



Pharaoh's Desire

CHANTA JEFFERSON RAND

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By

Chanta Jefferson Rand

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Chapter One

Lower Nubia, Aswan—1600 B.C.

It was the dead of night. While everyone else slept soundly, Kama's stomach awakened her with its soft growling. No matter how much she ate, her belly never seemed satisfied. She sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes before peering at her cousin, Satati, who was snoring softly on the straw-filled bed beside her. At last, the poor girl was finally getting some sleep. They'd both endured the daylong boat ride from Kerma to Aswan, the home of Satati's betrothed, Zetran. Satati's father, Akahmen, had piled her bride-vessel high with stacks of fresh fruit and succulent honeycomb, large crates of smoked fish and meat, baskets of bread loaves, sweet-smelling perfume cones, spices, cosmetics, jewelry, and ornately carved bronze mirrors. He'd spared no expense in pledging his daughter to her betrothed.

Arranged marriages were commonplace, but Kama thought the entire concept cold and calculating. The only benefit she saw was to the greedy father of the groom, who often demanded far too steep a dowry in exchange for a bride. But, shy and quiet Satati did not share Kama's gloomy outlook on marriage. She was

content to become a wife and lead a boring life of domestication. Kama had no such aspirations. Since birth, she had been wild spirited and outspoken. Her mother often joked that even her newborn cry was louder than most babes'. And now, at age twenty, she was a headstrong and opinionated young lady—although some men might not consider her so young.

Not that she cared much for the opinions of men. Indeed, the more she learned about them, the more convinced she was of their uselessness. Uncle Akahmen was one of the few males she could tolerate. He'd been husband to her mother's sister before she died. Since then, Kama and her mother had shared his home, along with Satati. Now with Satati getting married on the morrow, Kama wondered how long it would be before Akahmen finally insisted that she, too, be wed.

Thus far, she had successfully resisted all attempts. Each time some hopeful suitor approached, Kama always found some monumental fault. Akahmen usually bit his tongue, but she could tell that he was becoming increasingly frustrated with her. She knew it was only a matter of time before he found a husband for her. It had been the same for Kama's own mother and her ancestors before her. Everything in life was planned and arranged. Just like wars and harvests.

In the morning, the marriage contracts would be signed, followed by a wedding feast of roasted duck, sun-dried fish, curried goat, boiled cabbage,

cucumbers served in oil and vinegar, and warm bread and beer. Kama's mouth watered just thinking about it.

She lay down and tried to forget her hunger. The soft chirping of the crickets usually relaxed her, but tonight, there was only silence. She held her breath and listened carefully. In the distance, she heard a shrill cry that made chills run up her spine. It was like a battle call piercing the dark air. Moments later, she smelled smoke. *Fire!*

Kama sprang out of bed. "Satati, get up!" she screamed in her cousin's ear, and pulled the sleepy girl to her feet, shaking her. "The house is on fire. We must get out!"

Satati's eyes immediately filled with tears. "...Must find Father... Zetran," she rasped, her voice anchored by the heavy weight of sleep.

Even as Kama shouted her agreement, a line of golden-hot flames began dancing up the side of one wall, leaving a cloud of black smoke in its wake. The two women choked, gasping and coughing in the foul air as they ran through the corridors of Zetran's home. Everything was aflame, burning brightly and throwing off a fierce heat. Brittle fragments of the mud brick walls began breaking off and flying in all directions. A large piece hit Satati on the head, and she fell, crumbling to the ground. Her flailing arm sent a tall oil lamp toppling, and the scented oil inside quickly caught fire. The flames quickly snaked a path from the oil to Satati.

Instantly, the girl's clothing was engulfed in the blaze. Her piercing scream penetrated the loud crackle of the flames.

"Satati!" Kama yelled. All common sense deserted her as she grabbed frantically at her cousin's body, trying to beat the fire out with her own hands. She succeeded only in burning her fingers and palms. "No! No!" she cried, feeling hot tears streaming down her face. She was forced back by the roaring fire and watch helplessly as Satati's body flailed violently before being consumed by the hot flames.

Kama staggered away, blinded by her tears and suffocating from the heat. Satati was lost to her; she must at least find her uncle. She choked back her sobs and ran through the main house, loudly calling Akahmen's name. She brushed wildly at the dense smoke that attacked her eyes. Unable to see or hear, she instinctively dropped to her knees and crawled along the floor. Immediately, she smelled the pungent odor of red onions and she knew she was in the kitchen.

Beneath the thick clouds of smoke, she was able to see better. Once her vision adjusted, she gasped in shock. She could barely make out the outline of Zetran's charred body. She knew he too, was dead.

Screaming in horror, she bolted upright and ran. She stumbled aimlessly, falling over the smoldering items the fire had ravaged. Pockets of bright red flames threw off a scorching heat that singed the very air she breathed. She hurried

toward made for the last room, coughing and nearly doubled over. Her heart tightened in her chest. Akahmen was not there.

She turned around, staggering, and tripped over something, hitting the floor hard. She peered at the bundle at her feet, willing her eyes to focus despite the smoke. *Akahmen!* She pulled his body against hers, cradling his head, but it was no use. He was limp in her arms. The raging fire drowned out the sound of her grief-filled sobs. She laid him on his back and crossed his arms over his chest. There was no time to perform the ceremonial prayer. If she didn't escape now, she would surely be trapped inside.

She half-ran, falling and stumbling over debris. When she fell against the wall by the side of a door, the wall gave way, freely opening into a dark, earthen tunnel. A small, flaming wooden beam fell against her shoulder, burning her, and she cried out, but kept her pace. The cool interior of the tunnel was a welcome relief, and almost immediately, she felt beads of sweat cooling against the heated skin on her back. She wiped her eyes with the heel of her blistered hand and was too numb to even feel the pain. She fought to keep the images of Satati, Akahmen, and Zetran from her mind. The time for grieving was later.

As she neared the end of the tunnel, she heard loud shouts. She stood frozen, wondering if the sounds were from friend or foe. It was not uncommon for warring tribes to resort to violence like this. She hid in the shadows, quiet as a gazelle,

trying to listen to the voices. Her heartbeat thundered loudly in her ears, like frenzied fists pounding on a drum. She waited until the muted sounds died away and spurred herself into action. She planned to race toward Akahmen's boat that was still docked on the riverbank. She hoped his servants would still be there, keeping vigil.

She glanced around and, seeing nothing, fled from the tunnel. A fire-scorched landscape greeted her. Houses, monuments, and fields had been set aflame, and whatever had not been ravaged by the inferno was left scarred and blackened.

As she ran, an amulet of the goddess Pakhet swung wildly from her neck on a leather cord. Pakhet was the patron of inner strength. Kama wrapped her burned fingers around its familiar shape, the head of a lioness attached to a woman's body, and said a silent prayer for the goddess to watch over her. She would escape this fire or die trying.

She made it as far as the outskirts of the city when she heard shouts behind her. Kama glanced back and saw a swarm of Egyptian soldiers. Exhausted, she was quickly overtaken by the group. They immediately surrounded her, forming a wide circle and trapping her in the middle. They closed in tighter until she had nowhere to run.

A tall, thin man stormed through the ring of human bodies, brandishing his sword in the air. He had a cruel face that only a mother would cherish. Apparently, he was the leader of this pack of vultures.

“What do we have here?” he spat contemptuously. He gave her a lustful glare that left no doubt as to his intentions. “I have no love for Nubians,” he sneered, “yet I will have the pleasure of sampling what lies beneath your dress. Do you willfully submit or must I force you?”

She was shocked at his vulgarity. How could the gods breathe life into this brute? He gave her a menacing stare, but she swallowed her fear and held her ground. She would give no man the satisfaction of humbling her.

“Speak when you are spoken to, woman!” he demanded. “Or have you no tongue?”

Anger like hot tar bubbled inside her, threatening to spill over. She lifted her chin and gave him the full measure of her fury. “Animals like you do not deserve my words,” she said scathingly.

He eyed her with loathing and then shouted to the assembled soldiers. “Men, I think this creature is nothing more than a common whore! Look at her clothing. She is a dirty, filthy, Nubian whore.” He licked his lips. “And she’s ours for the taking!”

Kama gasped aloud. “I am no harlot! I’m dirty from the smoke and fire.” She

gave them all venomous glares. If they thought they'd found some helpless victim, she would soon prove them wrong. "I am chaste, and if you dare to find out," she challenged, "it will be the last thing you do before dying."

In response, the man raised his sword high above his head and brought it down swiftly in front of her. The shiny metal of his weapon sliced through the thin fabric of her dress, cutting it in two halves and baring her flesh. A loud roar of excitement echoed in the night air. The soldiers jeered and yelled as they advanced forward, each determined to take the first spoils of the night.

The tall, thin man called out, "She is mine first!"

Kama hurriedly pulled the two pieces of her garment together with one hand and picked up a rock with the other. She hurled the stone as hard as she could, easily hitting one of the soldiers in the face. He howled in response. Her heart raced in alarm. They might take her, but not before she inflicted some damage of her own!



From atop his horse, Pharaoh Amonmose stared down at the fires ravishing the city of Aswan. He watched long enough to see the leaping flames slowly transform into angry red embers glowing eerily against the dark horizon. His long cloak fluttered in the warm night breeze as he felt the blood racing through his

veins. Tonight, he and his men had raided three towns and taken them all by surprise. They were covered from head to toe with black smoke and dirt, but none of them seemed to care. They were focused on one thing—conquering their Nubian neighbors.

Egypt seemed to attract enemies like flies to a pile of dung, but the Nubians were perhaps their most deadly foes. Egypt had the misfortune of sharing a southern border with Aswan, which was located in Lower Nubia. The proximity of the two kingdoms invited constant warring. His royal council had informed him that fierce Nubian warriors had been mercilessly attacking small towns on the outskirts of Thebes. Two days ago, Egyptian temples had been desecrated, and in one town, the wife of a government official had been abducted.

Amonmose had ridden into battle tonight determined to have his vengeance against the Nubians. Yet, strangely, his army had not been met with any opposition. Thus far, he'd seen none of the Nubian resistance his royal advisors had told him existed.

In the distance, he heard a deep rumble of shouting. He'd heard that particular sound before. It was the way the soldiers celebrated when they'd found precious booty. He quickly turned his mount around and sped in the direction of the noise.

When Amonmose arrived at the edge of the village, he saw a battalion of his

soldiers huddled in a thick circle. Whatever prize they'd found had so totally enraptured them that they were unaware of his approach. As he neared the melee, he saw one of the soldiers fall back and crumple to the ground. The man's loud yelp of pain could be heard above the din of the noise. The ring of soldiers parted slightly as two of the men stooped down to help their fallen comrade, giving Amonmose a glimpse inside *A woman!* She was hopelessly surrounded, and the men were closing in on her. In a desperate attempt to thwart their advance, she was hurling rocks. Her last effort had landed a soldier on his backside. The woman was fighting for her life, and he was impressed by her bravery.

"Enough!" His deep voice prompted deafening silence. The soldiers respectfully parted to allow him entrance into the circle, and Amonmose addressed his chief commander. "Nadesh, what goes on here?"

"We found a survivor, Sire," Nadesh answered. "A Nubian traitor or probably a whore."

"I am neither!" the woman hissed.

Amonmose turned his attention to her. Up close, she was breathtaking, despite the dirt and soot. She had a graceful form and hair the color of ebony. She held a shredded white dress like a shield in front of her. It did little to conceal the ample curves of her body. With her narrow waist and wide hips, she looked like one of the exotic dancers that often entertained at the palace. Her skin was the

darkest of browns and smooth as the slopes of the Sahara Desert. He could see her slim legs outlined beneath the thin fabric of her torn garment.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I am Kama Nubemheb,” she answered boldly. “I hail from Kerma.”

Her full bosom was heaving up and down. She was obviously exhausted by the heroic effort she’d made to fight off her attackers.

“You are named after the Egyptian goddess of love,” he said. At that moment, their gazes locked, and he stared into her onyx-colored eyes. Her look told him she was surprised by his observation. In the midst of battle, most men were consumed with looting and killing, not matters of minor theology.

“Yes,” she said warily. “Nubians worship many of the same gods as you. My mother named me after the Egyptian goddess of love. But that is not an invitation. I have no wish to service you or your filthy soldiers.”

Amonmose smiled to himself. She did not seem like a harlot. In fact, from her outraged behavior, she acted as if she were royalty. His gaze roamed over the long, thin braids surrounding her face. She stood wary, ready to spring at any moment. She was like a crocodile. Silent and calm, but deadly when provoked. Her eyes were dark as a midnight sky, shiny as the stars in the heavens, and glowing with the anger of a raging fire. It was entrancing.

Her body language silently rebuked him, with shockingly openly hostility.

She was almost as fierce as a man, arrogant and haughty. But her looks were striking, and her body was lush.

“Do you know who I am?” Amonmose demanded.

“No, I do not, and I am certain it is no concern of mine,” she spoke bravely. “I ask only for safe passage. I can make it well worth your trouble,” she added.

“Oh?” He did not bother to hide the suggestive tone of his remark. “And what of your cherished maidenhead

Kama flushed. “You misunderstand my words. My cousin was to be married on the morrow. Her dowry waits at the river. If you let me go, it’s yours.”

He deliberately advanced his mount toward her. He was so close he could smell her scent intermingling with the foul smell of smoke in the air. “What makes you think I won’t simply take the dowry, along with anything else I desire?” He watched as she took a step backward.

“You seem like a man of great importance,” she said. “If you say you will release me in exchange for the dowry, I know every man here will comply with your wishes.”

Nadesh interrupted. “She lies. She is probably no more than a slave giving away her master’s goods to earn her freedom.”

“No! I am slave to no master!” Kama shouted.

Amonmose watched her shake her head vigorously, her free hand clenching

into a fist. He wondered if she was always so passionate. Suddenly, he had a vision of her beneath him, arching her hips to his and clasping her legs around his back. He fought the rise beneath his tunic. Her spirited nature had inflamed his desire, and slave or not, he wasn't ready to release her yet.

Keeping his heated gaze on Kama, he spoke to Nadesh. "Bring her back to Thebes," he commanded. "She will be mine."

He saw clear indignation written on her comely face. "You are making a mistake," she told him. "I am not for sale."

He smirked. "Then I shall take you for free."

Her eyes became narrow slits. "You shall never have me!"

Amonmose was accustomed to his subjects bowing before him. That this mere *slip* of a woman had the audacity to ... She needed to be put in her place. He gave his full attention to Nadesh. "Take her to my vessel, but I want her treated well," he admonished. "No one is to touch her." He spared the woman a quick glance before spurring his horse back in the direction he'd come from.

Kama got one last look at the mysterious man before he hastily rode away. Her gaze quickly followed the lines of his muscular body. He was draped in a light-colored shendyt that was knotted at the waist and fell to just above his knees. His bronzed, muscled chest was bare but almost entirely concealed by a red

cloak upon his shoulders. A metal headpiece covered most of his ears and head, and a well-groomed, black goatee framed his stern mouth. His amber eyes glowed with a mysterious heat, and the tight line of his lips and his hard-set jaw told her he was not someone to be taken lightly.

She clutched her dress tightly. “How dare he!” Kama spat, looking at the man’s retreating back. “Who gave that beast rights to claim me?”

The man with the cruel features who answered to the name Nadesh responded. “That *beast* is Pharaoh Amonmose Tehutimes of Egypt. He has every right to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants. He is the divine law of this land.” He grinned lasciviously. “And you are his new concubine.”

Chapter Two

The journey to Thebes was a blur. Kama scarcely recalled how she got from Aswan to the Pharaoh's colossal palace. She remembered riding in his massive boat. She remembered looking up at the full moon. She remembered watching the Nile as it snaked like a ribbon through the land, winding through the narrow villages of El-Armana, twisting across the desert, and plunging into the valley floors of Alexandria. She wished she could sail away and forget this ever happened.

After several hours, the rhythmic motions of the ship lulled her. Despite her torn dress and scorched skin she felt her heavy lids closing and finally fell into a deep sleep. When she awoke, she found herself in a strange room. She was on her back with her arms outstretched, palms up. She tried moving but found that her arms were bound at the wrists. She struggled against the leather ties but only succeeded in making herself dizzy. Each time she moved her head, she felt a dull throbbing at the base of her skull.

She fell back against the pillows, groggy and drained from her efforts. And her mouth felt dry, as if it had been stuffed with lamb's wool. She could scarcely feel her tongue. A feeling of helplessness washed over her, and she moaned aloud. Where was she? Why was she tied up like this?

Moments later, she felt the ties at her wrists loosen. She jerked her head quickly to see, and the pain returned. This time, her vision blurred.

“Try not to move so fast,” a soft voice cautioned. “You will suffer headaches.”

Kama slowly allowed herself to focus. A small female form appeared beside her. The face was kind with smiling eyes. Her cinnamon colored skin had a reddish tint. The girl wore her hair in a thick, black braid hanging from the right side of her face—a popular hairstyle of Egyptian youths. Kama closed her eyes. How many times had she helped Satati braid her hair in that exact same style?

Kama opened her eyes again and looked at her wrists. The young girl was gently massaging them, restoring the blood flow. “You were tied for your protection,” the girl said. “You kept scratching at your hands and trying to tear the bindings off.”

Kama’s hands were wrapped in thin linen strips, cleverly designed to make a glove. Each finger was protected from fingertip to wrist. Both of her hands resembled those of a mummy, and she shuddered at the thought.

“You will be fine,” the girl told her. “When you came here two days ago, your hands were burned terribly from the fire. A healing salve has been applied to your hands and your shoulder. It was made by the Pharaoh’s doctor, and he’s the best in Egypt.”

Kama closed her eyes again. Just thinking about her capture brought the

taste of bile to her lips. She recalled standing in the burning village watching the Pharaoh's retreating back. The trauma of the fire combined with the thought of losing her freedom had been more than she could bear. She'd slept for days, dreaming the most vivid dreams possible. And now, she'd awakened to find that it had not been a dream but a real-life nightmare instead.

"My name is Dyzet," the girl interrupted Kama's thoughts. "We will tend to all of your needs."

Kama opened her eyes to find Dyzet smiling at her. "We?"

"The Pharaoh has given you four ladies-in-waiting, including me. We are here to instruct you on the proper Egyptian protocol, so you will be prepared when you are summoned by the Pharaoh."

Kama slowly pushed herself up on her elbows and looked around the room. Standing in the corner were three other young women, two who appeared to be much older than Dyzet, staring back disdainfully. "They don't look very friendly."

"In Egypt, foreigners are regarded with great suspicion," Dyzet said. "They are simply being cautious for now."

"What reason would one have to be cautious of me?" Kama asked, incredulous.

One of the other women spoke. "Because we do not want to be eaten, of course!"

Kama sat up. "Eaten? I do not understand. By what?"

"By you! It is a well known fact that Nubians are barbaric cannibals. Do you deny it?"

"Yes, I do! That is pure nonsense."

"We've been studying your culture," the woman answered back. "We've learned that Nubians practice sorcery and cannibalism."

Kama shook her head in protest. "That is not true! Your fear of foreigners has allowed your ignorance to grow like a wild weed. Nubians have many of the same religious customs as Egyptians. Some wear the same clothing and eat the same foods. We are not so very different from you."

"Nevertheless," the woman insisted, "we shall keep a wary eye on you."

Kama tempered her rage. "I can assure you all that I am no threat. Certainly no more than your Pharaoh. He destroyed the village I slept in and killed my family."

The women gasped aloud in response. Yet, instead of sympathizing with her plight, they turned their backs to her and covered their ears. Kama frowned at their strangeness and glanced at Dyzet, who looked embarrassed on her behalf.

"You must never speak poorly of the Pharaoh," Dyzet warned. "To disagree with him is an offense punishable by death. To knowingly overhear someone condemn the Pharaoh yet fail to report it, is also an offense punishable by death."

So, they”—she indicated the other ladies-in-waiting—“have offered you their backs as a sign that they do not respect you.”

Kama stared defiantly at the trio. These women would never approve of her, and she suddenly had no desire to try to change their feelings.

“I was brought here against my will!” She yelled loudly so they would be sure to hear her. “I have no more wish to be here than you wish to be here with me. Now, go and tell your Pharaoh about me!” she challenged. “Tell him that I am not some lapdog waiting for his approval! Tell him that I will never submit to him.” None of the ladies-in-waiting moved. “Be gone! All of you! Be gone from my sight!”

