them for beer and wine. His mother had to hide her jewels, her clothing, even her linens."

"Where is Mistress Qedet?"

"I will fetch her."

Meren shook his head. "We will go to her."

"She is upstairs, lord."

In the master chamber Qedet was busy putting clean sheets on the bed that her son once occupied. When Meren entered she hastily tucked a

sheet under the mattress and stuffed more folded linens into a box at the foot of the bed.

"I want to ask you if Kar ever said anything about his work at Hathor's Ornament," Meren said.

Wersu and Qedet glanced at each other.

"Not much, my lord," said Wersu. "He didn't like Uthi, the overseer of doorkeepers and porters. But Kar never liked anyone who had authority over him. That was why he failed as an unguent maker."

"And what about his sudden wealth? The gold bracelet, the other things?"

Wersu flushed, and Qedet burst out, "We were so afraid he'd stolen them. Onuris told you about those things, I know. What were we to do? Give our son to the police? I couldn't bear the shame. Please, my lord, we're old and humble, and have been good subjects all our lives. May the gods witness how we tell the truth. We didn't steal, and Kar didn't tell us anything."

No matter how he approached the matter, Meren couldn't alarm or trick Wersu or his wife into admitting being involved in their son's crimes.

Further intimidation would be necessary, and that meant dragging the old couple to the barracks at his house. That could wait until he'd finished with the people at Hathor's Ornament. Then he would send men for Wersu and Qedet. Being summoned at a late hour to appear before him often was enough of a shock to loosen tongues. Meren eyed Wersu as the older man made more excuses for his son's crimes. Qedet added her own litany when Wersu ran out of breath. Losing interest in their justifications, Meren's attention strayed. His gaze drifted from the ceramic lamps distributed about the room to the small alabaster and faience tubes and trays used to hold eye paint and kohl eyeliner.

That nagging irritable feeling was back. He was about to interrupt Qedet when his eye caught the newly made bed. Light streamed in from a window set high in the wall and caught the sheen of the linens on the bed. Such fine cloth, almost the quality of royal linen—soft, smooth, tightly woven. It was then that Meren remember his first visit to this house. He'd been talking to these two in the kitchen, and Qedet had been scrubbing a spot off a sheet, an ink spot. Only now Meren realized it hadn't been a spot. It had been a laundry mark, and that mark had been

from the laundry at Hathor's Ornament. Meren suddenly shoved Wersu aside, walked over to the bed and pulled at the sheets.

Wersu followed him, wringing his hands. "My lord!"

Meren turned to him with the corner of a sheet in his hands. "Your wife couldn't remove the mark entirely. I can still see the name of the owner, Wersu. Your son stole this from Princess Iaret. It's time for the truth, unless you'd rather wait for the attentions of the city police."

"No! No, my lord, please, I'll tell you what I know." Wersu licked his lips and clasped his trembling hands. "Kar brought home a large box of linens, and these are some of them. He—he wasn't stealing—"

"I should have brought my whip," Meren snapped.

"No, please, lord. Kar told me what he was doing one night when he was drunk. He knew a secret, a secret about one of the ladies, and she was giving him valuable things so that he would keep the secret."

"Out with it, Wersu. The woman was Princess Iaret. What was the secret?"

"It was that Princess Iaret had fallen in love with Lord Roma. She met him while performing her duties in the temple as a singer of the great

god Amun. Kar saw them meeting secretly late one night in the garden of Hathor's Ornament. He went to the princess and threatened to expose the affair if she didn't pay him."

Meren's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. It was worse than he'd imagined. Roma was the grandson of the Paranefer, the high priest of Amun. He had just stumbled onto what could be a plot to take the throne of Egypt. It had been done before. A man of great ambition could marry a royal princess. If he had enough backing from the powerful temples and nobles, he could seize the throne and legitimate his claim through his wife. This was why so many princesses remained within the royal women's household where pharaoh could keep an eye on them. Iaret was the daughter of Akhenaten. Roma was a young man of great skill as a warrior, having won battles against the wild tribes of Nubia and rebellions Asiatic vassal princes. He had a large following in the army. Together Roma and the princess could be a real threat to the immature Tutankhamun, especially with the richest temple in Egypt, that of Amun, behind them. Cursing, Meren left Wersu and Qedet pleading for leniency and making excuses for themselves instead of their son. As he

stepped out of the house he heard Qedet screeching at Wersu, blaming him for their misery. His last sight was of Wersu, his flaccid skin pale, his eyes watery, staring after Meren like the shade of one without a tomb doomed to wander lost forever.