As the women rushed from the room, Kama felt the throbbing pain return to the back of her head. She cradled her forehead against her bandaged palms.

Dyzet had not fled like the others, and she gently pushed Kama back onto the down-filled bed. “Lay down,” she instructed. “You have overexerted yourself.”

Kama complied. “You did not run like the others. Are you not afraid of being eaten by the great Nubian cannibal?” she asked wryly.

Dyzet shrugged. “I said *they* were cautious of you, not *I*. I have traveled far and wide with my father. He’s a mapmaker for the Pharaoh. In my travels, I have met many foreigners, including Nubians. Individuals are all different, and rarely what hearsay and rumor claim.”

Kama gave the girl a measured look. “How old are you, Dyzet?”

“Fifteen summers.”

“And the others?”

“Nemhet and Tiya are both nineteen. Pamut is twenty.”

“They are too old to be so uneducated.”

“They are old maids. Bitter that you have gained the Pharaoh’s favor but they have not. Give no further thought to them. I will speak with the Pharaoh and make certain they do not return.”

Kama winced. That was another thing their cultures had in common. In Nubian society, any childless woman over twenty could be regarded as an old maid.

“Sleep now.” Dyzet urged. “You must regain your strength so you can get back to normal.”

Kama fought the wave of despair that rolled over her like a storm. *Normal?* She would never have a normal life again. Her fate was sealed. She belonged to the Pharaoh now. She rolled over and curled into a ball, wrapping her arms tightly around herself. A concubine. What had she done to deserve this? She wanted to cry, but she would not give anyone the satisfaction of seeing her tears.

“I shall return tomorrow after you’re feeling better,” Dyzet promised. “In the meantime, the servants will look in on you and bring your meals. I will teach you everything about your new home, and pretty soon, you will love Egypt as much as

I do.”

Kama listened to the girl’s footsteps as she left the room and cringed inwardly. This would never be her home. Her home was with her mother, Mutema, who was hundreds of miles away in Kerma. For years, both she and Mutema had lived under the dark cloak of her father’s abuse, until they had the courage to flee to the safety of her Uncle Akahmen’s home in Kerma. Mutema had refused to ever leave their refuge, even years later to attend Satati’s wedding in Aswan. Kama was happy that her mother had declined the chance to travel. For if she had gone, she would surely be dead as well.



Every day that passed was the same for Kama. Dyzet was her constant companion, fussing over her injuries and babbling nonstop about the wonders of Thebes. After a while, Kama could not help but like her. Dyzet was not the one who ordered her capture so, she did not take her fury out on the poor girl. She would save her ire for her meeting with the Pharaoh.

She was surprised that the fearless monarch had not ordered her to his chambers immediately after her arrival. When he didn’t summon her during those first few days, she thought maybe he’d forgotten about her. For the first time since her capture, she felt small stirrings of hope fluttering inside her like a gentle

breeze. As her body healed and her mind became clearer, though, she knew it was only a matter of time before he would come to claim his prize.

Instead of waiting in anguish for him, she used her time to learn all the local customs of Thebes. Dyzet was an eager teacher, rambling continuously, jumping from topic to topic. Soon, Kama was an expert in all subjects from exotic fruits and animals to taxes and architecture. Today, Dyzet was instructing her on the proper customs that must be observed within the palace walls at all times, especially when interacting with the Pharaoh. The two of them had just sat down to a delicious lunch of roasted quail and pomegranate when Dyzet began speaking.

“Remember,” Dyzet cautioned, “you are not permitted to speak to the Pharaoh until you are prompted to do so by him. To speak out of turn is considered disrespectful.”

“If I have something that needs to be said, I will certainly speak.” Kama vowed.

“It is forbidden.”

“What will happen? Shall I be hung by my thumbs?”

Dyzet shook her head sadly. “Worse. Speaking before the Pharaoh commands you to do so is an offense punishable by death.”

Kama laughed out loud. “This palace has far too many rules. Is every offense punishable by death?”

“Yes, if it offends the Pharaoh.”

“What if someone unintentionally commits an error or makes a mistake in protocol?”

“It does not matter. I heard he once sent someone to the dungeon for drinking from his favorite wine goblet by accident.”

Kama gasped and stared at her companion. “That is absurd! You cannot be serious.”

Dyzet offered her a lopsided grin. “No, I am not.”

Relief flooded through Kama’s body, and she playfully wagged a finger at Dyzet. “It’s unkind to frighten me like that.”

The girl giggled. “Please accept my apology.”

“Are there any more rules?” Kama asked, though she didn’t want to know.

“Yes. You must bow when he enters the room and again when he leaves. You must not sit until he has taken his seat first.”

“In Nubian culture, women sit first.”

“This is not Nubia, Kama. The Pharaoh will not tolerate any breach of conduct.”

Kama’s eyes flashed. “His rules mean little to me. I have my own standards of conduct that *I* will not tolerate. I will not tolerate being seized in the dead of night. I will not tolerate being commanded to bend to the whim of some pompous,

overbearing ruler who sits lazily all day and wants to fornicate by night.”

If Dyzet was shocked by her words, she gave no indication. “The Pharaoh does not sit idle each day,” Dyzet said seriously. “There is much work to be done. He holds court daily and settles the citizens’ various legal disputes. He oversees daily purification ceremonies and religious rites for priests. He regulates duties and awards titles to government officials. As the Supreme Commander of his army, he is charged with motivating his soldiers and leading them in battle. He also controls Egypt’s vast quarries, mines, and trading fleets. And he is certainly neither pompous nor overbearing. Most women find him handsome. Don’t you?”

Kama quietly chewed her food. Her mind traveled back to the night she first saw the Pharaoh. He towered over everyone, sitting magnificently astride his horse. His amber eyes blazed each time he spoke. He was confident and regal. Yes, she would admit he was definitely pleasing to the eye. Perhaps under different circumstances, she could appreciate his outer beauty. But he and his men were responsible for her family’s death. No matter how handsome he was he would always be a monster to her.

“I do not wish to speak of him any longer,” she told Dyzet, her expression souring.

Dyzet stood up. “Then let us play Senet.”

Dyzet’s favorite pastime was playing Senet, a game in which three rows of

ten squares were painted on a piece of wood. Each player had seven pieces, and the object was to move them in a snakelike fashion across the squares. The first player to get all pieces off the board while preventing the opponent from doing the same won the game.

Kama would indulge the girl occasionally, but today she preferred to sit alone and watch the city from the four windows of her spacious room. She was sequestered somewhere on the fifth floor of the palace. It was a safety precaution, she was certain. Done intentionally to prevent her from jumping out of the window and running away.

Each morning she would gaze out of her windows and watch the quiet city of Thebes transform itself into a bustling metropolis full of activity. She watched the changing of the guards so often she knew their schedule perfectly. On the south side of her room, there was an elegant garden, blooming with the most colorful plants she'd ever seen.

Escape had crossed her mind, but only briefly. Much of the time, servants were around, observing her every movement. If she did evade their watchful eyes, she would still have to navigate her way through the vast palace, past the throngs of guards and safely away from the city gates. She would never survive the bandits in the forests or the deserts that lay on the outskirts of Thebes. She had no coin and no transportation. It would be a very short-lived escape. She was homesick,

but she wasn't witless.

"I would like to be alone," she told Dyzet.

Dyzet's expression revealed her disappointment, but she accepted Kama's request without question. "I will inform the servants not to disturb you," she offered.

"That is most kind."

Kama waited for Dyzet to leave the room before wandering to one of the open windows. Below, she saw several children playing. Their innocent laughter floated through the air and resonated in her ears. She stood and watched them as they played with their toys. Their roles were already defined even at their young ages. Little girls hugged dolls crafted from linen, and little boys pretended they were at war, enacting battles with mock swords fashioned from bent sticks. And so the cycle continued. Women had the urge to nurture. Men had the desire to destroy.

She wanted to tell the girls that they could play the same games as boys. She wanted them to know that women were just as important as men. Queen Sebek-Neferu-Ra and Queen Aah-hotep, who ruled hundreds of years ago, were competent and accomplished rulers. In Nubian society, women had a place of esteem, and they were frequently consulted on political affairs.

But as Dyzet said, this was not Nubia. For every heroic story of a powerful queen, there was an equally pathetic story of a woman like her—a victim of circumstance. Her capture proved that women were often nothing more than pawns in a man's world. So, she did not call out to the girls. She did not try to tell them what they could be. She remained silent, watching the city below, and preparing herself for her next encounter with the man who held her future in his hands.



Amonmose walked briskly down the long corridor to his meeting room, his golden flail in one hand and his walking staff in the other. A small procession followed him. His chief counselor, Meketen, dogged his heels. The short, stout man almost had to run to match the Pharaoh's brisk pace. On Amonmose's left, his bodyguard, Baal, kept constant watch over him. His hulking form gave the distinct impression that he could snap a man's neck in two quite easily. On Amonmose's right, two female servants gently waved huge fans made of ostrich plumes. Normally, he did not mind the women dispelling the thick waves of heat. But the corridors were cool today, and there was no need for their annoying presence. He waived his flail in their direction, indicating their services were no longer needed. They slipped away, seemingly brooding over their dismissal.

As Amonmose neared the meeting room, two eunuchs guarding the double doors to the meeting room bowed. The doors were then opened with a flourish. He entered and sat in a large gilded chair adorned with rare stones and carvings. As his advisors rose to greet him, he impatiently waved them away, dispensing with the pleasantries. He was not in the mood for pomp and ceremony.

“Nadesh, as my grand vizier, I rely on you to provide accurate military intelligence. As I am sure you know, that night in Aswan was a waste of men and effort. Have you an answer for what went wrong? A *quick* answer,” he added, to forestall one of Nadesh’s endless rambles.

Nadesh stepped forward. Fine lines were etched into his bronzed face, the only hint that he was nearing fifty years of age. “One of my scouts advised me of a skirmish on the southern border of Thebes, near Esna. An envoy of Nubian soldiers stormed the city, destroying temples and looting the coffers. They left over forty people dead.”

Amonmose held up his hand. “You conveyed this same information to me days ago. Yet, I saw none of this resistance. Am I to believe you depended on the word of one scout to carry my army into battle?”

Nadesh looked offended. “Never! I have a number of sources who keep me well informed. Even now, a unit of soldiers performing routine reconnaissance has alerted me to hostile activity near the border again. The Nubians are mounting

another campaign to demolish our outlying cities. Obviously, the loss of their homes and the destruction of their towns have meant nothing to them. They are like rabid dogs, foaming at the mouth, ready to conquer Egypt and usurp our power. The time has come to crush these insurgents for good!”

Amonmose listened to Nadesh’s heated words with cool indifference. “Surely, if the Nubians had initiated the first attacks, they would expect retaliation. Their soldiers would have been battle ready, prepared to take on our army. Yet, when our soldiers arrived, there was no one to put up a fight. In fact, our appearance seemed to be a complete surprise. How do you explain this?”

“Someone must have alerted them of our plans,” Nadesh responded.

“I think you were misinformed about the Nubian state of affairs in Aswan.”

“I have no regrets about that,” Nadesh said. “I will not be satisfied until they are all dead.”

Amonmose sneered. “*You* will not be satisfied until they are all dead? *I* am Pharaoh. I decide who survives and who does not. Nubia is a formidable enemy. The people are self-sufficient, politically well organized, and they have a strong military. Not only do we risk the lives of our soldiers, going to battle with them may also be cutting off a valuable trade route. You talk too much of bloodlust and not enough of diplomacy.”

“Respectfully, I agree with you—in part. The Nubians grow in strength and

number each day. They give no thought to the lives of our citizens when they raid our border towns. Their sneak attacks are crippling us. If we do not stop them now, they will overtake us soon.” Nadesh’s voice filled with anger and conviction. “We need to strike hard and fast into the hearts of our enemies. If there is any indication of weakness, if anyone survives, the next generation will grow with twice the envy and hatred.”

Nadesh stroked his thin, black beard with the palm of his hand. “As far as their trade route, Nubia is perfectly located to receive goods from the interior of Africa. If we conquer them, we can control all the shipments of gold, ivory, precious oils, spices, and animal skins.” He held his palms up in a pleading gesture. “Let us not be naïve, your grace. Egypt is rich with flourishing trade, prosperous farming, and the greatest water source in the entire world. We would be fools to think that no one would come to challenge us for it. But we would be stupid to wait on them to do so. We *must* be the aggressor. We must not sit idly by and wonder if, and when, they will attack again.”

Meketen, the chief counselor, spoke up. “I am in agreement with Nadesh. With the increasing number of foreigners entering our city gates and the threat of war looming from neighboring countries greedy for our resources, Egypt is in state of turmoil. Soon, it will be time for you to take a bride, Amonmose. Would you have your wife live in fear in her own city? Afraid to go to the market? Terrified to

venture to the temples? Our enemies are just waiting for the opportunity to strike. And when they are successful, what will become of Egypt? Looters and thieves will flood the streets. Our people will be destitute. Our temples will be desecrated. Our culture will be forgotten. We must show these mongrels what we do to those who test the authority of the Pharaoh.”

Amonmose watched the men standing before him. In the past, both had shown superior combat knowledge with impressive military records. Meketen was by far the more rational one, but he was not a brilliant strategist like Nadesh. Leading the pampered life of a royal chief counselor had easily added excessive pounds to his already short stature. He now reminded Amonmose of the god Bes, who stood in the doorways of many Egyptian homes, protecting the occupants against evil. Still, both men had been advisors to his father, and over the last twenty years, he, too, had come to rely on their counsel. Amonmose turned to his third advisor, Royal Treasurer Hai. “Have you an opinion on this?”

Hai cleared his throat before speaking. “Pharaoh, since your rule began, there has been nothing but stability in the land. Our citizens are prosperous. Our grain silos are always full. The soldiers are happy and well paid. Trade flourishes. But your throne is being constantly threatened by these foreigners. If you lose power, it will devastate trade relations and leave our currency undervalued. Workers will panic, production will decrease, prices will increase, and we’ll have

complete anarchy. We cannot live with the constant threat of Nubia at our throats. I say it's time to destroy them once and for all."

Amonmose pondered the advice of his council. Nadesh seemed agitated, emotional, as though the attacks from Nubia were personal. Kill every last Nubian? That was pure hatred disguised as counsel.

And Meketen? The consequences of inaction that he foresaw were ludicrous. Thebes destroyed? Their culture forgotten? Thebes had the greatest quantity and variety of goods anywhere in the world. Even if the city was captured by foreigners, it would never be destroyed.

As for Hai, his only concern appeared to be fear of losing control over Egypt's economy. He lamented over the country's currency as though it came from his own purse strings. Over the years, Amonmose had seen him change from an efficient accountant to an overstuffed miser.

"Gentlemen, I have heard all of your arguments, and I've come to my own conclusion. We've spent an enormous amount of resources fighting Assyrian, Mesopotamian and Libyan invasions. There is a time for battle and a time for peace. Waging war against Nubia is like stirring a bee's nest. I am content to leave that nest alone for now. We will keep our reconnaissance troops in place, and any new developments should be immediately reported to me. Are my orders clear?"

The advisors masked their disappointment with affirmative nods. While

they might not agree with their Pharaoh, they would not dare to oppose him. Amonmose left the room and retired to the solitude of his chambers. He looked at the oversized map of Nubia that lay on his table. It was at times like this when he thought of his father and wondered what his strategy would have been. Amonmose never got a chance to really know either of his parents. His mother had died giving birth to him, and his father was killed in battle when he was barely twelve. The irony was not lost on him. His parents died so he could live.

From then on, he had been totally dependent on the royal advisors, who raised him until he could successfully rule on his own. With corruption running rampant in the palace, it was amazing that he had not been killed—ascension to the throne by violence occurred frequently. As a precaution, he was kept sequestered for most of his adolescence.

He soon developed a loathing for the warring tribes that incessantly threatened the stability of the kingdom. As a young man, he surrounded himself with the brightest advisors and the smartest military strategists. He soaked up knowledge like a dry desert receiving its first rain. By age twenty, he had gone to war with eight neighboring tribes. Five years later, he'd doubled the size of the royal coffers, and he'd recovered a vast amount of land that had been stolen from weaker kings.

All his victories were hard won. His father had tried to do the same, and

Amonmose felt he carried on his father's legacy. He hoped his own heir would follow his example, but first he must find a wife. A fact his advisors would not let him forget.

Women were mere playthings to him. He loved their ripe forms, their soft bodies, and their willing dispositions. But they were all fluff and no substance. He'd yet to find one he felt he could regard as his equal.

Amonmose pushed the map aside and poured himself a goblet of wine, made from the grapes of his own vineyard. The sweet liquid felt warm going down his throat. He savored the effects that rippled slowly through his body.

He walked over to his large, bronze mirror and stared into it. Most women would consider him handsome. For certain, he'd had more than his fair share of conquests. The concubines he'd had in the past had stirred his blood, but only briefly. Nevertheless, he must find a wife soon. She would need to be fiercely loyal to him, but she should also have the best interests of Egypt in mind. She must realize he is the link between the people and their gods, and she must believe that when he prospers, Egypt prospers.

He wanted her to understand his duties as the supreme ruler. She would also have to appreciate her role as his queen and know how her actions affected the citizens. And of course, she would have to be attractive. He could not be expected to sire a legitimate heir with a woman who had the face of a goat!

Amonmose swallowed the last of his wine and turned away from the mirror. He would have to devote his time to finding a wife later. Right now, he had business with the Nubian woman. He'd learned that Kama had dismissed all but one of her ladies-in-waiting. She refused to eat any of her food, and the servants reported that she cried herself to sleep each night. Apparently, she preferred to starve herself to death rather than suffer in captivity.

He smirked. Something about her tempestuous nature drove him wild with passion and the need to possess her. Night after night he'd been plagued by her image. He remembered every detail about her, from her sparkling onyx eyes to her luscious body. Even surrounded by his army, she'd tried to hide her fear with her haughty stare and her biting tongue. Kama was a force to reckon with. But he could be just as powerful. He smiled to himself. On the morrow, he would make certain they were reintroduced.

Chapter Three

The next day Dyzet did not visit Kama. Despite her obvious desire to be alone, Kama had grown used to the young girl arriving promptly at sunrise and interrupting her cherished silence with her endless chatter. The room was eerily quiet without her.

Kama surveyed her surroundings. Her eyes rested on the mahogany three-legged table and two matching stools. Dyzet's Senet game was still there. The other furniture in the room consisted of three chests made of woven reeds, a massive bronze mirror polished to perfection, various wooden lamp stands with oil to light the room, and her large bed. She had to admit, the bed was comfortable. It was piled high with soft pillows and linens for cushioning. Since her arrival, she'd spent most of her time in this room. Perhaps she could sneak unseen from her chambers and see the rest of the palace.

She donned a simple, long white sheath dress but did not bother to belt it at the waist, as was customary. In Kerma, she'd always worn her clothing loose, preferring comfort to style. She glanced briefly at her new sandals lying at the foot of her bed. She would leave them behind. The tough leather rubbed against the arch of her foot, irritating it. Furthermore, she knew she would not step outside

the palace walls.

She quietly ventured from the room. To her surprise and relief, no one stood guard. As her bare feet touched the cool tiles of the floor, she felt a sense of trepidation slither through her, as if someone were watching her. She shrugged the feeling off and continued her walk, passing through the endless corridors of the palace. It was like a giant maze. Each hall emptied into another with no rhyme or reason. Her eyes widened in surprise at the opulence. Even the walls were engraved with ivory and gold inlay, depicting scenes of royal life, hunting, and chariot races. Ebony and teak wood sculptures lined the long halls. Ornately carved bronze and gold mirrors flanked her on all sides.

She looked at her reflection in one of the mirrors. She appeared calm and cool. No one would guess that only days before she had fled from a devastating fire, lost most of her family members, and barely escaped being raped by barbaric savages. She felt a rush of sadness at the memories, but no tears came. It was just as well. Tears were no use to her anyway. She had to use her brains and not her emotions to secure her freedom.

She kept walking, determined to explore the rest of the passageways. Gigantic stone torches lit each end, casting a brilliant glow over everything. When she reached the end of the corridor, she saw it opened into a magnificent receiving room filled with rows of marble stools. In the center of the room was a large

platform raised several inches off the intricately tiled floor. Just beyond the platform sat a solid gold chair encrusted with precious, colored gemstones. The arms of the chair were shaped like animal limbs, and the ends formed lion's claws.

She marveled at the exquisite display of turquoise, coral, and onyx. Mesmerized by the strength and power it exuded, she tentatively reached forward and stroked the chair's hard surface. It was cool to the touch.

This chair could belong to only one person. A sarcastic smirk crossed Kama's lips. The Pharaoh must be a vainglorious ruler to liken himself to a lion. Either that or a man with a sense of humor. She doubted it was the latter.

"This is where I hold court," a voice called out behind her. "Are you here to be judged?"

Kama whirled around. Even though he stood in the shadows, she could tell it was the Pharaoh by his masterful stance. He was an impressive figure, draped in a long, blue, pleated tunic and elaborate sandals. A majestic gold headpiece adorned with lapis lazuli and red coral stones covered his head. He wore thick gold bracelets on both arms and a bronze Ankh on his neck. The brilliance of the metal complimented his darkly tanned skin. His handsome features appeared stoic, but his eyes seemed to burn with a wild heat. He did indeed remind her of a lion, fierce and strong.

She felt her hands instinctively drop to her sides. Once steady fingers now

trembled in the presence of her captor. Her heart hammered in her chest, as her eyes roamed muscled body. He was the same as she remembered. Tall. Intimidating. Handsome. So, he'd finally come to lay claim to his prize, to show her what her intended place in his kingdom was. That must have been the reason Dyzet had not shown herself today.

She'd both dreaded and anticipated the moment she would come face to face with him again. She'd stewed in her own anger, outraged that he had the audacity to make her his prisoner. She'd prayed to the gods to give her courage and refused all food so she could keep her mind sharp and her hatred strong. Now, she finally had the confrontation she'd been anticipating. Her heart raced with the speed of a thousand chariots. But for some reason, she was not nearly as prepared as she thought she would be. Her head pounded. She wanted to say something, but as her lips parted for air, her lungs suddenly deflated. She took a step back and wavered, woozy. The Pharaoh suddenly blurred before her eyes. She blinked rapidly, trying to control the distorted image. Kama frowned at his furrowed brow and then swooned, crumpling to the ground.

Amonmose's quick reflexes allowed him to catch Kama before she fell. He heard his own sharp intake of breath loudly as she collapsed against him. He'd never held anything tighter in his life. He stared at the ripe beauty in his arms. Her

parted lips beckoned him like a siren. His first thought had been to take her to his chambers, but he decided against it. When she regained consciousness, she would feel more comfortable in her own familiar surroundings. He still remembered what a hellion she was the night he met her. If she knew she was in his private room, she would wake up fighting.

He gathered her in his arms and hastily carried her back to her bedchamber. His loud, booming voice echoed throughout the palace as he called for Latmay, his personal physician. Kama's body was light as a feather, and he effortlessly carried her to her room and delicately placed her on the soft bed.

As he gently released her from his hold, his palm grazed the soft slope of her buttocks. He felt himself stiffen and then flushed with shame. She was vulnerable, sick perhaps, and he should not take advantage. Still, his breath caught and fingers itched to touch her again.

Amonmose knelt beside the bed and put his ear to Kama's mouth, making sure she was still breathing. He felt a faint whisper of warm air escape from her lips and sighed in relief. He pulled back, gazing at her, his eyes following the fine lines of her high cheekbones to her sensuous, full lips. On impulse, he reached out and allowed his finger to take the same path. Her flesh was as soft and smooth as a lotus flower. Just looking at her was enough to test the willpower of any man.

Abruptly, Latmay burst through the door. "A thousand pardons, Sire. I came

as quickly as I could.” His jaw dropped when he saw the Pharaoh kneeling on the floor beside the woman’s bed. “What fate has befallen her?” he asked.

Amonmose scowled over his shoulder at the physician. “I approached her, and she collapsed.”

Latmay rushed forward and immediately took Kama’s limp wrist in his hand. He pressed the pad of his thumb to her delicate skin, nodding after a few seconds of quiet thought. “I believe she fainted.”

Amonmose let out the breath he had been holding. “Thank the gods. I thought it might be something more serious.”

“I’ll know for certain, once I examine her. Let us give her some space,” Latmay advised. “I will revive her, but she will be disoriented when she comes to.” He cautiously chose his words. “It might be better if…”

Amonmose understood and got up, giving Latmay a look that said they would forget who had been kneeling in whose presence. “I’ll be right outside, awaiting your full report.”

“Yes, Sire.”

As soon as Amonmose left the room, Latmay waved a bitter smelling salt under Kama’s nose. She jerked back to consciousness, and he was startled by the intense pair of dark eyes that fixed on him. “I am Latmay, the Pharaoh’s physician,”

he said. "You fainted in the great room."

"Latmay?" she repeated. "You were the one who tended to my burns."

"Yes."

Kama gave him a somber look. "You should have left me to die."

Latmay stared, shocked, at the woman he had saved. He cleared his throat, and she looked away. "In my opinion, it is better to live in any condition than to give up and die. In any case, I am a man dedicated to saving lives. And someone as lovely as you certainly has a lot to live for." When she did not answer, he pressed on. "I am told you have not been eating and you do not sleep either. You must eat, or you will never regain your strength."

Kama looked over at him with a hostile glare.

Latmay gazed back calmly. "I believe the gods are watching over you, Kama. You are strong and resilient. You did not escape fire and tragedy only to starve yourself to death." He pulled a small vial from his bag. "This will help you sleep," he said. "Drink it all. I will return later to check on you."

She took the vial, pulled out the cork and swallowed the contents in one gulp.

"And remember," he said, "your fasting does you no good. You must eat and learn to adjust to life here."

Even as he spoke, he could see that Kama had already begun succumbing to

the sleeping elixir. She stretched out on the bed and quickly fell into what would probably be a peaceful slumber. Satisfied, Latmay tucked the small pouch of smelling salts back in his bag. He grinned to himself at the thought of this woman fainting at the Pharaoh's feet. It was not usually the way women threw themselves at him

Latmay checked Kama's pulse again and found it much stronger now. She would live, even if she did not want to. He stared at her elegant features. With her comely face and young supple body, it was no wonder Amonmose was taken with her. Any man would be.

In his youth, Latmay had been so busy studying medicine, he'd had no time for women. From the time he was seven years old, he could remember being fascinated with healing, and later, he dedicated himself to investigating the mystical powers of plants and other herbs. While most boys his age practiced being soldiers, he busied himself with homemade potions and apothecaries.

He became an expert in embalming and could have made a successful living in that field. But, his ambition lay not in preserving the dead, but rather in giving hope to the living. Eventually he became a surgeon of such outstanding reputation that he was called into service by the Pharaoh—Amonmose's father.

Sadly, he'd been unable to save the Pharaoh so many years ago. The wounds were too serious, and Latmay had been called much too late. Sometimes, he

wondered if the delay was intentional, but he'd learned not to question any decisions that were made by the royal advisors. It was dangerous for any man to put his nose into politics where it didn't belong.

Besides, who would he confide in? The same men who'd been advisors to Amonmose's father were now advisors to Amonmose. There were hidden enemies everywhere and he could not take a chance on having his own life abruptly ended.

Latmay left the room, memories heavy on his mind, and practically bumped into Amonmose, who was waiting outside as promised. "Sire—"

"Well?"

"She is fine now," Latmay said, stepping back from the intensity of the Pharaoh's concern. "Her fainting was probably a combination of her improper diet and a high level of stress. I advise bed rest and this." He pulled a leather pouch from his bag. "It is a potion containing fish oil and gazelle hair. I will instruct the servants to add it to her food."

"Now, she will certainly refuse to eat."

Latmay chuckled. "It could not be worse than the tranquilizer I gave her. It contained oxen milk, crushed poppy seeds, and tortoise extract."

Amonmose rewarded him with a rare grin. "She will never let you near her again."

The physician smiled back. "I am but an old man. Maybe she'll warm to your

young face, instead. She needs rest however,” he admonished.

Amonmose merely nodded. “I will let her sleep for now. She will need all of her strength for our next encounter.” With that, the Pharaoh turned and left.

As he stared at Amonmose’s retreating back, Latmay wondered at this unexpected concern for a concubine. He’d seen the effect the death of the Pharaoh’s parents had on him. Amunmose never let himself become too attached to anyone, especially a woman. He would admit, Kama was not like other women. She was defiant and captivating and beautiful. But was she capable of infiltrating the Pharaoh’s defenses? It remained to be seen.



Dyzet reappeared a few days later. She breezed into Kama’s room wearing a hopeful smile, as if she’d never been absent. “I trust you are feeling better this morning,” she said cheerfully.

Kama sat at her usual place by the window. She’d been alone for three days, and she’d had plenty of time to think about her circumstances. She realized Dyzet could be very useful to her. She already knew Dyzet’s father was one of the city mapmakers. If she could gain the girl’s confidence, maybe she would help her escape. She needed every ally she could get.

“I do not feel better,” Kama said, then smiled. “Although I will admit, I have

missed your incessant speech.”

Dyzet’s mouth dropped open. “Glory to the gods. Is that a compliment upon your lips?”

Kama gave her a contrite smile. “I apologize for my poor company of late.”

“Dyzet shrugged. “So, let us forget about it and begin anew.”

Kama pulled the Senet board out as a friendly gesture. “I would like that.”

Dyzet sat down at the table and began setting her pieces on the board. “I heard about your fainting incident.”

Kama gave her a look of surprise.

“The palace is alive with loose lips and open ears,” Dyzet said with a small smile, and Kama bristled at the thought of being the subject of gossip. “I do not know how these things get propagated. All I know is people are eating up the excitement, passing the tale from one to the next. They said you were overcome by the sight of Amonmose.” Kama made an unladylike snort. “I didn’t think it was so.” She put her hand on Kama’s. “I came as soon as I heard. I hated to think of you here all alone.”

“Thank you for your concern, Dyzet. The physician advised me to eat more. I can assure you, I’m not in the habit of fainting for no reason.”

“Certainly,” Dyzet murmured. “If it is any consolation, I too nearly fainted when I first laid eyes on the Pharaoh.”

Kama looked into her eyes. “You are wise for your age, Dyzet. What did you do to get assigned the task of tending to me?”

Dyzet frowned. “I do not look upon this as a task. It is an honor to serve you and the Pharaoh.”

Kama concealed a look of surprise.

“As I told you before,” Dyzet said, “my father is a mapmaker for the Pharaoh. He travels far and wide and during his trips. He meets people who know about hidden routes, rough terrain, and access to desirable waterways. As you can imagine, this information makes his maps very valuable to the Pharaoh.”

Kama nodded her head in agreement.

Dyzet continued. “Whenever father delivers new maps to the palace, he allows me to accompany him. I have known the Pharaoh for years, and he’s entrusted me with many favors.”

Kama raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “You’re young to be entrusted with his *favors.*”

“You misunderstand.” Dyzet shook her head. “The Pharaoh is an honorable man, a compassionate leader. He loves his people. Everyone is happy to gain his favor.”

Kama smirked as she turned toward the window, and looked out over the city. “And I am sure he has many beautiful girls willing to do his bidding.”

“You misjudge him,” Dyzet said quietly, sounding sad.

“Perhaps when you are older, you will see for yourself.”

“There are many, both male and female, who are honored to be here, but he pays us no heed. Perhaps if I were as enchanting as you, the Pharaoh’s eyes would be upon me.”

Kama glanced quickly back at her, stunned. This was not going the way she had planned. “Is that supposed to make me feel better about my predicament?” she demanded.

“Predicament? I believe the Pharaoh became besotted with you from the moment he set eyes on you. You are the most exquisite woman I’ve ever seen, Kama. He probably feels the same. How is this anything but a blessing from the gods?”

Before Kama could respond, a knock sounded at the door. When she answered, she found Baal, his hulking form filling the doorframe.

“The Pharaoh commands an audience with you,” he told her. “I will be waiting outside to escort you to his chambers.” And then he closed the door with a flourish.

Kama swallowed her lump of fear. In the few days since she’d last seen him, her emotions had run from hot to cold and back again. Part of her was enraged that he could inspire such fear. The other part was embarrassed at her reaction. If only

she could reason with him without trembling in his presence. She just had to get the words out. "I will demand my release," she mused aloud.

Dyzet stood abruptly. "Why?"

Kama stared at the girl and then realized she'd spoken her thoughts. "Why not? Have you a better strategy in mind?"

"Strategy?" Dyzet flung her hands up. "Why do you need strategy? You are beautiful, Kama! You have the best of everything. Food, clothes, shelter. You are treated like a queen! Life can be good for you here. I have been by your side day and night trying to be your friend, yet, you sulk like a mute and cry like a babe! You have won the Pharaoh's favor. The *Pharaoh's*! And still, you are not happy. Are we so awful here? Am I so awful?" The girl's voice rose with each word. "You are not awful," Kama told her. "And I may have the best of all things, here. But this is not my home. It will never be."

Dyzet let her arms fall and gave her a measured stare. "Everything has purpose in this world. You are here for a reason. You may not realize it now, but I believe this is your *only* home."

"And I believe you are a foolish young girl!" Kama's anger flashed. "I will go home one day. You will see!" She opened the door to allow Baal to lead her to another terrifying encounter with the man who held her destiny in his hands. Kama regretted her harsh words to Dyzet, yet she could find no breath for

apologies. She was *not* sorry, but she stormed away to keep from saying anything more.

Dyzet called out from behind her, “May the gods keep and protect you, Kama. For you will need their help if you think you can escape the Pharaoh’s reach.”



When Kama arrived at the Pharaoh’s chambers, the heavy double doors were wide open. She walked in and silently surveyed her surroundings. His spacious room was as opulent as the rest of the palace. It was resplendent in gold and silver, and decorated in rich shades of deep purple. Her eyes scanned the lavish furnishings. In the middle of the room, two chairs draped elegantly in dyed, delicate linen surrounded an impressive table of ivory and gold.

Thick velvet draperies parted by gold cords allowed the brilliant morning sun to pour into the room. The intricate designs on the black marble floor were partially covered by massive zebra and leopard hides. She could not believe her eyes. It was like going to the market. There was so much to see.

Silver and gold busts and statues littered all corners of the room. Paintings and portraits covered almost every inch of the walls. A limestone mantle displayed a brass mirror at least fifteen hands high, encrusted with lapis lazuli and bloodstones. On the left, a gleaming sword with a black and gold shield adorned

with a falcon border proclaimed the Pharaoh's victories in battle. Precious oils, resins, and waxes lined the shelves to the right.

Her eyes traveled upward to a magnificent cut glass chandelier that hung from the ceiling, casting a prism of colors across the room. The room opened into another chamber that was covered from end to end with crates of papyrus. It was like a private library within a bedroom. She would have never guessed the Pharaoh was such a well-read man. There had to be hundreds of volumes.

Despite the décor, Amonmose's chambers were by no means ostentatious. Kama found everything quite tasteful. Then, she noticed the bed and was surprised she hadn't noticed it immediately. It was huge. The bedposts reminded her of thick trees. The mahogany wood was smooth and well crafted, with intricate hunting scenes carved into each post. A diaphanous canopy of white linen spilled from the top, possibly to protect the Pharaoh from mosquitoes. Kama smirked. With all of his ferocity, even the mosquitoes were undoubtedly afraid of him.

Behind her, she heard the doors close softly, and she turned to find the Pharaoh staring at her. He looked different today, less intimidating. Kama stared back at him and then realized he was without his ornate headpiece. She marveled at his perfectly round, shaved head. His only facial hair was his dark eyebrows and well-manicured mustache and goatee.

Dyzet had explained that the proper way to greet a Pharaoh was to bow and remain silent until given permission to speak, yet she stood her ground, refusing to bow. An uncomfortable silence hovered in the air, and she was filled with mounting anxiety, wondering what move he would make next. She saw his heated gaze upon her body, his eyes roaming from the top of her head to the heels of her feet. After a few moments, she could no longer keep quiet.

“You summoned me?” she boldly asked.

His eyes met hers and they narrowed slightly. “Has no one instructed you in observing the proper protocol?” he asked.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I have been tutored extensively. In Nubia, women are allowed to speak freely at court. And we do not bow to our captors.”

He walked slowly around her, circling like a bird of prey. Then, he paused and crossed his arms over his chest, his disapproval evident. “You realize such insolence could get you killed?”

Her reply was low and raspy. “Alas, I am not dead.”

A dark shadow crossed Amonmose’s face. “I’ve given strict orders that you are not to be harmed in any way. If someone has given insult to you, I shall have the perpetrator’s head.”

Kama bravely marched on. “It is you who has offered me the greatest insult. I would gladly face death a hundred times than be cursed with the fate you have in

mind for me.”

He frowned, his full lips quickly becoming a grim line. “And what fate is that?”

“That of your concubine.”

“Who fills your head with such thoughts?”

Kama did not answer. How dare he play games and pretend that was not her intended purpose here?

“Find your tongue, woman,” Amonmose said dangerously.

When she remained silent, he grabbed her arms, pulling her against him.

Her heart slammed against her ribcage in fear. She had not realized his strength until that very moment. Her original plan had been to insist he release her immediately, but now she realized that was foolish. He’d taken her as one of his war prizes, and she had no influence over him. She could not simply make demands upon a mighty ruler like him. She had to be smart about this. She must use diplomacy to demand her freedom.

“Pharaoh Tehutimes, please grant me my leave. I have nothing to do with the wars you wage. I am no threat to you. I am but one helpless woman.”

Amonmose stared at her, his amber eyes smoldering. “No. You are mine now.”

Kama chose her words carefully, struggling to keep her anger at bay. “Sire,”

she proceeded cautiously, "I am not for you." Her thick eyelashes fluttered against her face, embarrassed. "You do not ... please me. I could never willingly lay with you. So, if you want me, you must force me."

"I do not please you?" he asked incredulously and then tightened his grip on her arms. "I have provided you with food and shelter and taken care of your wounds. I have kept you from harm and provided servants for you! You have lived like royalty instead of a foreigner in a strange land! Yet, I do not please you?" He loosened his hold on her and pushed her away. "To think, I have arranged for your every comfort, while all this time, the very thought of being my concubine has made you relish death instead!"

Kama looked away, refusing to meet his hard gaze.

But he placed a finger under her chin and tilted her face toward him, forcing her to look him directly in the eyes. "It matters little to me that you do not want me. All that matters is that I want you."

Kama felt her rage rising again, slowly simmering like a pot on a fire. She had tried to appeal to his sense of fairness, but he'd brushed her away like an insect. She wanted to scream in frustration. How dare he treat her like chattel? "Do what you will then, Pharaoh. If you want me, you must force yourself upon me. But always know that you would be with a woman who is repulsed by your touch."

Their eyes locked, and he stared at her with such intensity that she thought he would strike her. But his rebuttal took a different form. Before she could protest, he pulled her into his arms and crushed his mouth against hers. His tongue swept inside, and he took possession, stunning her with the force of his deep kiss.

Caught off guard, she did what came most naturally to her. She kissed him back, curiously exploring the soft folds of his mouth. She responded to his demanding strokes, her tongue battling his with an erotic dance. All sense of time seemed to leave her.

As Amonmose tightened his embrace, Kama felt her body yield to the hard planes of his muscular form. His velvety tongue met hers thrust for thrust as she tasted everything he had to offer. Her flesh tingled in response to his touch, and she felt an intense heat building inside her. In her mind, she fought him, called him the foulest of names, and denounced his possession of her. But her body succumbed easily.

Abruptly, Amonmose withdrew from her mouth and sneered wickedly. “Kama, you lie. Your words say I do not please you. Yet, your tongue says otherwise.”

Dazed, she fingered her swollen lips and watched the smug look on his face. “You do not understand.”

“No, I understand completely. You wanted me, and you proved it. There is no need for me to force you when you give yourself to me so willingly.”

She shook her head, pulling herself from his embrace. She'd never been kissed before. He'd clearly taken advantage of her, somehow. “Y-You deceived me!” She accused, backing away.

He gazed at her, his eyes burning like lava. “I did nothing except what you wanted me to do.”

His kiss had left her teetering like a newborn lamb. What had he done to her? What kind of sorcery had he used to make her body betray her? She touched a dainty hand to her forehead.

Amonmose frowned. “If you faint again, I will no doubt be forced to kiss you repeatedly until you regain consciousness.”