Instead of going to Hathor's Ornament, Meren returned home and sent for Kysen and his men. He spent a few hours in preparation before dispatching a messenger with a polite invitation for Lord Roma to visit him. The young man arrived near dusk. Meren received him in the reception hall of his town house, a graceful room with a high ceiling supported by eight slender columns in the form of water lilies. Wearing an intricately pleated robe of royal linen, a gold broad collar set with carnelian and turquoise, and matching armbands, Meren was seated on the master dais in a gilded chair. Kysen and Abu stood beside him.

Roma strolled into the reception hall resplendent in his own jewels and fine linen. He was one of those men who, despite being rather plain, exuded an air of power and confidence. "An invitation from the great Lord Meren. An unexpected honor." He bowed slightly, the salute of one equal to another.

"Welcome, and may the gods bless you, Lord Roma. May I inquire as to the health of your grandfather?"

"He's well, considering his great age." Without being invited Roma sat in a chair near the dais and helped himself from a bowl of dates on a nearby table. "What's the purpose of your invitation, Meren? I'm due at the temple for the evening ritual. I'm a lector priest, you know."

"A learned man and a skilled warrior," Meren said softly. "Admirable accomplishments for one so young. The ladies at court must find you irresistible."

Something flickered in Roma's eyes, but he answered easily. "No more irresistible than you, Meren. You should have remarried by now, if you'll pardon me. Your wife has been dead many years."

"True, Roma." Meren rose and stepped down from the dais, ending up beside his guest. He bent down and hissed, "But I don't have a princess besotted with love for me." As he spoke Meren pulled Roma's dagger out of its sheath and rested it against the hollow of his throat. Leaning close, he said, "I don't appreciate being attacked from behind in my own home, Roma. I ought to gut you just for that."

Roma had frozen when Meren drew his dagger. He met Meren's eyes, lifted his chin and spat, "So you know. I've done nothing wrong."

"Corrupting a royal princess, you call that nothing? We shall see what pharaoh thinks of it." Meren straightened as Kysen and Abu joined him and took up positions on either side of Roma. "You should have made sure Kar was dead before you left him. I'm surprised you didn't take him farther out into the desert."

"Kar." Roma's dark eyes flashed with anger. "You think I killed that worthless donkey's arse? I didn't even know he was threatening Iaret until she confessed to me after you came to see her. She kept it from me because she knew I would kill him. You can ask her."

"I will, and I'm going to ask her if she gave you a dagger engraved with the name Nefer-kheperu-re."

"Well, she didn't," Roma sneered. "I happen to know that dagger just came in a couple of months ago. It was from a lot of items moved from the royal palace in the Fayuum Oasis. It had been her mother's. If Kar was killed with it, Iaret gave it to him to keep him quiet."

Meren realized with admiration that the sweet-natured and seemingly guileless laret had deceived him with great skill. He opened his mouth to reply, but shouting sounded at the front door. Something crashed to the floor in the entry hall, and an old priest charged into the hall followed by several retainers.

"What are you doing here, Paranefer?" Meren demanded.

Paranefer stopped and leaned on his walking stick, his scrawny chest heaving. "What are you doing with my grandson?"

"Don't bore me with this air of injured innocence," Meren said as he walked away from Roma. "I know the plot, Paranefer. You're not going to marry your grandson into the royal family. You'll be lucky to escape this with your life."

"What!" Paranefer squawked. He rounded on Lord Roma.

"What's this, boy?"

Meren rolled his eyes, but Roma was staring at the floor and turning red. Curious, Meren remained silent while Paranefer continued.

"Is this true? Answer me, you addled colt!"

"Yes," Roma mumbled.

Paranefer let out a squeal of outrage. "What have you done? Who is it? Who is the woman?" His grandson muttered under his breath.

"Who? I didn't hear you."

"It's Princess Iaret," Meren said as he watched Roma shrink under the molten gaze of his grandfather. His swagger and confidence had vanished.

The old priest's jaw dropped. He whacked Roma on the head and took his seat, his hands trembling. "A daughter of the heretic! May Amun protect me." He glared at Roma. "You would taint our blood by allying yourself with the spawn of that great criminal?"

Roma straightened and faced Paranefer. "I love her."

"What?" Paranefer regarded his grandson with horror.

"I love her!"

"Nonsense. No one could fall in love with one of the heretic's brood. You've betrayed me. May the gods witness my anguish."

Paranefer moaned and spewed epithets at his grandson.

While the two argued, Meren took Kysen and Abu aside.