Kama turned on her heels and fled. Hours later, she could still hear his cruel laughter ringing in her ears.

Chapter Four

Kama managed to avoid Amonmose for the next several days. She didn't think she could ever face him again without dying of humiliation. She still remembered every second of the kiss they'd shared—the most intimate act she'd ever experienced. She recalled the taste and texture of his mouth. The warmth of his tongue touching hers. She thought of that kiss at least a dozen times a day. Visions of him began to haunt her dreams, and she soon found herself wishing for the bitter tranquilizer the old doctor had brought her days earlier. Even if she did escape the powerful Pharaoh, she would never be able to get him out of her mind.

She was angry with herself for not putting up more resistance. If only he were an ordinary man, she would have slapped him or hit him with one of her many verbal barbs. But the Pharaoh was no ordinary man. He was all smooth words and brutal kisses—a charmer and a viper. Perhaps a sorcerer as well! Why else had her body responded so wantonly? Perhaps, she thought, she would have responded that way to any man's kiss, not just the Pharaoh's. But there was no way for her to know. Amonmose had branded her as his property, and she knew in her heart that it would not be long before he sought her out again.

A few days later, a royal page appeared at her door with a missive. Dyzet was there to answer, and she read the note excitedly. “Oh, Kama! Our presence is requested at the royal hunt tomorrow. The Pharaoh sent a personal invitation for you”—she waived the pale parchment in the air—“and I’m to come as well!”

Kama stared at the paper as if it were dipped in poison. So, Amunmose would not give up so easily? Of course not. He was Pharaoh, used to having all of commands obeyed.

“Let us find something for you to wear.” Dyzet rushed to one of the reed chests and rifled through its contents. “By the gods, all you have are these white tunics.”

“I will not go,” Kama declared.

Dyzet gasped. “Have you gone mad? You cannot refuse a royal summons!”

“I can if I am sick. In fact...” She touched her forehead. “I feel ill this very moment.”

Dyzet stood slowly and eyed Kama evenly. “You know you are simply delaying the inevitable.”

“So be it.”

“You cannot avoid him.”

“I have been successful up to this point.”

“You cannot outsmart him.”

“That remains to be seen.”

The two stared at each other, neither willing to back down. Dyzet’s small fists rested firmly on her hips. Her legs were spread in a defiant stance. “I do not think you realize the seriousness of your situation,” she warned Kama.

“And I do not think you realize the extent of my determination,” Kama retorted.

“Stubbornness is more like it.”

“I prefer to call it endurance.”

“Your *endurance* could be your undoing.”

“It has not failed me yet.”

“The Pharaoh will not be happy.”

Kama crossed her arms. “That is one thing we shall both have in common.”

“Your beauty and intellect have brought you this far, Kama. But his patience will wear thin.” Dyzet opened the door and prepared to leave. “The Pharaoh will have you sooner or later.”



The entire palace was alive with excitement on the day of the hunt. Amonmose sat comfortably inside his litter and admired the view. He was suspended above the shoulders of forty men who carried him effortlessly to any destination he chose. The top of the litter was equipped with a hard canopy that

shielded him from the merciless sun and the The dark red interior was roomy, comfortably seating four people if necessary.

He inhaled a deep breath of fresh air. This was what he lived for. He was an accomplished hunter, and as a member of the royal lineage, he enjoyed the privilege of this sport. He could easily conquer any animal on his own; his bodyguard and royal entourage only slowed him down. He was not afraid of man or beast, and he had the trophies to prove it.

Amonmose pulled aside the curtain that protected him from the harsh rays of the sun and surveyed his surroundings with a nod of satisfaction. His servants were making final preparations for the hunt. There would be a feast upon his return. And then, he supposed, all his soldiers would get drunk and horny before the day was over.

He watched as the last of the hunting party arrived. From his where he sat, he had a clear view of Kama walking with her usual grace:her head held high, her shoulders squared. She was dazzling in her customary white, long dress. Her waist-length hair was straight, plaited in tiny braids, and pulled back from her face with a leather bandeau. Amonmose had an urge to yank that cord off and thread his fingers through the mass of hair. No woman had ever made his body respond the way she did. He tried not to concentrate on her sumptuous figure, uncertain whether he would be able to control his reaction.

His inner voice nagged at him. *You are lord and ruler. You do not need to contain yourself. Everything is yours to be taken.* He shrugged off the thought. He did not have to force himself on anyone. Plenty of women threw themselves at his feet every day!

But there is only one that you want.

As he watched Kama, he noticed some of the other men openly staring at her. She obviously had no idea the effect she had on the male species. Amonmose's lips lifted at the corners to form a rare smile, and it was at that moment their eyes met. He saw a flicker of anger in her dark eyes, and then they softened, and a nonchalant gaze replaced the spark. She narrowed her eyes and turned away. His heartbeat quickened. She would be no easy conquest, but he'd felt the erotic promise of her kiss. When she finally gave herself to him, it would be well worth the wait.

Kama turned her attention to Dyzet, but she could still feel the Pharaoh's eyes upon her. The nerve of him, ogling her like a piece of cattle! She knew her fate was sealed here, but she could not bear the lustful way he looked at her. She chanced another surreptitious glance at him, but he never took his eyes off her, staring at her with that lecherous grin. She knew he was thinking of the kiss in his chambers; she burned with embarrassment. At least she would not have to ride with him.

Kama had turned to whisper to Dyzet when she noticed a burly man out of the corner of her eye. He stepped close, intruding on their space, and his formidable presence could not be ignored. “Why is that behemoth lurking around?” Kama whispered. “Making sure I have no chance to flee?”

Dyzet smiled. “His name is Shu. He will stand guard over you,” she said. “The Pharaoh wants you protected at all times.”

Kama made an undignified snort. She needed no protecting. If anything, Shu’s presence was more of an annoyance than a comfort, a constant reminder of her place. “Give him leave,” she told Dyzet. “I have no need of a guard.”

Dyzet shrugged. “The Pharaoh thinks otherwise. And whatever the Pharaoh desires—”

“Yes, yes. I know. Whatever the Pharaoh desires is fulfilled without question. You may wipe that stupid grin off your face.”

Kama watched Amonmose pull one of the men aside and point in her direction. She stared, mortified, as the messenger walked toward her. As he made his way through the throngs of soldiers, she recognized his tall, dark form. *Nadesh!* She had not laid eyes upon him since the night of the fire. Just looking at him brought back all the horrible memories. He’d wanted her raped and killed. If not for the Pharaoh’s interference, his will would have been done. Her eyes narrowed, but she caught herself. Now was not the time for confrontation.

“You are to ride with the Pharaoh,” Nadesh said as he approached.

Kama merely gave him a curt nod and brushed past him without speaking.

Nadesh inhaled Kama’s scent as she passed and turned to watch her go, mystified. He knew she recognized him, yet she said nothing. He’d expected her to try to claw his eyes out, but she barely acknowledged him, practically made him look the fool with her indifference. Was she trying to embarrass him in front of his men? Did she think her new status as the Pharaoh’s consort gave her such a right? He wondered if Amonmose had bedded her yet. But no, he would have heard. The palace was a breeding ground for gossip.

This Kama was not the wild woman Nadesh saw in Aswan. She was more reserved, as if she’d been humbled and now accepted her fate. A grin split Nadesh’s face at the thought that she had been broken, and his loins tightened. If only the Pharaoh would find disfavor with her, then, perhaps she could be his.

“She is the Pharaoh’s woman,” Dyzet said aloud.

Nadesh looked sharply at the pretty girl. Just two summers ago, she’d been a flat-chested child. Now, she was on the verge of blossoming into a fertile, young woman. He licked his lips. “And what of you?” he asked. “Whose woman are you?” He was a powerful man, very well respected and financially stable. He knew he was not handsome, but his invitations for illicit encounters were rarely turned

down.

“I am my own woman,” Dyzet replied haughtily, before walking away.

Nadesh watched the sway in her young hips and mumbled under his breath. In Egypt, foreigners were regarded with suspicion. Yet, Kama was being treated like a queen. She was a Nubian. She didn't deserve the privilege of riding in the Pharaoh's litter. As of this moment, it was his sole purpose to make certain Amonmose did not fall victim to her charms.



The Pharaoh's caravan consisted of seven litters, four dogs, and a party of well armed soldiers. It was Kama's first journey out of the palace, but Amonmose's close proximity made her so nervous that she found it hard to enjoy herself. She simply stared at the passing scenery and tried to be inconspicuous. She couldn't help but make comparisons to Kerma's lush landscape. She missed the thick, green grass and the cool, dense jungles. But the colors of Egypt pleased her as well. Its familiar reds and browns warmed her like a long lost cousin come to visit.

Instead, Kama concentrated on the dark bodies of the men carrying the huge litter on their shoulders. She was surprised that the ride was so smooth. After a few minutes, she began to frown. “Won't the men soon tire?” she asked.

“No,” Amonmose answered her in a low tone that caressed her entire being. When she glanced over at him and saw the sensuous gaze in his eyes, she

purposely looked away.

“How long must they carry us?” she asked. “Are they permitted to rest?”

“They do not complain. It is an honor for them to transport us.”

“Why?”

Amonmose switched positions, sliding up beside her. He leaned over and hooked his index finger under her chin and softly turned her to face him. They were inches apart. When he spoke, she could feel his warm breath against her cheek. “There are many who would give their lives to be in my service,” he told her. “I guarantee there is no one here who does not wish to be.”

She looked into his strange eyes, which she’d seen change from hazel to amber. He was so close she could see each one of his dark, feathery eyelashes. No man should have lashes so lovely. She shook her head and tried to focus on her question. “And each person is free to leave at will?” she asked, her voice surprising her with its shakiness.

He caressed her cheek. “One who has found my favor often finds the reward well worth staying.” He gazed into her eyes and then dropped his gaze to her mouth. “For some, my generosity knows no bounds.”

Kama felt a searing heat creep into her body. *He was doing it again!* Why did he continue these attempts at seduction? If he was going to ravish her, he should just do it and get it over with! Suddenly, she wished Dyzet were there, but they had

been separated when Amonmose summoned her to ride with him. She felt like a trapped animal here with him.

“Your skin is so smooth,” the Pharaoh murmured. “I could touch you all day and never tire of it.”

“Is that why you have brought me here?” she asked. She didn’t think she could handle him touching her all day. She was fearful that he would kiss her again – and worse, that she would like it.

Amonmose drew the curtain closed. “Why do you believe you are here, Kama?” There was a hint of suggestiveness in his voice and a raw desire in eyes, as if being this close to her was testing the limits of his patience. Did he plan to take her right here in the litter?

“I can presume I’m here for only one reason.”

“And your conclusion is that you are here for my pleasure?”

“Do you admit I am not?”

“I must confess, I do not know your purpose here,” he said. “I do not know what I plan to do with you. I do not know if I will ever let you go. I only know that you intrigue me.”

She gave him a hard smile. “Animals *intrigue* you. Exotic cities *intrigue* you. War *intrigues* you. I am not some pet or oddity to be kept caged for your pleasure. I am just a woman, a simple woman who begs leave to go home.”

Amonmose shook his head. "I cannot let you go, Kama. Even if I did, you would be here, under my skin. My head tells me to release you, but my heart overrules."

She stared at him in disbelief. "It is not your *heart*, Pharaoh."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"It is lust."

He made a sound of assent and traced a finger along her cheek. "And you tell me you feel nothing, Kama?"

"No. I desire no man." She forced the words out steadily. "Least of all one who serves as my captor."

He smiled slightly. "I proved you wrong before."

Kama watched his tempting mouth move toward hers, and felt her resistance vanish. Her heart fluttered, as if a cloud of butterflies had taken flight inside her. She closed her eyes as Amonmose brushed tiny kisses along her collarbone. The warmth of his mouth left a trail of heat everywhere he touched. His lips were tender against her skin, and her body flushed with heat, as he pressed delicate kisses along her neck. Kama shuddered, overwhelmed by the gentle affection. No man had ever touched her this way.

His scent was all male, strong and masculine. When she breathed, she felt surrounded by him, assailed. Then he softly licked her earlobes, gently pulling

them with his tongue, and she heard her own sigh of delight. He was a drug, ominous and forbidden but darkly intoxicating. She did not want to be a slave to that drug. She did not want to lose herself in this euphoria. If she fell victim to him, she would never regain her freedom. She had to stop him.

Kama pulled herself from her passion-induced stupor, her breathing ragged and her heart palpitating. Somewhere, she found the strength to focus. “Why did you kill my family?” she asked.

Amonmose felt as if he’d been struck by a lightning bolt. Years of training had taught him to control his reactions and never apologize for his decisions. He was a Pharaoh. And yet, he felt moved to give Kama an explanation. But he did not know where to begin.

“I did not kill your family,” he said simply.

“You gave the order for them to be killed,” she replied, becoming bolder. “Maybe you were not present, but *you* were responsible. You engineered the raid. You commanded the soldiers. You are their leader.” She shrank away from him, eyeing him with hatred. “You may as well have killed them with your own hand.”

Amonmose’s heart thundered in his chest. He did not know that her family had been killed that night. For him, it had been another battle, trying to keep his citizens safe from foreign invaders. He sat back, releasing his hold on her. “You do

not understand politics,” he said. “My kingdom, my very way of life is constantly threatened by uprisings. I cannot have the people under my rule living in fright, fearing retribution from neighboring tribes.

You Nubians relentlessly attack our borders and terrorize our people! As Pharaoh, it is my sole mission to improve conditions here and guarantee solidarity to the citizens. I must protect my people. During that process, sometimes, innocent lives are lost.”

Her black eyes flashed at him. “My cousin had barely seen fifteen summers! You and your people needed protecting from her? Your men murdered her, and for that I blame you.”

Amonmose gave her an impatient look. No matter how many times he said it, she would never understand. “Kama, know this. I am sorry for your loss. But I will not apologize for defending Egypt. I have a kingdom to protect. If I second-guessed everything I did, it would eat me alive. Sometimes, a man must make unpopular decisions,” he told her. “I live with mine every day.”

She sank against the velvet fabric of her seat. “You will never know the pain you have caused.”

He clasped her hands in his own. “I will not ask forgiveness for going into battle. This is what I do. It is who I am. But I will ask forgiveness for what I have unintentionally done to you.”

She stared at him through mist-filled eyes. “Giving me my freedom will replace any apologies you offer.”

Amonmose gazed at her, his body flooding with heat and attraction. He’d never felt more alive, nor questioned himself more deeply. It was thrilling and unsettling. Kama’s courage was attractive, but he could not agree to her request just yet. “I give you my word, I will consider the matter,” he said.

Hope burst into Kama’s eyes. “Pharaoh, I’m certain my mother is dying of a broken heart, waiting for my safe return. I am all she has. If you will not take pity on me, take pity on her. How would you feel if you were taken from your mother?”

Amonmose closed his eyes briefly, hoping she could not see his anguish. He did not like to talk about his mother. “Is your mother as beautiful as you, Kama?” he managed to ask instead.

“She is very beautiful. I miss her terribly and I know she is worrying for me.”

“Tell me about her.” He needed to hear something to make him forget his own painful memories. Kama was the perfect diversion. He concentrated on watching the way her lips moved when she spoke.

Kama gave him a pleading look and sighed loudly. “My mother is Mutema Nibemheb-Hotep. She is strong and independent and smart, like all Nubian women. And she raised me to be the same way.”

He looked her up and down. “And so you are, Kama.” He felt a familiar heat

creep into his loins again. Why was it that he wanted this woman so badly?

Kama gazed into his eyes. Her look was still defiant, but her tone had softened. "Please," she implored him. "Grant me my leave."

Amunmose held her gaze. "You told me earlier that you were just a simple woman. This, I understand. Despite my royal position, I, too, am just a simple man."

She shrugged. "But you are Pharaoh. You are considered divine by many."

"And yet, I have mortal needs." An agonized expression slipped across her face, and she tried to pull away, but he held her tightly. "I cannot let you go my ebony beauty. You have infiltrated my defenses like no army could." He kissed the back of her hand, his lips gently grazing her knuckles. "I am not as callous as you may believe. Give yourself to me. I promise only good things for you."

She shook her head, anger flashing in her dark eyes. "You ask the impossible. Because of you, I have seen death and sorrow. Yet, you feel that I can put this aside and offer myself willingly to you? Each time I look at you, I would remember! Each time you touch me, I would recall the reason I am here! No!" She stood abruptly. "It can never be!"

Amunmose felt the litter sway wildly. "Kama, sit down!" he ordered. "You will topple us!"

She fell back into her seat, and tears sprang from her eyes. "May the gods

have mercy on me,” she sobbed, “and cure my heart of this awful pain.”

Amonmose scowled. “Where is the defiant woman that stared me down in Aswan?” he growled. “What happened to the fiery tempered wench who made my heart pound and my loins tighten?”

“I am still here,” she declared through her tears, “Begging for my release. What say you?”

His emotions hardened once again. “I said I would consider it, and I have. You will remain, Kama. And tears will not move me.” You are mine, and I will not part with you. Ever.”

She lifted her reddened eyes to glare at him. Her lips pressed into a bitter line. “Then, you should know, I am not chaste,” she spit the words like a challenge. “Do you desire me now, Pharaoh?”

Amonmose rushed her, clutching her wrists in the tight vise of his fingers. “I assumed nothing less.” He sneered. “I know of no woman who has made it past the age of eighteen without losing her virginity. That hardly matters to me. What matters is that you are *mine* now.” He spoke in a deadly tone. “Every man in my kingdom knows whom you belong to. I have left my brand on you, and I shall do it again and again until I am satisfied.”

He pulled her hard against him and then grabbed a handful of her hair. He tugged, applying just the right amount of pressure to make her head fall back and

her lips part. With unchecked fervor, Amonmose crushed his mouth against hers, claiming her lips, searing her with a kiss filled with wild dominance, and pulling harder when she resisted. He invaded the sweet wetness of her mouth, taking everything he wanted. His passion equaled his anger as he suckled and nibbled and teased her lips. He felt a hardness forming in his loins, his own body reacting to the taste of her, the touch of her. She had put a spell on him, and if he was not careful, she would soon master him entirely.

With restraint he didn't know he possessed, Amonmose released her from his embrace and gently placed her in the seat furthest from him.

Kama's eyes flashed angrily as she struggled for composure. Her chest heaved as heavily as his, but she wiped at her mouth. "Are you pleased with yourself?" she scathed breathlessly.

Amonmose eyed her ripe form and tried to calm his rising manhood. "No," he answered. "I will be pleased with myself only when *you* are pleased with me."

"Then you will have a long wait!"

He smiled ruefully. "Speak again and I shall silence your tongue with mine own, woman."

She glared hotly at him but wisely said nothing. They rode the remainder of the journey in silence.

Chapter Five

When the hunt finally began, a spirit of competition had taken root. Of all the men in the hunting party, only the Pharaoh, his closest advisors, and a handful of wealthy landowners were permitted to hunt. The rest were soldiers and attendants to assist the nobles, many of whom had brought their wives along, but females were denied the privilege of hunting. Kama thought this notion was absurd. In her culture, everyone enjoyed hunting, especially women. And hunting was more stealth than strength. Women silently stalked their prey and almost never came back empty-handed. Kama winced at the huge gathering of 124 people and 17 dogs. How did they hope to catch anything with all these fools hovering about?

Kama felt someone at her side and was relieved to find it was Dyzet. “Thank the gods,” Kama breathed. “I feel so out of place here.”

The young girl gave her a toothy grin. “I am glad for your company as well, Kama. I rode with the other ladies, and I cannot tell you what a bore they were.”

Kama had not spoken with any of the other women, but she was sure they were exactly as Dyzet described. “Perhaps you can ride with me on the return,” Kama suggested.

Dyzet shrugged. “You need only ask, and I am sure the Pharaoh would willing comply with any request you make.”

“He does not care about my wishes,” Kama said as she walked with Dyzet away from the large group. “He cares only for what he wants.” It was true. She had begged for her freedom, and Amunmose had brushed her wish aside as though it was papyrus. No, she would not embarrass herself again by making requests. And she would never be indebted to him, no matter how small the score. She could only imagine what form of payment he would expect.

“Perhaps you need to find a different approach,” Dyzet insisted. “I’ll wager you have not used your charms on him at all.” Kama stopped in her tracks and eyed Dyzet with suspicion. “I have known the Pharaoh for many years,” Dyzet continued. “And I’ve always found him to be a wise and just ruler.”

“Except when it comes to me. He is neither just nor wise.”

Dyzet’s face clouded in confusion. “Have you learned nothing of Amunmose *the man*? You’ve spent intimate moments with him. You’ve seen him as few others have. Can you not determine his likes? Dislikes? His passion? Every man has a weakness – even one who is divine.”

Kama was silent. Perhaps Dyzet’s idea had merit. If Amunmose did have a weakness, maybe she could use it to get what she wanted. Maybe she could barter for her freedom. She’d done everything else in her power to change Amunmose’s

mind, and it had been to no avail. For all of her ranting and raving, for all her tears and determined silence, she had not even succeeded in securing her release. Yes, maybe it was time for a new tactic. She bit her lip. It would require more intimate contact with him. The question was could she do it? The answer was—*she had to!*



Later in the day, the oversized party drifted away from the marshlands and toward the dense forest. Most of the footmen stayed behind to attend to the litters, but the others traveled through the murky waters on foot. Kama went along, glad for the change of venue and the cooler temperature. She was the object of much interest to the noblewomen, who stared at her constantly. She couldn't help but wonder if they were hostile or merely curious. Shu walked quietly behind her, shadowing her every step, and she felt oddly comforted by his presence.

Baal was not far away, either, keeping a watchful eye on Amonmose, who was decidedly the best hunter of the group. She'd expected him to sit in his litter and watch from afar, the pampered ruler who was more at home in the luxurious confines of his palace than on the field. But she was wrong. She could make out the strong lines of his body as his white tunic softly hugged his back. His forearms peeped teasingly from the long sleeves of crisp linen. The hem of his tunic was short, so her gaze roamed from the fine hairs on his muscular calves to the outline of his brawny thighs. With each step he took, his body shined like bronze

under the sun's bright rays.

Unexpectedly, Amonmose turned and flashed her a wicked grin. So, he knew she'd been watching him. Their eyes locked, and Kama saw raw desire reflected in his. He brandished an iron sword with jade and onyx stones crafted into a clever design on the hilt. She'd wondered if all of the weapons in his chambers were just for show. Now she knew.

Amonmose stared at Kama as she moved uncomfortably under his intense scrutiny. He preferred the cool canopy of the trees, but she stood basking in the sun's warm glow. The light was at her back, illuminating her shapely form beneath her white dress. Glory to the gods, she was beautiful. His eyes moved from her heart-shaped face and full lips to her up-thrusting breasts, which strained softly against the thin material of her garment. His mind was alive with images of her lying naked. He wondered how it would feel to hold those breasts. To caress her thighs. To have her beneath him, writhing with pleasure. He'd been waiting for her to want him as much as he wanted her. It was more pleasurable that way. But she was as stubborn as a team of oxen, and he'd run out of patience. Her kisses had told him all he needed to know. The passionate fire within her had not been banked after all. She was ready for him, whether she wanted to admit it or not.

Amonmose turned away, trying to drive all thoughts of her sweet, young

body from his mind. He was off-focus, when he should be concentrating on the hunt. He took long, determined strides to put some distance between them. His loins might crave her madly, but his head cautioned against giving in to such primal feelings of desire. He was certain once he bedded Kama, the urges would subside and he could get back on task. Tonight, he would show her that he was master. By the time he was done with her, she would be begging him to take her to his bed.

He smiled. He would take what was rightfully his, and then she would no longer have her mysterious hold on him. His problems would be solved, and he felt more confident already. Amonmose turned to speak with Baal, but before he could take another step, an enormous black snake dropped from a tree in front of him, blocking his path. He heard a shocked gasp from someone in the crowd. The creature spit and hissed, vehemently, its eyes glowing with deadly promise. Amonmose sucked in a breath. *A king cobra*. He watched, horrified as the hood on the snake's neck expanded to the span of a man's hand. Cobras usually only attacked when provoked, but this one slithered and hissed dangerously forward.

With jaws wide and fangs bared, the cobra lunged for Amonmose's leg. He dodged to the side, swinging his sword low. The motion was swift and precise, and he severed the head of the cobra with one blow.

Chaos erupted. A cheer rose from the hunting party. Several of the noblemen

ran over to congratulate him. Others stood in disbelief. Nadesh began barking orders for everyone to move aside. Meketen fingered his scarab beetle amulet and prayed loudly. The hunting dogs stood over the snake, yelping. The entire incident had happened in a heartbeat, but for Amonmose it seemed like an eternity. The spectators could not hear the loud pounding of blood in his ears. They could not see the beads of sweat across his back. All they saw was the brilliant metal flash of his sword. He accepted their praise with a weak smile. The gods were with him today.

“Friends, I am fine,” he called out to everyone. “Hunting is my sport, and I’ve bested far bigger game than that!”

Another cheer went up from the crowd.

“Sire, what will you do with your trophy?” one of the men called out.

Amonmose stared at the long snake now dead at his feet. The creature easily equaled the length of two men. “I shall have a pair of snake-skin sandals made for the noblemen on the hunt today.”

This was met by more exuberant cheers. Several of the Pharaoh’s attendants came forward and dutifully carried the large serpent away.

Baal stepped close and dropped his gaze to the ground. “Forgive me, Sire,” he whispered. “I should have been there to protect you. If you give me a chance to redeem myself, I shall never fail you again.”

Amonmose brushed him off with a wave of his hand. “Do not be ridiculous. There was nothing you could have done. It happened much too quickly. However...” He lowered his voice. “I believe that serpent being here was no accident.”

Baal’s eyes narrowed at the implication. “An attack?”

Amonmose nodded. “Cobras are not uncommon here, but king cobras are indigenous to Asia. And most king cobras only eat other snakes. This one came straight for me. Something must have provoked it.”

“Or *someone*.” Baal’s expression darkened.

“Precisely. We must practice caution from now on.”

“No harm shall befall you,” Baal vowed. “You know I will give my life for yours.”

Amonmose gave his guard a wry smile. “You must stay alive so you can be my eyes when I cannot see.”

Baal did not return his smile.

Amonmose clapped the man on the arm. “I am not as easy to dispense with as some might think, Baal. But stay alert, I fear the worse is yet to come.”

Kama shifted uneasily and glanced around the hunting party. Despite the thrill of the kill, the air had changed, and it was charged with an ominous mood.

Amonmose had put on a brave front, but she knew there would be no more hunting today, despite his confident strides.

She turned to Dyzet. “He could have been killed.”

The girl smirked. “So you do care about him after all.”

“No! I-I would hate for anyone to face death at the hands of a snake.” Kama said, lifting her chin defiantly.

Dyzet sighed after a moment’s pause. “You are right. The Pharaoh could have easily been killed. I pray to the goddess Isis to protect Amonmose and keep him from harm. And I pray for your protection as well, Kama.”

Kama felt her heart sink. As much as she hated to admit it, she knew she was safe only because she belonged to the Pharaoh. She remembered the lustful look in Nadesh’s eyes. If Amunmose perished, she had no one she could depend on to protect her.

Chapter Six

Hours later, Amonmose sat still in a large chair in his chambers while Latmay examined him. The old doctor felt for a strong pulse, measured his body temperature, and tested his reflexes using a mallet made of dried animal tendons. “Your heart rate is still erratic,” Latmay observed. “Just as a precaution, I’m going to prepare you a compress of tobacco leaves soaked in calf’s blood.”

“I’d sooner journey to the Netherworld than let you apply that,” Amonmose warned.

“The compress should slow your heart beat and help it maintain a steady rhythm..”

“Have you gone mad?” Amonmose demanded. “My heartbeat is strong and fast because I am a virile, healthy man!”. He jumped to his feet and beat his fists against his bare chest.

Latmay grinned. “Well, it’s your fault,” he said. “I do not get enough practice from you, so I am forced to look after more sickly people. My skills are languishing!”

“Can I help it if I am as strong as an ox?”

“No, you cannot. Few men can claim to be in such great shape.”

“Thank you, Latmay. Now, I give you your leave, for I have some urgent matters to attend to.”

“Goodnight, Sire,” he said, putting his instruments into his leather bag. “I will return to inquire of you on the morrow.”

Amonmose wagged his finger at the old man. “And when you return, your prescription better include something more palatable, like honey.”

Latmay bowed. “Your wish is my command.”

Amonmose grimaced as he watched the doctor leave. He had no intentions of taking any medicine for an erratic heartbeat. He knew its cause, and it was a siren, not a serpent. Even now, he was fully prepared to storm down to her room and demand her complete and total surrender. Yet deep inside, he knew Kama might surrender her body, but never her heart, and that would not do. He wanted her to want him. It was time for a change in strategy.

“Baal!” he called aloud.

“Yes, your grace?” Baal seemingly appeared from nowhere.

“Have the servants draw a bath for me. I’ll take it here in my chambers.”

Baal bowed gracefully bow and nodded in acknowledgement. He stepped outside the Pharaoh’s chambers and quickly delivered the instructions to a waiting servant. There was a formal hierarchy at the palace. Everyone reported to someone, and they all ultimately reported to the Pharaoh.

Minutes later, Amonmose's chamber was a flurry of activity as dozens of servants brought in a huge copper tub and carefully placed it in the center of one of the Pharaoh's adjoining rooms. The massive tub was large enough for him to sit with his legs outstretched. Once it was positioned perfectly, dozens more servants brought in buckets of rose-scented water and emptied them one by one into the tub. With so many servants dedicated to the task, the entire process happened very quickly. Two female attendants lingered by the chamber entrance ready to assist the Pharaoh with his private bathing.

However, this evening Amonmose preferred solitude, so he clapped his hands loudly, signaling for everyone to make a hasty departure. Once he was alone, he removed his garments and lowered himself into the cool, soothing waters. It was the perfect solution to the seasonal heat. He took his time, lathering himself with a fragrant cleansing cream. Afterward, he would spread balanos oil over his body. The oil was extracted from a thorny tree in the Nile Valley and was purported to have mystical healing powers.

The Pharaoh relaxed and soaked leisurely, replaying the events of the hunt in his mind. He was certain the appearance of the snake was no accident. But how did it get there? Who released it and how would he *or she* know how to time its exact placement? The person had to be someone with experience handling snakes, someone with nothing to lose by doing this, and, worst of all, someone in his inner

circle whom he'd invited to the hunt. So far, he'd only discussed his concerns with Baal. At this moment, he did not know whom else he could trust. Whoever was responsible for that serpent would either go into hiding like a scared baboon or become even more aggressive, like a cornered hyena. In either case, he must be cautious. Someone was trying to tell him something, and today he'd gotten the message loud and clear.



Later that evening, Kama sat in her room watching a spectacular sunset. So many times she'd sat by Akahmen's pool watching the deep shades of red slowly transition into the shadowy purple hues of night. It was a brilliant display of color that she never tired of watching. Dyzet had told her the sun god, Re, was also worshipped here, and she could certainly understand why.

Kama wondered if her mother was gazing at the same glorious sunset. Was Mutema thinking of her lost daughter? Did she cry at night? Was she lonely? Kama wished she would have spent that last precious day with her mother, helping her make bread and telling her she loved her. She remembered their brief encounter in the kitchen the day she left for Aswan. Her mother spoke of Satati's impending marriage and what her wifely duties would be. At that time, Kama had never been intimate with a man, so she couldn't imagine submitting to anyone's touch. But now, she had a better understanding of her own body and the unfamiliar

sensations she was feeling. She still remembered her mother's words. She had said passion was a complicated emotion. Kama was beginning to believe her.

She felt a tumultuous mix of emotions every time she thought of Amonmose. His touch drove her mad with a craving she'd never felt before. She loved it and despised it in the same breath. She wondered if her mother would understand these feelings. Not that it mattered. She would never get to ask her, for she would never see her again. Kerma was a distant memory to her now. A beautiful, sweet memory that she would always treasure.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a discreet knock at her chamber door. Kama smiled to herself. It must be Dyzet. She was usually at home with her family at this late hour, but lately her visits had been more frequent, and Kama welcomed her company. Maybe they could watch the sunset together.

When she opened the door, it was not Dyzet who greeted her but the Pharaoh instead. He looked magnificent, as usual. He wore a finely spun white linen kilt knotted at his waist. His bare chest was adorned with a gold pectoral collar encrusted with large turquoise and onyx cabochons. He never failed to impress her with his regal air and his confident manner.

She bowed gracefully. "To what do I owe this visit?" she asked.

Once again, she'd spoken before he had addressed her. She expected him to make a comment about her lack of protocol, but he surprised her.

“I thought you might wish to accompany me on a walk,” he offered. “It occurred to me that you have not seen my garden.”

Kama stared at him, not knowing what to say. Just when she'd learned to adjust to his forceful and commanding personality, he changed tactics. He'd done the same thing earlier in his litter.

“Now?” she asked.

“Yes, if that is your desire.”

His amber eyes were warm and inviting as he held her gaze. He looked so sincere and honest. But did she dare trust him? Did she have a choice?

Kama smiled shyly. “Lead the way.”

Amonmose held his arm out to her, and she graciously accepted, permitting him to escort her. Both Baal and Shu followed a discreet distance behind them. They all walked in silence as Amonmose led the group down a series of hallways into an area of the palace that Kama had not previously explored.

Eventually, they traveled down a dim tunnel with marble walls and elegant tile floors. The tunnel was not straight, and the walls appeared to curve into a large semicircle, slowly turning into a wide arc as they walked.

“The terrain will soon change,” he told her.

Kama watched incredulously as the beautiful tile floors transformed into a soft stone walkway. Even the walls lost their graceful veins of marble, replaced

with rough textured stone and brick. Suddenly, the tunnel curved and abruptly ended, opening into the most exquisite garden Kama had ever seen.

“It-it’s...incredible!” she exclaimed.

“The garden was started long before I was born, but I have added to it considerably since I became Pharaoh. A few years ago, I commissioned a local stone mason to construct the tunnel and add a few more pathways.”

Kama stood open-mouthed as she stared at an unending variety of lush green plants, radiant flowers, and towering trees. She’d never seen such stunning colors. A plethora of reds, yellows, purples, and greens dominated the landscape.

Amidst the splendid blooms of flowers and plants, there were a multitude of trees. There were tall, spindly trees with thin branches, short heavy trees with thick trunks and dark foliage, and soft willowy trees with cascading leaves. The bushes were perfectly trimmed, and they dotted each area of the garden in all shapes and sizes. Kama stood on the main path, but she could see that several smaller paths ventured off in different directions. It was paradise. Sweet and secluded.

“I have never seen its equal,” she admitted. “It’s more than a garden. It’s a masterpiece.”

Amonmose smiled. “I’m glad it meets with your approval.” He took her hand. “Come. Let me show you more of this masterpiece. Baal and Shu will remain

stationed at the tunnel entrance.”

Kama allowed him to hold her hand, and she quietly listened as he proudly listed each flower, plant, and tree.

“There are forty sycamore figs, one hundred olive trees, twenty-two date palms, twenty pomegranate trees, fifty-eight willows, sixteen arcadia trees, and forty-four lotus trees,” he told her. “But they are more than just scenery. Everything serves a purpose in this garden.

“The pomegranate and date trees yield a delicious crop of fruit each year. The wood from the sycamores is used to make water wheels and other tools for agriculture. Its fruit also makes an excellent fig pie. We grow lotus trees to harvest the timber to make furniture and ships. The olive trees, of course, provide us with much needed oil to light all the lamps in the palace. When it comes to these resources, we are self-sufficient.”

Kama marveled at the shiny dark green leaves of the olive trees. The fruit was so healthy and vibrant. In Nubia, there were no lush gardens like this. “What manner of irrigation do you use to keep all these plants prospering?” she asked.

Amonmose looked at her with admiration. “Most women would not think to ask such a question. They like beautiful things and they accept them as they are. I am impressed with your curiosity.”

She blushed, not knowing how to respond.

“I have a dedicated team of gardeners that tend to the plants each day,” he told her. “Some of the flowers are hand watered using large jugs. For plants requiring more water, the men bring it in using barrels carried by oxen. This garden also has its own source of water, which flows from a brook.”

Kama sniffed the air. “What is that delicious scent?”

“Probably the orchard. It’s this way.” They passed through a towering pergola, formed by two double rows of pillars covered in rich green and purple vines. “Welcome to my orchard,” he said proudly. “There are nearly ten varieties of fruits and vegetables and twelve varieties of flowers in this garden.”

Kama smiled as he held out his hand with a flourish, as if he were presenting some great and wonderful treasure. “This is amazing!” she exclaimed. “You have an endless supply.”

He chuckled. “That’s precisely the idea. Between the royal chefs and Latmay, this garden has seen its fair share of harvests.”

Kama was confused. “Latmay?”

“He uses many of the herbs grown here for medicinal purposes,” Amonmose explained. He pointed to each plant as he spoke. “Over there are the onion bulbs he uses to relieve colds. There is the thyme for pain, mint to cure indigestion, and dill for diuretic purposes.”

Kama scoffed. “Sounds more like ingredients for supper.”

Amonmose laughed again. "I agree. Come, there is much more to see."

They held hands as they explored each area of the garden. Kama found that Amonmose was quite knowledgeable about all the different species of flowers and trees. She listened quietly as his smooth, velvety voice wrapped itself around her. She was seeing another side of him today. Perhaps if he was another man and she was not here at his command, she could be content here. *Perhaps*. She shrugged her thoughts away.

Amonmose led her to a new area of the garden, where she was surrounded by an abundance of flowers, including daisies, mandrakes, roses, irises, jasmine, mignonettes, celosia, and narcissus. The garden was elaborately laid out and sectioned into separate areas.

"This garden was designed for privacy as well as enjoyment," he told her. "Look up there," he pointed skyward.

From where she stood, she could see a large set of windows in the upper level of the palace. "It's someone's chamber window," she guessed.

"Yes. Mine. The garden is located on the north side of my quarters. This allows the cool breeze to filter into my windows throughout the day."

"The view must be spellbinding."

"It is. I can look down into the garden and smell the fragrant flowers in my room each day. For security reasons, no one can enter my chamber from the garden

and vice versa. That was why I had the special tunnel constructed.”

Kama frowned. “I don’t remember seeing this view from your chambers.”

He met her dark eyes with a knowing stare. “You left in haste that day,” he gently reminded her of her urgent departure after his searing kiss.

Kama searched his face, but she could see no signs of mockery. It was simply the truth, she had left in haste. Somehow, he seemed different from the man she met then.

Amonmose gazed at her, and as if by magic, a frail blue lotus flower appeared in his hand. Its narrow, pointed petals glowed with a luminous shade of pale blue. He slowly drew closer and placed the delicate bloom in her hair. “The blue lotus is a symbol of creation and life,” he told her. “Before the universe was formed, there was a vast primordial ocean known as Nun. From Nun, a lotus flower emerged. Then, from the deep blue center of this flower, the newborn sun god Nefertum was born.” He softly caressed the smooth skin of her cheek. “This mystical plant celebrates the joining of a man and a woman and the infinite possibilities they can create.”

His gaze was smoldering, and she felt a slow heat creep into her body. How could he so easily make her insides melt? If she were not careful, she would once again fall victim to his smooth voice and sweet words.

Abruptly, she turned from him. Her heart was her own, even though it raced

every time he touched her.

“I want to show you something else,” Amonmose said, as though he hadn’t noticed. “This next place is extremely secretive.”

Grateful that he was turning his gaze elsewhere, she followed him through a dense thicket of trees. He expertly weaved his way through the maze of foliage, and they emerged into a small field littered with yellow chrysanthemums. A thick ring of trees encircled the field, secluding it from the rest of the world.

“How beautiful...” Kama murmured.

“This is my hiding place.”

She gave him a shocked look. “You have a hiding place? I thought the Pharaoh could go wherever he wanted and do as he pleased.”

Her tone was teasing, and he appeared to accept it in good humor. “True. Yet, each person needs a place to enjoy solitude. A man who is not comfortable spending time alone with himself cannot expect others to desire his company.”

“I never thought about it in that manner,” she confessed. “Is that a sage philosopher’s quote?”

“No, it is a quote from my father.”

“Interesting. And did your father also teach you the art of seducing helpless women in your private garden?”

He grinned. “No. I taught myself that skill.”

Kama cast him a glance from the corner of her eyes. “I knew the real Pharaoh was in there somewhere, hiding behind your false pleasantries.”