"They've forgotten about us," he said ruefully.

"Aye, Father. I believe the old man was ignorant of Roma's doings."

"Indeed," Abu said. "His outrage wasn't feigned."

Meren shook his head. "Love. I never considered it."

"That's what comes of being so jaded," Kysen said with a grin.

Frowning at his son, Meren said, "Nevertheless, Roma has interfered with a royal princess." He thought for a few moments.

"However, one could view the liaison differently, as an opportunity to form an alliance with an old enemy."

"Paranefer would hate it," Kysen said with a bigger grin.

"All the more reason to approach pharaoh with the idea. I shall consider it."

Abu cleared his throat. "And what of the murder, lord?"

"Yes, I'm inclined to believe someone else killed Kar with that the dagger he got from the princess," Meren said. "It's the simplest explanation."

Kysen looked at him inquiringly "Who?"

Meren said nothing for a few moments, toying with Roma's dagger as he thought. "By the mercy of Amun," he breathed.

"What is it, Father?"

"Abu, my chariot, quickly. We may be too late."

Meren paced back and forth. Kysen watched him anxiously while Paranefer and Roma argued, oblivious to their surroundings.

"What's wrong?" Kysen asked.

"I'm probably too late," Meren muttered.

"Father!"

Meren rounded on his son. "You stay here and watch our two guests, but don't keep them. They're not going to flee the city."

"Where are you going?"

Heading for the door, Meren said, "I'll take Abu with me."

Running out of the house, he found Abu careening around the corner of the house driving his chariot. The vehicle swerved so that Meren could jump in, and they rumbled down the tree-lined avenue and out the gate in the wall that surrounded the estate. Scattering pedestrians, herds of sheep and donkeys, they clattered over the packed

earth, down narrow streets and around precipitous corners. They skidded to a halt at a corner occupied by a stall selling fresh beer because the chariot wouldn't fit between it and the opposite house. Meren leaped to the ground with Abu close behind him and raced around the corner. He hurtled down the street and saw Wersu in his courtyard pulling on the tether of a donkey loaded with parcels. Meren stopped just beyond the courtyard wall, but the old man hadn't seen him. Wersu's front door was open, and he was shouting at someone inside.

"Hurry! Leave the rest! I have the valuables already."

Qedet shouted back. "I'm not leaving my linens!"

"Taking a trip, Wersu?" Meren asked softly.

The old man gasped and whirled around. Seeing Meren, he paled and opened his mouth. Nothing came out. Wersu's gaze jumped from Meren to the tall, imposing charioteer at his side.

Meren's fingers ran over the beads of electrum and lapis lazuli in the belt that cinched his robe over his kilt. "How unlike Kar to be so generous as to give you that valuable royal linen. I find myself unable to believe your tale, Wersu. I think Kar kept all his loot to himself. I think

you were furious at him for this last and greatest injury. Did Kar threaten to leave and take his wealth with him after all you'd put up with from him?"

Dropping the donkey's tether, Wersu sobbed and dropped to the ground at Meren's feet.

Unmoved, Meren continued. "I think if I look in those carefully wrapped bundles on you donkey I'll find more of Princess Iaret's possessions. What do you think?"

Wersu raised himself, but he spoke to Meren's sandaled feet. "I beg mercy, great lord. Kar wouldn't share anything, not a bead, not a scrap of linen, and Qedet--. My wife has always berated me for my lack of ambition and wealth. I thought to myself, at last, here is a chance to please her. She will love me as I've always wished now that I can give her the luxuries she craves. But Kar refused. After all I'd done for him, for years. I couldn't bear it, and Qedet kept complaining and criticizing." Wersu was quivering. "I so tired and unhappy. I just wanted her to stop telling me what a failure I was, and Kar wouldn't help me."

"So you followed him to his hiding place and confronted him," Meren said.

The old man nodded. "He was in the cave admiring his newest treasure, that d—dagger. I didn't mean to kill him." Wersu was crying now. "He was my son, but he never listened, just never listened. Wouldn't listen to me. I didn't mean to hurt him, but he wouldn't listen."

Meren winced at the way Wersu seemed to disintegrate in front of him. At that moment the front door to Wersu's house banged open, and Qedet backed outside with a long wicker box. She maneuvered her burden across the threshold, turned and saw Meren. Shrieking, she dropped the box, spilling royal linen into the dusty courtyard.

Glancing at a sheath dress with a hem embroidered in purple and gold, Meren said, "Ah, Mistress Qedet. I think you'll find that those linens have come at a higher price than even you are willing to pay."

END