“You have a sharp tongue, woman.” Amonmose tugged her wrists and pulled her toward him. “As I recall, tasty but sharp.”

She opened her mouth to give a warning, but he paid her no heed. He pulled her into his arms and claimed her lips with a deep kiss. She was held prisoner in his passionate embrace. His mouth was warm and soft as his tongue expertly caressed hers. It was even more delicious than their first kiss, and she wondered how she could have denied herself this pleasure.

He was methodical in his actions, and he left no area untouched as he sucked and nibbled her lips. Her mouth was alive with the taste of him, and she stopped resisting, wanting only to savor the feeling of his tongue intimately entwined with her own.

As his kiss deepened, it became more tender, and she felt herself succumbing to his gentle touch. Her hands moved to his chest, and she found herself unable to resist stroking the hard planes of muscle there. His bare skin was hot to the touch, and when her fingers brushed against his nipples, she felt his deep moan of approval against her mouth. Frightened, she dropped her hands and pulled away, breaking their contact. She had no idea how to handle him. She could barely handle herself.

But Amonmose pulled her back, softly caressed her shoulders, and gently placed butterfly kisses on her eyelids, nose, and cheeks.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured as he trailed kisses from the corners of her lips to the delicate tips of her earlobes.

Kama stood stunned by passion. Her body was numb and tingling, something she'd never experienced before. She held him tightly as he suckled and teased the sensitive skin of her neck. As he moved to her collarbone, she arched her body backwards giving him access to the tender flesh.

Amonmose groaned with pleasure as he moved his hands down her curvaceous body, stroking her smooth skin. He let his hands roam lower and cupped her buttocks, feeling her supple skin through the thin material of her dress. His palms stroked her soft flesh, and his manhood hardened instantly.

Kama looked at him through fearful eyes. “What are you doing to me?” she begged.

He took her hand and placed it on the hardness between his legs. “The same thing you're doing to me. It's called desire.”

Before she could respond, he swept her into his arms and carried her the short distance to the middle of the field. He laid her down on a soft patch of grass. A lazy breeze of warm air floated over them, carrying the fragrant scent of the brilliant, yellow chrysanthemums.

Amonmose looked at the gorgeous creature beneath him. How many times had he fantasized about this very moment? The image of Kama lying beneath him had haunted not only his dreams but his days. Now, it was finally here. It took every ounce of his strength not to mount her and thrust himself inside her. He'd waited a long time to have her, and he meant to savor every moment of this.

His breathing was ragged as he spoke. "From the moment I saw you, I have been unable to think of anyone else but you," he said. "You have lit a fire inside me that cannot be quenched."

He showed her the depth of his desire by capturing her mouth with a passion-filled kiss. Kama writhed in pleasure as he stroked his hands across her breasts, rhythmically rubbing each nipple with the palm of his hand in a circular motion. Her cries of pleasure encouraged him even more.

He pressed on, simultaneously trailing hot kisses down her neck and fondling her nipples between his thumb and forefinger. Her tunic was thin, and he could see the dark buds beneath the sheer material. He kissed her nipples through the light fabric, and the dark berries immediately hardened in his mouth. He generously showered each one with attention, gently licking and teasing the hard buds until her garment was wet and soaked from the warmth of his mouth.

Amonmose reached beneath her long dress and touched the bare skin of her legs. His hands slid along the slender curves of her calves, and he marveled. His

fingertips had a mind of their own as they continued their sensual exploration upward, gently stroking her smooth thighs. Her skin was softer than Chinese silk and he longed to put his lips where his hands had been.

In one swift moment, he pulled up her dress, exposing her creamy thighs and her long, shapely legs. Such perfection. His hungry eyes traveled the length of her body from her delicate ankles along her thighs to her womanhood. He heard his own sharp intake of breath loudly.

Kama's eyes flew open, and she met Amonmose's stare with a questioning gaze.

"You are not shaved," he whispered softly.

She remained quiet, but her pained expression spoke volumes.

"You are...you are natural." He paused. "I was not expecting..."

Kama quickly pushed her dress down and struggled to her feet. "I cannot believe you have the audacity to mock me," she accused.

"Kama, wait. Do not leave, please. Accept my apologies." Amonmose stood up and reached for her. "This is a first for me. In Egypt, the custom is—"

"I know your customs! And they are not the Nubian way! You want to own me and possess me, yet you know nothing about me!"

"The women I've known..."

"The women? Precisely how many women *have* you been with?" she spat.

Amonmose visibly bristled. “That has nothing to do with us. You are the only woman I desire. I meant no harm with my careless words. I was simply...caught off guard.”

Kama glared at him, her black eyes flashing with anger. “That makes two of us!”

Amonmose watched her storm off. His arms had just held the most bewitching creature he’d ever laid eyes upon, and now.... As he watched her retreating back, he felt his chest tighten in pain. It was the same unwelcome anguish he had felt when his father died: loneliness. It was better to be alone, unaware of your emptiness, than to feel the shape of it in fresh wounds.

For all the might of a Pharaoh, he stood powerless as Kama slipped between the trees and vanished. He would give her some time alone. It was the best thing for both of them. The next time he took her in his arms, he would be better prepared. And heaven help her, because there would be no stopping him then.

Chapter Seven

“Kama, in case you were wondering, it is still your turn. It has *been* your turn for the past several minutes,” Dyzet said with a hint of a smile.

Kama sat, staring at the pieces of the Senet game. “It is easy for you to gloat. You always win.”

“That’s true. But the least you could do is give me the honor of a proper competition. Where are you today? Because you are definitely not here with me.”

Dyzet was right, of course. Her mind was not on the game. She could think of nothing except Amonmose. It was so embarrassing. It had been a week since their encounter in the garden, but it was still fresh in her mind. He’d shown her passion she’d never known. His kisses had left her breathless. His touch had left her defenseless. His gaze had melted her resolve like wax.

She relived that day over and over again in her mind. Each time she remembered how he touched her, her heart raced and her body responded with a will of its own. Even now, the place between her thighs burned just thinking of him. She could not escape him, even in her dreams. Each night, she was tormented by fantasies of him. She felt ashamed of the way her body responded to him, and more ashamed because she wanted to feel his touch again. If only he had not ruined the moment. She did not know what to think now. Had he grown tired of

her already? Was he keeping his distance on purpose? She had no experience in this area. All she knew was that she felt miserable.

“What troubles you?” Dyzet asked.

Kama hesitated. For a brief moment, she thought of confiding in her. But how to put this anguish to words? She pretended to study the Senet board instead.

“I am trying to devise a method to best you.”

Dyzet shook her head. “If only it were that simple. I think there is something else.”

Kama sighed impatiently. “Must you always try to find hidden meanings in the words people say?”

Dyzet leaned forward and rested her chin in the palms of her hands. “No, I merely try to find hidden meanings in the words *you* say.”

“Well, there is nothing to find. I am simply concentrating on the game, trying to find my strategy.”

Dyzet smiled. “Which game? The one you are playing with me or the one you are playing with the Pharaoh?”

Kama jerked her head up and looked into Dyzet’s dark eyes. “I am afraid I have already lost that game.”

Dyzet reached over and clasped Kama’s hand. “On the contrary, I don’t think you realize the extent of your success. You may have arrived here a captive, but I

believe it is you who has captivated the Pharaoh. He has gone to the trouble of providing you with your own suite, fine clothing, a chambermaid to assist you, and access to his personal physician. You have free reign of the palace and the garden. And he has practically given you everything you could desire. It seems to me that you are not only winning the game, but you have created all the rules as well.”

Kama pulled her hand away and stood up. “The Pharaoh is not the only one who has given,” she said softly.

“What you need is a little diversion,” Dyzet said. “You must not sit here lifeless as an empty seashell. Accompany my sisters and me to the annual festival being held on the morrow. It will give you a change of scenery. Besides,” she added, “my sisters are eager to meet you, though I do not know why. I have already told them your beauty will render them speechless.”

Kama smiled wanly. “You are too kind, as always. Tell me about this festival.”

Dyzet clapped her hands in excitement. “Each year, Thebes hosts the Festival. The finest athletes from Egypt come to compete. There are a dozen sports including wrestling, javelin throwing, long distance running, knife throwing, chariot racing, horseback riding and weight lifting. This year, the winners from each category will be awarded a sack of ten gold coins, which has been graciously supplied by the palace.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“Yes, quite! I am surprised at the large sum. It is equal to a few months’ wages for some people. I have heard that Hai Meri, the Pharaoh’s royal treasurer, hates giving money away. He guards the royal coffers like a cheetah protecting her cubs.”

“Indeed? Is the man really such a miser?”

“Oh, yes. It is rumored he is so tight-fisted that when he farts, gold dust comes out!”

Kama could not stop the spontaneous laughter that escaped her lips.

Dyzet smiled and continued on. “The money is not the only reason men compete. Some do it for bragging rights and respect. I truly believe that someday athletes from all over the world shall come to Thebes to compete. That would be a spectacular sight indeed.”

“Yes it would,” Kama agreed.

“Good. Then it is settled! You shall go with us on the morrow.”

Kama hesitated. “It sounds lively, but I do not feel like enduring the company of others. I think I am better served by spending time with myself.”

“Nonsense. Nobody wants to spend time with themselves if they can help it!”

Kama thought back to the words Amonmose had spoken in the garden. A

man who is not comfortable spending time alone with himself cannot expect others to desire his company. Was he somewhere spending time with himself? Did he think of her as often as she thought of him? Kama sighed. “I shall be fine by myself.”

Dyzet looked disappointed but shrugged. “If that is your wish, I respect it. But, I had hoped you would be there to see the Pharaoh’s performance.”

Kama’s heart skipped a beat. “Will he be there?”

Dyzet dropped her gaze and took her time studying the pieces on the Senet board. “Of course,” she finally answered. “He will be there. He competes in the archery contest each year. And he always wins. He’s been practicing nonstop for the past few days. When his focus is this great, no one sees him until the day of the event.” She selected a game piece and moved it forward two squares. “There!” she proclaimed. “It is your move.”

Kama returned to the table and sat down. She was certain Dyzet’s words held a double meaning, but she did not comment. She’d made up her mind. “Dyzet, I think I *will* accompany you and your sisters to the Festival, after all.”

Dyzet flashed her a wide smile. “You shall not regret it.”



Nadesh paced angrily back and forth. “This is the worst possible time to have the Festival,” he said.

“It is held at the same time each year,” Meketen replied.

“Yes, I know; but the timing is all wrong. Perhaps we could delay it for a few months.”

Amonmose stifled a yawn. Nadesh had a tendency to be melodramatic at times. They were adjourning their weekly scheduled meeting, and as usual, Nadesh was dragging his heels toward the end. Meketen and Hai were seated comfortably, stretched out in their chairs like water buffalo after a full meal. Amonmose held his patience. Lately, it seemed these meetings lasted unnecessarily long.

“Nadesh, why are you so agitated?” he asked.

Nadesh stopped pacing momentarily. “The Festival is a threat to our security,” he said. “Thebes will be vulnerable to attacks from outsiders who will use this occasion as an opportunity to scrutinize the city and exploit its weaknesses. It will be impossible to keep track of all these unknown visitors.”

Hai nodded. “I concur. Also, as a participant in the archery contest, you will be an easy target. I wonder if it is wise for you to compete.”

Amonmose stood up, signaling the end of the meeting. “I am no coward,” he stated. “I will take part again this year. My presence builds the morale of the citizens. This city cannot be in a constant state of alarm. There is a time for waging war, and there is a time for peace and entertainment. The Festival will proceed as

planned. Now, are there any other issues before we adjourn?”

Meketen stood up. “Yes, Sire. There is the matter of your impending wedding.”

Amonmose gave him a stern look. “Have you taken leave of your senses? There is no impending wedding.”

“Respectfully, there *should* be a wedding,” Meketen replied. “Instead of having the Festival, we should be having a marriage feast. It is time you took a bride.”

Amonmose held up a hand in protest. “Now is not the time for this discussion.”

But Meketen pressed on. “You speak of peace and prosperity. What better way to demonstrate this than by marrying? You can forge an alliance by marrying a princess. The Syrians would be a good place to start. Princess Lenia is a beautiful.”

“No,” Amonmose shook his head.

“Or choose someone local,” Nadesh offered. “There are many desirable noblewomen. Someone already familiar with our customs would be perfect.”

“You could have your pick, Pharaoh. There must be someone of interest,” Hai said.

“Just say the word,” Nadesh said, “and we shall have the ceremony arranged.”

Amonmose's heart raced in his chest, as his advisors closed in on him like a swarm of bees. His head swirled from the incessant buzzing of their voices.

"Silence!" he shouted.

Amonmose stared at the astonished faces of the three men. He had another reason for wanting to participate in the contest, and struggled to keep it secret against his heart. He hoped it would give him an opportunity to get his mind off Kama. He had been plagued by thoughts of her since she ran from the garden days ago. He could still smell her, taste her, feel her delicate hands upon him.

Just last night he had the most erotic dream of her. She lay in his arms, stroking and caressing him, pressing hot, sensual kisses all over his body. Unable to deny himself any longer, he playfully grabbed her and flipped her onto her back. She licked her lips seductively with the tip of her tongue and begged him to make love to her. He spread her smooth thighs apart and lowered himself onto her. At the precise moment he was prepared to mount her, she turned into a serpent and slithered away. When he awoke, he found himself reaching into the empty air for her. His linens were damp with sweat, and his manhood was hard as granite. He'd dreamed of her every night since their last encounter.

He needed the distraction of this festival. He was the most powerful man in Egypt, yet he felt helpless when it came to her. And now, his advisors wanted him to agree to an arranged marriage? Impossible.

Amonmose's voice was slow and deliberate when he spoke, looking at each of his aides in turn. "I appreciate your concerns, and I understand that you have the best interests of this kingdom at heart. However, *my* interests lay not in matrimony right now. I am going to focus on the archery competition, and when I am ready to take a wife, you will be the first ones to know of it."

The three men watched Amonmose depart from the room. Once he was out of earshot, Nadesh turned to the others. "He is not himself."

"It is the Nubian woman," Meketen said with a grimace.

"No," Hai countered. "His mind is focused on the contest."

"Don't be a fool, Hai!" Meketen hissed. "He's been like this for months. It has nothing to do with the contest."

"How do you know?" Hai spat his words. "Can you read his mind?" He crossed his pudgy arms over his chest.

"The palace gossips report he is 'incurably fascinated' with her."

"So?" Hai scoffed and waved dismissively. "No woman has held the Pharaoh's attention for long. This one will be no exception. Let it pass, and he will back to normal."

Meketen narrowed his eyes and looked to Nadesh instead. "We have to get his thoughts away from that woman."

“I agree. Amonmose should be concentrating on finding a wife instead of obsessing over his *Nubian* captive.”

“He has taken foreign women to his bed before,” Hai said with a shrug.

“But this one is different.” Nadesh shook his head. “She is like a black widow spider that has ensnared him.” He shrugged. “I will confess, Kama is stunning, but no female is worth sacrificing a kingdom for.”

“Sacrificing a kingdom? Oh, come now,” Hai protested, “you are being melodramatic.”

“No, I am not. Since that woman arrived, Amonmose has not been the same ruler. He has been distracted from his duty to his country. A woman like that is dangerous. She could have him thinking with his heart instead of his head.”

“My sentiments exactly.” Meketen nodded in agreement. “So, what are we going to do about her?”

Nadesh gazed at the other man and stroked his thin mustache in thought. “Out of sight, out of mind?”

Hai jolted. “And just what are you suggesting?” he demanded in a high-pitched voice.

Nadesh gave Hai a hard look, letting a short silence build in the confines of the chamber. “I believe,” he said quietly and evenly, “we must rid ourselves of Kama. She has corrupted his thoughts. First this, and then who knows what other

kind of influence she will have over him. As his trusted advisors, it is our job to protect him *and* this kingdom.

Hai pointed a long finger in Nadesh's face. "I distinctly heard the Pharaoh say he does not want to choose a wife. Those are his words. And defiance of that would be treason."

Nadesh pushed Hai's hand aside. "This, Hai, is protecting our investment. Besides, he only *thinks* he does not want a wife. We have to convince him otherwise."

Meketen arched an eyebrow. "And how do you propose we do that Nadesh? We cannot just rid ourselves of her. He *will* notice."

Nadesh grinned. "No, we are not going to dispose of her. We are simply going to give her a little competition." He glanced at the pudgy treasurer. "Have you a concern with that Hai?"

Hai relented. "I suppose not. But, I still feel you are meddling."

Nadesh threw back his head and laughed. "And when have I not meddled? My meddling and maneuvering has been the reason both of you have kept your positions for so long. So, leave everything to me. I will take care of the Nubian woman once and for all."

Chapter Eight

The day of the Festival was warm and sunny. The brilliant blue sky hung like a cloak of turquoise. Outside, vendors sold corn, roasted pig, duck, tankards of beer, and chunks of cheese. Kama and Dyzet arrived at the arena early and were fortunate to find a good seat, though it was a fortune in which Dyzet had a hand. The palace had its own seating area, and she had arranged for their presence in advance. The arena was a tall, circular structure, consisting of sixty rows of seats, which could easily seat five hundred people per row. The seats were perfectly arranged so everyone could view the events below.

Kama was pleased. She could see everything perfectly. Her bodyguard, Shu kept vigil a short distance away. She'd grown used to his omnipresence and she often forgot he was watching over her. Today, she was too excited to think of anything else but the Festival. Anticipation fluttered in her stomach at the thought of seeing Amonmose at last. She was filled with a mixture of fear, trepidation, and optimism. Fingers squeezing tight on the amulet around her neck, she paid silent homage to the goddess Pakhet, praying for courage and fortitude.

Whatever nervousness she felt abated with the arrival of Dyzet's sisters. All four ladies were mirror images of each other. They all had the same cinnamon-colored skin and tiny, shapely figures, a full foot shorter than Kama herself. Each

one had taken the time to adorn herself with kohl, emphasizing her wide, dark eyes. Kama knew also that it was the custom for Egyptian women to shave their heads and wear wigs. But Dyzet's sisters had long, beautiful hair that looked so natural she could not determine if the locks were wigs or not. They were so busy chattering, they seemed not to notice her intense scrutiny.

It seemed as if the entire population of Egypt was present for the event. Everyone from farmers and soldiers to musicians and crafters had come. The nobles, draped in the finest clothes and fashionable jewelry, sat in their own section, quietly observing the arena below. Kama was dressed comfortably in a long, white sheath dress belted at the waist and brown leather sandals. As usual, she'd tied her long braids loosely in back. If anyone eyed her simple attire with scorn, she was oblivious. She was there for one reason, and her eyes remained glued to the arena floor in search of him.



At the suggestion of Nadesh, Amonmose arrived secretly by chariot to the Festival. Nadesh was concerned about his safety. Nadesh was always concerned about his safety. But despite his dramatic precautions, Amonmose trusted the man's judgment.

Heavily guarded, he made his way to the arena floor just in time for the archery competition. Two of his trusted servants carried his large bow, quiver of

arrows, and a spare bow, just in case. He believed in being prepared, no matter what the occasion. Baal walked directly behind him, his eagle-sharp eyes surveying everything. They found the royal advisors waiting them just outside the arena.

Nadesh stepped forward. "Greetings, Sire. You are looking exceptionally fit today. May I be the first to congratulate you on your victory?"

Amonmose laughed good-naturedly. "The contest has not yet begun, Nadesh. Have you been indulging in that Asian cannabis again?"

Even the dour Nadesh shared in a jovial laugh. "No, I am merely stating the inevitable. You are a master at this sport and you will win, I am certain."

Meketen nodded. "Most certainly. Although, I am told there are a few challengers who may test your skills today, Pharaoh."

"Good," Amonmose replied. There was no benefit to participating if he had no real competition. Some of the nobles would go so far as to purposely lose games because they believed it would garner his favor, only to find themselves later shunned. Like any other man, Amonmose wanted to test his talents against others, to win or lose based on his effort, not his position as Pharaoh.

With a nod to each of his men, he set out across the arena to take his place among the contenders.

"Archers ready!" the announcer shouted.

Amonmose felt the blood coursing through his veins with new vigor. This

was what he'd been waiting all year for.

“There will be three contests,” the announcer said. “The first event is the flight contest, which will measure how great a distance each archer can shoot his arrow. Each competitor will be given two opportunities to shoot. The ten men who land their arrows the furthest distance will advance to the next competition. Needless to say, the remaining men shall be eliminated.”

Amonmose studied his competition. There were close to one hundred men of various ages and backgrounds gathered to hear the announcer's words. They had gone through pre-qualifying events and were the best in their cities. Still, as good as he believed they were, he knew he was even better.

The announcer continued. “The next event will be the target contest, which measures how accurate the archer's aim is. Points will be awarded based on proximity. The closer the arrow to the middle, the greater the amount of points. Each competitor is allowed three attempts, and after each attempt, the target will be moved back ten cubits. So, by the third attempt, the final target will be thirty cubits away. The five men who score the greatest points shall advance to the next competition.

“The final event will be the field contest. This category measures speed, marksmanship, accuracy, and skill. Six apples will be placed atop six wooden poles five cubits in height. The poles will be placed an equal distance from each

other. Each contestant will be required to shoot each apple from each pole while riding a horse at full gallop.”

The crowd cooed in anticipation at such a spectacle, but the announcer lifted his hands and motioned for silence.

“In addition,” he cried, “the first two apples must be hit upon approach, the second two must be hit while passing by, and the last two must be hit after you have passed the targets.”

Amonmose smiled. He had practiced shooting like this before. The trick to winning was in controlling the horse. He would not be riding his own mount, so he hoped the horse he was given was a competent animal.

Kama watched closely as each man lined up for the flight contest. She immediately recognized Amunmose in his short blue tunic with long sleeves. With his muscular physique and impressive looks, he stood out from all the other contestants.

Kama’s stomach was turning flips as she watched him walk to his mark and prepare to shoot. He was the epitome of masculinity. The corded muscles of his strong legs rippled with each move he made. He wore gold cuff bracelets and a thick, gold collar encrusted with garnet and turquoise. He held his head high, gaze steady.

“No man should be so handsome,” Kama heard one woman say.

“Yes,” another woman agreed. “I would stare at him all day and never get a thing done.”

“I can assure you, we would get quite a few things done—over and over and over again!”

Kama smiled to herself. Amonmose was indeed pleasing to the eye. Yet, while these women could only imagine being with him, she’d had the pleasure of knowing his touch, feeling his caresses and tasting his sweet lips. After the contest, she would go to him. If only she were as confident as Dyzet about her effect on him.



The flight competition was the quickest way to eliminate the weaker archers. Anyone could shoot an arrow, but it took strength to launch it over great distances. After almost an hour, all but ten were disqualified.

Amonmose had easily advanced. His arrow fell a distance of seventy-five cubits—a Festival record. The exuberant cries from the crowd lifted his spirit, and he felt certain he would win again this year. With so many men competing, this was

The second event was harder, but the Pharaoh had spent the past two days practicing for this very event. The archers drew straws to decide who would go

first. Amonmose drew the next to the last man in the event.

The first contestant did not hit the middle but did earn thirteen points, setting a high standard for the subsequent archers. The second and third contestants were both equally bad, scoring high on the first launches, but poorly as the target was moved a greater distance away. One man missed the target completely, causing raucous laughter among the spectators. After almost another hour, eight contestants had competed, and it was finally Amonmose's turn.

He closed his eyes and focused inward, visualizing his arrow hitting the target. He'd done this a thousand times, and today would be no exception. When he opened his eyes, he concentrated on the simple target. He pulled an arrow from his quiver. He'd used the same type of arrow for the past ten years. Constructed of solid wood with an arrowhead made of ram's horn and fletching of eagle feathers, it had never failed him. The placement of the fletching was critical in achieving the desired flight path of the arrow. His feathers were attached at an angle, which caused the arrow to spin in flight. It did not add to the accuracy, but it made a spectacular presentation when it was launched.

Without further hesitation, he drew back the sinewy cord of his bow until it was taut and took aim. He breathed in deeply and released the arrow, holding still and he watched it fly towards the target. With lightening speed, it spun through the air and landed in the middle. The crowd erupted in cheers.

Amonmose smiled before drawing another arrow from his quiver. He was now in second place, a position he did not intend to stay in for long. The next launch would put him in the lead.

He waited patiently as the announcer directed a young boy to move the target back ten meters. He aimed, released the second arrow, and watched it spiral toward the target. Just when he was certain it would hit the coveted spot in the middle, it dipped and landed squarely, just missing the center. Again, his efforts were met by cheers. It was not a perfect shot, but it put him decisively in first place with a score of fifteen.

Kama watched nervously as Amonmose prepared to his final arrow. He was an amazing marksman. She held her breath as she watched him pull firmly on the string of the bow. His brawny arms were bundled tightly, the muscles of his biceps and forearms flexing with each movement. She shivered, remembering how those arms had gently held her that day in the garden. She had felt his strength and his passion.

She saw him pause briefly before releasing the arrow. In the next instant, the arrow solidly hit the red center of the target. Both she and Dyzet stood and clapped wildly, their shrieks of delight melting into the roar of the spectators around them.

Nadesh strutted like a proud peacock as he watched the competition from the tunnel into the arena. That totaled twenty-five points for Amonmose. “Didn’t I tell you he would be victorious?”

“There is still one more competitor and one more event,” Hai reminded him.

“Easily crushed,” Nadesh said, keeping his eye on Amonmose. He had shaped the Pharaoh into a strong and competent warrior, into the best among them.

“What of this surprise you spoke of, Nadesh? You said we would find out today.”

Nadesh grinned and cut a look at Hai. “Be patient my friend. A good mystery is like a fine wine. The longer you keep it bottled up, the better it tastes when it is finally shared.”

He scanned the stands until his eyes fell on Kama. So, she was here after all, looking as bewitching as ever in her delicate white tunic, her dark braids pulled back from her comely face. Her skin gleamed like finely polished ebony.

Nadesh hid a sneer. She had turned out to be more of threat than he’d ever imagined when he’d cornered her in the dark and sliced her dress from her body. Since the day she’d arrived, she’d made no secret of her contempt for him and all of his men—they who preserved Egypt. Nadesh saw her giggle happily to her friends

and smiled darkly. Soon, he would give Kama her comeuppance and then, he would have the last laugh.



The last contestant was a tall, burly man with massive forearms and thick fingers. His long reach was ideal for archery. Under any other circumstances, Amonmose would have recruited him for his army. Earlier, he'd heard another competitor refer to this man as the Barbarian from Morocco. His long, dark hair and menacing gaze drew hisses and scorn from the crowd, but it was marksmanship that mattered today.

The Barbarian proved to be an excellent marksman. All three of his arrows hit the center of the target. While he was clearly not the crowd favorite, the spectators showed their appreciation of his skill with a standing ovation nonetheless. He now had a total score of thirty points, easily securing his victory in the second round.

Amonmose did not dwell on his defeat. He was now in second place among the five remaining competitors. There was one more event, and he was determined to win.

The third and final contest involved shooting six apples from the tops of six wooden poles while on the back of a moving horse. Five sturdy mounts were led in for the contestants. He could see each mount was quality horseflesh, with rich-

looking coats. Amonmose wondered from whence these fine animals came. They were definitely not from his stables.

He was so focused on the horses for a moment that he almost overlooked the woman leading them. To say she was gorgeous was an understatement. Amonmose watched her approach slowly and seductively. She was tall and voluptuous with a firm bosom. Her caramel-colored skin almost matched his, but it was lighter and no doubt, softer. Her long, reddish brown hair was worn in thick braids and upswept to reveal her lovely oval-shaped face.

Nadesh stepped out into the arena and took the woman by the hand. “I present my niece, Zahra,” he said. “Zahra has graciously loaned her family’s prize Arabian horses for this event.”

Zahra slipped her hand from her uncle’s and kneeled before Amonmose. “It is a pleasure to be of service, Pharaoh.”

Amonmose had both of Nadesh’s wives, and neither looked like they could be related to this beauty. He motioned for her to rise. “All of Thebes thanks you for your contribution, Zahra.”

Zahra stood and licked her lips seductively. “May I say that you are even more handsome up close?”

Amonmose raised an eyebrow at her boldness. “Thank you,” he said graciously covering his surprise. “I promise, your mare is in good hands with me.”

Zahra glanced suggestively at his hands before smiling. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

Kama watched the mysterious woman talking to Amonmose but, because of the distance, could not hear what was being said. She had been introduced by Nadesh, which Kama made Kama suspicious. Did Amonmose know her?

The announcer stepped up on his podium and spoke, his deep voice ringing loud and clear. “You are the last five competitors. Remember, you must hit the first two apples upon approach, the second two while passing, and the last two after you’ve passed the targets. The poles are fifty meters apart. Please draw to choose your steed.”

As the men drew straws, Zahra excused herself. Amonmose found his eyes wandering over tempting backside as she walked away, but he forced himself to focus on the contest. This year’s competition had proved the most challenging so far. He was enjoying himself, but he could not afford a break in his concentration.

The Barbarian drew the long straw, which meant he was allowed to choose his place in the order of the competitors and the first mount. He took his time, and after a thorough inspection of each animal, he selected a chestnut horse. Amonmose approved.

The Barbarian elected to go last. Amonmose pulled the shortest straw, so he

would ride first. He mounted the mahogany mare and expertly took up the reins. As the horse adjusted to his weight, he surveyed the wooden posts in the distance. He could do this. He lifted his eyes to the crowd. Whether he won or lost today, it would surely be talked about for years to come.

The announcer signaled him. It was time.

Amonmose cleared his mind of everything except the contest. He took a moment to steel himself, and spurred his horse forward, thighs locking hard on the animal beneath him. Within seconds, he'd pulled the first arrow from his quiver and launched a shot. The release was smooth, and the apple toppled from its high perch. A roar that might have been cheering filled the air around him. The horse's gait was flawless, and she moved to the rhythm of his commands.

He toppled the second, third and fourth apples from their perches, and knocked another arrow. As he passed the fifth apple, he shot, easily spearing the fruit, and it was on to the last.

Something was amiss. Instead of a wooden pole, Zahra stood in the arena, with an apple balanced on her head.

Stunned, Amonmose slowed his horse. Had she gone mad? What was she doing out there? As his concentration broke, he could hear the loud roar of the crowd, urging him on.

“Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!”

Madness. But this was the competition he had entered. If Zahra wanted danger, he would give it to her. He spurred the mare up again and they flew passed her. In one swift movement, he turned and launched his last arrow. It spiraled through the air and hit the apple dead center, splitting the fruit into two pieces. The cheers rattled the skies.

Amonmose did not know whether to be angry or elated at Zahra's stunt. One movement from her could have caused his horse to spook. Not to mention that he might have missed and landed his arrow in the middle of her pretty forehead—or her lush bosom. She could have been killed, or worse yet, *he* could have been killed.

Amonmose turned his horse and rode back toward her. He extended his hand and pulled her onto his horse, intent on giving her a ride back to the starting point and chastising her for her recklessness. But Zahra had plans of her own.

The moment he lifted her onto his mount, she turned and straddled him, pressing her ample curves against him. Then, she planted a deep, searing kiss on his lips. Her mouth was hot and wet, alluring in all the right ways. She touched her tongue to his, coaxing, begging.

He gently pushed her away. “That was...foolish.”

Zahra fluttered her long eyelashes. “What was foolish? The stunt or the kiss?”

“Both.”

She laughed. “Perhaps. But you loved it, didn’t you,” she declared in a sultry voice. “The crowd loved it too. Listen to them!”

She was right. The cheering had not stopped. Amonmose had given them a show that they would remember for the rest of their lives, thanks to this brash, presumptive girl.

He smiled broadly at her. “The next time you plan something like that, let me know in advance.”

Zahra was silent as they rode back across the arena, a secret smile touching her lips

Kama’s heart sank as she watched Amonmose and the mystery woman. Had this woman been the distraction that had kept Amonmose from coming to her? She heard mutterings of approval from the onlookers in the stands. The women wished they were down there, and the men made raunchy comments. Even Dyzet’s sisters were swooning with delight over the Pharaoh’s performance.

Kama felt anger begin to swell inside her. She whispered to Dyzet. “She must be the diversion that has held the Pharaoh’s interest for so many days. How dare he flaunt his conquest in front of me?”

Dyzet gave her a look of disbelief. “Diversion? I told you, he’s been

preoccupied with preparing for this event. I don't think that woman is his *conquest*. Besides, everyone knows he is smitten with you. The palace tongues wag about his continuing infatuation."

Kama pointed to the arena below. "Look at him! Does he look like a man smitten? He has found another."

Amonmose was grinning from ear to ear, with the red-haired woman by his side, lapping up the attention like a thirsty dog. The more Kama watched, the more her blood boiled.

"You cannot have it both ways, Kama. First, you run from him. Now, you are jealous.

"I trusted him."

Dyzet clasped her hands and squeezed them hard. "Then go to him and tell him how you feel!"

"Never!" Kama stood, abruptly pulling her hands free. "My time in Thebes is done."

Dyzet stared up at her, aghast. "You cannot simply—"

"It is clear he has chosen another, in which case he will have no further need of me. Tonight I will go to him and demand my freedom. This time, I shall not be denied."

Chapter Nine

The Festival continued into the late hours of the night. People hugged each other, sang loudly, and drank the wine and beer that flowed freely. In the end, few could remember who had been victors and in which events. Exception for the archery contest. Everyone spoke of the Pharaoh's defeat over five other archers, including the Barbarian, whose good fortune ran out when he misjudged the angle of the fourth pole and missed the apple by a hair.

Amonmose's elation had lasted only a few minutes. After the announcement of his victory, he'd searched the arena for Kama's white dress. He had seen her earlier among the other noble women, but she had vanished. This was the fourth year he'd won the contest, yet his victory rang with a strange new hollowness in his chest. While the rest of the city celebrated joyously, Amonmose retreated to the quiet solitude of his chambers.

He found solace in a casket of wine. As he stared into the depths of the crimson liquid, he wondered how he'd managed to fall so far. There was a time when he'd needed no one, man or woman. He remembered the hard shell around his heart that could not be penetrated under any circumstance. He remembered when his own joy was enough, when

he commanded his relationships like he commanded a military operation. He came in, he conquered, and then he moved on when he grew weary of the occupation.

As he poured more wine, he found himself looking at the map of Nubia again. This map had changed his destiny forever. As long as he lived, he would never forget the night he met Kama. He would always remember her flashing dark eyes, her contemptuous stare, and her utter defiance in the face of obvious defeat. The image of her clutching her white garment against her beautiful black skin would be embedded in his brain for eternity.

He could still smell the burnt air swirling around his nostrils as he watched the night wind blowing her long hair wildly about. He'd wanted her before she even spoke a word. Now, he had her and could not find his way. Taming her was like taming the Nile itself. One moment she was calm and serene; the next, she was turbulent and unpredictable.

As he guzzled his wine, he heard a discreet knock at his chamber door.

"Yes?" Amonmose growled.

Baal opened the door with no hesitation, as though he had not heard his Pharaoh's surly voice. He slipped in quietly and closed the door behind him. "Sire, you have a visitor. The woman insists on seeing you."

Amonmose nearly choked on his wine. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Send her in immediately.”

“As you wish.”

Amonmose watched Baal turn on his heel and exit, a slight hesitation in his step. He frowned and then frowned further at the thought of Kama. So, she was finally here. What was he supposed to do? Apologize? Argue? Pretend to be aloof? Take her in his arms and make wild, passionate love to her? How could he make her want him as badly as he wanted her? For the first time in many years, he was at a total loss.

“I thought you would be much happier to see me,” he heard a silky voice purr.

Amonmose turned. “Zahra!”

“In the flesh.” She sauntered over to him, her hips swaying seductively in a sheer tunic. The see-through material revealed her naked body beneath. “You were expecting someone else?” She pouted.

Amonmose chuckled. “Zahra, you are full of surprises today.”

Zahra smiled sweetly at the way the Pharaoh laughed. It was so powerful and masculine, just like everything else about him. She walked a circle around him, openly appraising his muscular body, and not bothering to hide her admiration. At the Festival, he’d worn a short tunic, which accentuated his lean, muscled legs.

Now, he was clad in a long kilt knotted at the waist. His feet and chest were bare; she had caught him at a private moment. Most women would have been intimidated, but she was well versed in the art of pleasing a man. If she planned it just right, she could end up in his bed tonight.

“You do not like surprises?” she asked.

He gave her a mischievous grin. “I confess I can appreciate a nice surprise as much as the next person.”

Zahra sashayed over to the casket of wine on his table. “Hmm. You have an odd way of showing your *appreciation*.” She picked up an empty goblet and licked her lips seductively. “Mind if I share your wine?”

Amonmose watched as Zahra pulled the cork from the casket, and the deep red elixir quickly poured out. Within seconds, her goblet overflowed, and she let out a startled yelp. He rushed to help, but too many goblets of wine made him clumsy, and it took two attempts to get the cork to fit snugly. As he fumbled, the excess wine flowed from the spout onto the tabletop and floor, ultimately splashing onto the ornate tile.

“Oh!” Zahra exclaimed. “What a mess I have made.”

“No, the fault lies with me,” Amonmose said. He looked around for something to wipe his wine-soaked hands.

“Let me help,” Zahra offered sweetly.

She pulled one of his hands against her mouth, and Amonmose felt her lips envelop his fingers. She started gently, her warm tongue softly licking, then began kissing. Her tongue languidly stroked each finger, thoroughly bathing each one with kisses from the fingertip to the knuckle. Then she sucked each finger, removing all traces of the wine with her sultry lips. As he watched his pinky disappear into her hot mouth, he felt a heat creeping up inside of him.

“You are too brazen and audacious for your own good,” he murmured.

Zahra stepped back and disrobed, pulling her transparent garment off. It landed in a delicate puddle at her feet. “Shall I be punished?”



Kama tossed and turned in her bed, still steaming over the events at the Festival. One part of her was crushed and the other was mad as a stinging hornet. Her intent had been to speak with Amonmose after the festivities. Instead, she came back to her room and cried herself to sleep. Hours later, she awoke to find her bed linens were still wet with her tears.

She punched the bed linens in anger. How dare he flaunt his newest *conquest* in front of everyone, in front of her? All this time, he had only been toying with her, preying on her inexperience. Just when she was beginning to think there was more to him, he showed her that he was capable of a new level of cruelty.

As her tears flowed anew, Kama cradled her head in her hands. Why was he treating her like this? He'd torn her from her family and everyone she knew. He seduced her with his magic words and tender touch. Then, he abandoned her for another woman. For what purpose? Simply to see her suffer?

She wiped her tears with the back of her hands. By the darkness, Kama gauged it to be the middle of the night. She sniffled, wide awake and thinking. Her thoughts spun on her humiliation, betrayal, and whipped into a fire. Amonmose could not treat her like cow dung and expect her to like it! She might be risking her life by confronting him, but she had nothing to lose. Pharaoh or not, he would regret his trespasses.

Shu was standing guard outside Kama's door. His eyes widened in astonishment when he saw her stomping from her room, wearing only her dressing gown. Her eyes were watery and red. Her mouth was set in a grim line, and the expression on her face would make most men crumble. She acknowledged him by muttering an undignified "humph!"

He moved to follow her, not entirely sure of her destination. But she was clearly intent on unleashing her fury on someone. And at this late hour, no good could come from it.



Amonmose stared at Zahra's naked body. It had been months since he'd been with a woman. There was no shortage of offers, but he'd been so focused on his pursuit of Kama, he had not dreamed of bedding anyone else. His head was swirled from the wine, and he was alone in his private chambers with a gorgeous temptress. Any man with an ounce of sanity would take what she offered with no hesitation. But something was wrong. Zahra was too easy, too willing.

There was a time when he would have asked no questions and just taken his pleasure. But things had changed. *He had changed.* Zahra's body was beautiful, but she was not Kama. Kama had spoken to his mind and his body. Her sense of confidence and self-worth made him want to know her, and know her deeply – not just carnally. No other woman could serve as a substitute.

He sighed aloud. "Zahra, put your clothes back on."

Zahra stared at him a moment and then averted her eyes as she reached for her tunic. "Do I not please you, Pharaoh?" Her playful banter had been replaced with a hurtful tone.

"Yes," he admitted. "You are very pleasing to look upon."

"But, then why—"

"Because I wish you to go. You should not be here, and it is late. I will escort you to the door."

Zahra pulled her clothes on. She gave him curious, cautious looks, but held

her tongue. Amonmose's tone did not invite further questioning. He was, after all, the Pharaoh, and no matter what intimacies they shared, his command was law.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes. "Zahra, someday you will make a fine nobleman's wife. You are very desirable, very alluring, and obviously very smart. Any man would consider himself fortunate to find these qualities in a woman. But my heart is elsewhere," he said.

"Be careful," she replied, smiling. "Hearts can be broken."

He returned her smile as he opened the door to his chambers. "If that happens, I know the perfect woman to mend it."

In response, Zahra put her arms around his neck and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

A loud gasp sounded from the hallway, and Amonmose turned to see Kama, staring. She and Zahra eyed each other like two cats ready to scratch each other's eyes out.

Amonmose cleared his throat. "Shu, please escort Zahra out of the palace."

Without hesitation, Shu motioned for Zahra to follow him. As she walked past, Kama gave her a fierce glare, which was returned with a haughty look. Their eyes remained locked until Zahra disappeared down a hall. Rage clouded Kama's face, and she turned on Amonmose, her dark eyes blazing with contempt. Her gaze roamed the length of his long kilt, stained with wine. Her voice dripped with

venom.

“I see archery is not the only sport in which you excel, Pharaoh.”

Amonmose watched her, drinking in the sight of her so close, so long denied. She wore only her dressing robe, which appeared to be hastily belted at the waist. Her hair was loose, her long braids cascading down her back. The mere sight of her made his body react instantly.

“There are some sports I have not yet mastered, Kama.”

She fearlessly pushed past him and entered his room. “I hardly consider it a sport to see how fast you can spread your seed.”

Her tone bordered on insolence. He would have had any other person executed for such treason. Baal discretely closed the doors to give them privacy.

Amonmose grabbed her by both arms. “I see my absence has done nothing to soften your sharp tongue, woman.” She tried to wiggle from his grasp, but his grip was like steel. “Zahra came here of her own free will. Nothing happened between us, despite her efforts. I was escorting her out when you arrived.”

She glared at him. “Escorting her out? To the garden, perhaps, where you serve your best seductions?”

“Never, because I do not want her.”

“Liar! Your lips say one thing but your actions speak another! If I had arrived a moment later, you would have been showing her your royal *treasures!*”

Amonmose pulled her into his arms and gazed into her eyes, his hands at her back pressing their bodies close. “I told you there is no other for me. You are the woman I desire. You are the woman who fills my dreams at night and dominates my thoughts through the day. I am consumed by you. Only you.” His tone softened. “Please, listen to reason, Kama. She came here to offer herself to me, but I refused. I want you and no one else.” He moved his hands tenderly up her back. “I have been miserable without you.”

As Kama listened, the heat of Amonmose’s arms burning around her, she felt her bottom lip tremble, her defiance crack. How she had longed for him to hold her like this again. She missed his touch, his smell, his gaze. “Why didn’t you come to see me?” she asked. “Where were you all those days?”

He lifted a hand and softly caressed her cheek. “In the garden that day, I behaved insensitively. When you ran off, I thought I had lost you forever. I wanted to give you some time before coming to you.” He closed his eyes momentarily, then looked at her with a sadness she’d never seen before. “I was afraid that you would reject me again, and I simply could not bear that. Especially not after what we shared. But it was a mistake to wait. I should have come to you immediately.”

A lone tear fell from her watery eyes. “I thought it was *you* who no longer wanted *me*. I had been willing to give myself, and then when you... I thought... Then

I saw you with that woman..."

He wiped the tear from her cheek. "Zahra cannot compare to you, Kama. No woman can." He kissed her, softly at first, his lips gently nibbling the corners of hers, coaxing her to open up to him. When his tongue tasted the sweetness of her mouth, his kiss became deeper, as if he could not get enough of her.

Kama returned his kisses with a fervor of her own. She held him tightly, afraid this would all be a dream. She felt a familiar warmth spread across her body, the warmth that only he could inspire. She'd gone her entire life not knowing this feeling of bliss, and now she had a longing that only he could satisfy. Her touch was bold as she let her hands roam over his chest, his back, and his buttocks. His thick, corded muscles felt smooth and powerful, and she couldn't resist touching him everywhere.

Amonmose threaded his fingers through the thick mass of braids crowning her head. She responded with deep, urgent kisses, letting his mouth take command of hers.

With no words spoken, they communicated only by touch. The urgency of their passion reflected in their hurried kisses. Amonmose tugged at the belt on her robe before yanking it off in one swift movement. The finely spun garment spilled open, revealing her smooth dark skin. Kama watched as Amunrose stared at her naked body, his gaze traveling from the dark nipples of her full breasts down to

the dark curls of her womanhood. He pushed her garment from her shoulders and pulled her to his chest, claiming her lips with a passionate kiss.

Kama pressed her body against his, desperate to be as close as possible. She trembled with nervous anticipation as he swept her into his arms and carried her to his massive bed. She whimpered in protest as he laid her amongst the soft bed linens and left her briefly.

“Be patient, my love,” he said, amused.

Through her passion-filled gaze, Kama watched as he untied his kilt. She had already seen his well-muscled chest, his sculpted arms, and his brawny legs, but she was unprepared for what lay beneath his garment. His body was like a work of art, chiseled by a master craftsman. With his sinewy muscles and rugged build, he had a body any athlete would envy and any woman would desire. Every inch of his bronzed skin was sun-kissed.

Her eyes roamed from the hard lines of his chest to the firm planes of his abdomen. Her breath caught. As her eyes dropped lower, she tensed with alarm. He reminded her of the stallions running wild in the pastures back home. She wondered how something so large would fit inside her.

Amonmose eased himself back to her side, softly kissing her lips. “I promise you will feel nothing but pleasure,” he told her.

Kama returned his kiss, still fearful but also curious and excited. Her

tension eased as he placed butterfly kisses along the hollow of her throat. She closed her eyes and draped her arms around his neck, the tips of her fingers brushing against the carved muscles of his shoulders. She lost all reservations as he gently trailed kisses from her neck down to her chest, murmuring in delight as his lips touched each one of her breasts, teasing the delicate flesh with skillful strokes of his mouth.

She moaned deeply when he cupped both breasts and pressed them together so he could lovingly suckle each nipple. His tongue relentlessly flickered over each of the dark buds until they were hard pebbles in his warm mouth. Kama stroked his back with the palms of her hands, grounding herself to him. She weightless, her body wafting among the clouds. She savored every touch and kiss. She didn't want it to end, ever.

Amonmose reveled in Kama's cries of pleasure, and he swelled with pride because he, alone, was responsible for her rapture. Her caresses urged him on, made him want to immerse himself deep inside her and explode. But he could not. He'd promised to satisfy her, and earn the sweet nectar of her approval. Each gasp of delight was like music from finest harp. Each touch from her hands set him on fire. He wanted their first time together to be a memory that Kama would never forget.

With the tenderest of touches, he pressed kisses along her stomach and navel. Her smooth skin was warm and delicate against his lips, and he took his time gently nibbling and teasing her flesh. His strong fingers momentarily caressed her flat abdomen then dipped below to the blackberry patch between her legs. He heard Kama's gasp of pleasure as his hands parted her thighs and gently caressed the bud of her womanhood. His fingers danced in a circular motion, creating an erotic rhythm.

"Tell me you love me, Kama," he whispered softly. "Tell me you are mine." He slipped a finger into her sweet wetness and began softly thrusting it back and forth.

Kama arched her hips in response, tightly closing on his finger. "Tell me," he said again, softly kissing her parted lips as he continued stroking her. "Tell me you love me."

Kama reeled from his touch, a blazing heat soaring through her. She would have agreed to anything to keep him there, keep him moving. "Yes...yes," she gasped. "I love you!"

Even though the words came forth unwittingly, she knew she meant them. He must have as well, because his pace quickened, fingers slid deeper. Kama surrendered to the thrusts and felt the storm building inside her. Screaming, she

succumbed to the tempest as her body exploded in wild delirium.

Amonmose spread her silky thighs wider and lowered himself onto her ripe body. She felt his member throbbing between the heat of their bodies.

“Kama, I need you,” he said huskily, grabbing her hips possessively.

She felt him smoothly thrust himself inside her. She cried out in pain and pleasure and clung to him as his deep strokes rhythmically rocked her body. She resisted, anticipating and fighting the pain, but her resistance melted as his teasing movements coaxed her to open again like a flower receiving its first rays of sunshine.

Kama felt the stirrings of white-hot pleasure as his thrusts became longer and more rhythmic. This was her first time with a man, yet she instinctively followed Amunmose’s lead. Even unpracticed, she started to catch his movements and soon undulated her hips, matching him thrust for thrust.

Amunmose’s deep groans filled the air. He grabbed handfuls of her hair as he pushed himself deeper, faster, harder into her. Flames of desire snaked through her as her whole body blazed with an intense heat, shook with a mounting pressure. The pressure peaked, and she erupted, a tidal wave of ecstasy consuming her body with a sweet warmth.

Immediately after, she felt Amunmose’s final deep thrusts. Then, his body shuddered against hers, finally collapsing exhausted atop her.

Afterwards, they lay breathless in each other's arms. Amonmose was covered in a thin sheen of sweat, his heart thundering, but slowing with each breath. He held Kama tightly against his chest and kissed her softly on her cheeks and brow.

"I am sorry, my love," he whispered. "I did not realize it was your first time."

She looked up at him with surprise. "How did you know?"

"A man can tell if a woman is experienced," he said gently.

She lowered her lashes in shame. "I lied that day of the hunt. I'd hoped by telling you I was not a woman of virtue, I could deter your advances."

He hugged her closer and spoke into her braided hair. "You truly have no knowledge of men. Nothing short of you growing a horn in your forehead would have stopped me from wanting you."

She smiled. "I admit I still have much to learn. Is it like this each time?"

He caressed her cheek. "I am told a woman's first time usually hurts. But the next time will be even better for you."

She shook her head. "Not the pain. I wondered...is it always so beautiful when a man and a woman join? Will I always experience such...enjoyment?"

Amonmose propped himself up on one elbow and gazed at her. "When a man is sure of himself and experienced in lovemaking, there is no limit to the

pleasure he can give a woman.”

Kama lowered her eyes again. “And what of a woman? How can she pleasure a man?”

Amonmose raised her chin with a finger, forcing her to look at him. “I am consumed by you, Kama. You occupy my thoughts morning, noon, and night. You need only look at me and I am instantly pleased.”

She moved closer and pulled him into a tender kiss. “I, too, have thought of nothing but you. This feels like a dream.”

“We are kindred spirits, because I have had dreams about you as well.” He grinned lasciviously and settled his hand on her hip. “About doing wickedly delicious things to you.”

Kama smiled playfully. “Show me. I want to know everything about lovemaking.”

Amonmose rocked back, laughing, and quickly moved in for a kiss, lest Kama take offense. “There are many more positions that will give you pleasure, my love.” He stroked her cheek. “I am afraid you are not ready to master those techniques yet, but once you are more experienced, we will try them all.” He smiled at her. “Be patient, my beauty, and I will teach you.”

Her black eyes sparkled like diamonds. “I promise you will not find a more willing pupil.”



The next few weeks passed like a whirlwind for Kama. She and Amonmose stayed in his chambers all day, locked in each other's passionate embrace. At night, they took long walks in the garden and replenished their bodies with wine and food. Amonmose read poetry to Kama and taught her how to swim. Kama told him stories about her childhood and played the lute for him.

Amonmose was a thoughtful and gentle lover. He made love to her with a tenderness that betrayed his true strength. Each time their bodies joined, Kama experienced an unexplained rapture that only he seemed able to bestow. He learned every intimate detail of her body. Since their first encounter, he'd kissed every inch of her skin, even the backs of her knees, the crooks of her elbows, and the bends of her wrists. The anticipation of what he would do to her each day sent shivers up her spine.

Once, when one of Amonmose's servants came to change the bed linens, Kama hid behind the long drapes, hoping the old woman would not notice her, or worse, look at her with knowing eyes. Amonmose chuckled as he slid behind the drapes after her. "Kama, there is no need to worry what an old servant will think. The only opinions you need be concerned with are our own."

Amonmose was Pharaoh, his opinion law. And if he would show no shame, then neither would she. Kama lost herself in Amonmose's world, and in time, she

forgot about Kerma and the family that had been torn from her. Her life was at the palace, and she was content to be the perfect companion for the Pharaoh.

Chapter Ten

Amonmose patted his dog on the head and rubbed it behind its pointed ears. He had three others, but none so fine as this pure bred, Ibizan hound, with narrow flanks, a short curled tail, and a coat white as the moon. As he walked, the animal easily kept pace with him, its elegant gait matching the Pharaoh's majestic stride. Something about its bearing reminded him of Kama.

He smiled, thinking over their recent weeks together. She was everything he thought a woman should be. Sensuous. Kind. Beautiful. Smart. None of the females he'd been with in the past could compare with her. In fact, no one in his palace could compare with her. She was honest and genuine. She was fierce and independent. She was uncompromising.

When he asked for her opinion, she gave it freely, not caring if she risked his displeasure. When she wanted something, she simply asked, without the application of feminine wiles and manipulation. It was, all of it, refreshing.

For a fortnight, he'd secluded himself in her company. But, duty called, and Nadesh kindly advised that the Pharaoh hold court today.

Reluctantly, Amonmose had left Kama this morning while she slept. She was lying on her stomach, with the tempting rise of her backside peeping from

beneath the bed linens. He dressed quietly, not wanting to disrupt her deep slumber, his manhood nevertheless demanded to be sated by her body once more. He stared at her, resting and at peace, and decided to let her be. Before leaving, he kissed the delicate slopes of her shoulders and gave instructions to Shu that no one was to wake her.

When Amonmose walked into the audience chamber to hold his long neglected meeting, he was met by an abundance of guests. He'd hoped to quickly handle business and then return to Kama, but it was clear the day would be long. Several foreign ambassadors were there offering tributes, and the slow dance of diplomacy began. These ambassadors were trying to build relationships, secure military loyalties, and have access to greater trade resources. As Pharaoh for over twenty years, he'd seen every type of gift imaginable, from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Once, a foreign prince presented him with a talking bird. He was greatly amused by its ability to mimic any voice, but Nadesh considered the creature a danger to the security of the kingdom. The bird was hardly an enemy of the state, but since it was capable of repeating everything that was said, it was summarily disposed of as Nadesh requested. Today's offerings were tame by comparison. But still, as a precaution, Baal stood by his side, prepared for any surprises.

Hours later, the commoners and dignitaries filed out, and Amonmose was alone with his advisors. Meketen and Hai launched into detailed reports on each of their areas of responsibility, while Nadesh brooded quietly. Amonmose watched him scowl at the floor throughout the long meeting.

“Nadesh,” Amonmose said, more loudly than necessary.

His grand vizier jerked his gaze up.

“I would be interested in buying some horses from Zahra. Could you see to it?”

Nadesh’s dark eyes sparkled with interest. “I’ll arrange for her to visit you immediately.”

“No, no.” Amonmose raised a hand. “You can take care of the details. The last time I saw Zahra, she wanted to offer me more than just horses.”

Hai and Meketen laughed, but Nadesh pursed his lips into a reluctant smile. “As you wish.” The tightness of his features betrayed an inner turmoil, one that Amonmose could ascribe only to Zahra’s ill-fated visit. There was no mention of the night Zahra appeared in his chambers, but Amunmose felt certain Nadesh was aware of it.

When Amonmose arrived back at his chambers, he found them empty. He could still smell Kama’s essence lingering in the air. It was a soft, feminine scent he

couldn't explain only recognized and loved. Amonmose removed his head-cloth and placed it on his dressing table, setting aside with it the rest of a pharaoh's formalities.

Walking into the bedchamber, he noticed the bed linens were still rumpled and smiled to himself. Kama slept as wildly as she lived, tossing and turning in the night. Many times she started on one side of the bed and ended up on the other by morning. He slept like a mummy in a coffin. Was there ever so mismatched a pair? As he approached the bed, Amonmose saw a note set on one of the pillows.

Meet me in a secret place—where life begins anew and grows without the rain. Find me if you can. I promise the fruits of your labor will not be in vain.

He grinned widely. Of course, she was in the garden. He quickly folded the parchment and left his chambers in search of her, Baal dogging his heels every step of the way.

When Amonmose reached the corridor that led to the garden, he found Kama's bodyguard at the entrance watching vigilantly.

Shu bowed. "Greetings, Pharaoh. Lady Kama insisted upon being alone, but I kept watch here to make sure no one else entered."

"Excellent. I rest easily when I know you are with her."

Shu bowed again as Baal came to stand by his side. "We will await your return, Sire."

“There is no need,” Amonmose said. “Both of you are dismissed for the night.”

Baal protested. “But Sire—”

“Goodnight, Baal,” Amonmose said as he disappeared into the dark tunnel that led to garden. He had not meant to be so abrupt, but neither did he wish to explain himself. Kama would be mortified if she knew both guards were waiting for them. She was so private. She would not want anyone to suspect what they were doing.

Amonmose stepped into the garden and was submerged in fragrance. The smell of the delicate blooms filled his nostrils, and he grew heated thinking of the last time he was here with Kama.

At his feet, he noticed a trail of blue lotus flowers that glowed eerily in the incandescent light of the moon. He followed the path Kama had deliberately left for him, moving deep into the dense garden. He was surrounded by darkness except for the soft glow of the moon lighting the flowers on his path.

Abruptly, the trail ended, and he found himself in front of a clear pool of water. His breath caught. There was Kama, bathing. When she stood up, rivulets of water streamed down her curvaceous form. The moonlight danced sweetly upon her body, its soft beams illuminating her shoulders and her breasts.

She held out her arms to him. “You found me.” She smiled coyly.

Amonmose walked fully clothed into the shallow pool, heedless of the cool water soaking his tunic. He pulled her naked body against his. “You left a trail for me,” he said. “It was too easy. I wanted to hunt for you, like a warrior stalking his prey.”

“I am sorry to disappoint you,” she whispered.

“You could never disappoint me.” He nuzzled her neck and took long, deep breaths.

Kama shivered. No matter how many times she gave herself to Amonmose, she never grew tired of his soft caresses and his demanding kisses. She was infatuated by his power, amazed by his tenderness, and rendered helpless by his sexuality.

She ran her hands up and down the hard planes of his body. He had a short tunic on today, and she could feel the muscles of his well-toned legs pressing against her. She remembered the first time she saw him naked, the flash of fear that she would not be able to accommodate him. But he’d helped her conquer her fears, and each time they joined, the experience was more joyous than the last.

“Tell me your desire, Kama. Your wish is my command.”

She nudged him back and smiled mischievously. “I wish this tunic to disappear.”

Without hesitation, Amonmose pulled off the offending garment and cast it over his shoulder. He stood naked before her and she stared, mesmerized. “Your body is perfect,” she told him. “You are everything a man should be.”

He slid his hands to her cheeks, cupping her face, and kissed her. His kiss was strong and smoldering. She savored the taste of him. His daylong absence had seemed like an eternity. She missed his voice, his touch, and definitely his kisses. Kama returned the assault on her mouth with ardor, briefly pulling away to kiss the corners of his lips and the strong line of his jaw. She moved down, placing delicate kisses along the column of his strong throat. She let her mouth roam to his smooth, chiseled chest and innocently licked his flat nipples. He groaned with pleasure, and she secretly smiled. Each day she found something new that excited him.

Amonmose softly grabbed her braided locks and tilted her head back, forcing her to look at him. “Where did you learn that?” he playfully demanded.

His voice was thick with desire, and Kama shuddered. “That is my secret.” She laid her hands flat on his chest and gazed into his eyes with the fire of challenge. “Would you know my next desire?”

His lips twitched. “Always.”

“Make love to me.”

Amonmose made a sound deep in his throat and slid his arms around her.

He lifted her effortlessly and wrapped her legs around his waist. Kama clung with powerful thighs, and Amonmose carried her to the water's edge, where he gently laid her on the thick carpet of grass. With a hand, he spread her legs apart and eased himself on top of her, his manhood already hard with longing.

He captured her lips in a searing kiss, and Kama felt the familiar smoldering heat begin to spiral inside her. He could make her body bend to his will with just one stroke of his skillful tongue. As he nibbled at her lips, he moved in a slow sensual thrust. Kama gasped with delight and eagerly welcomed him inside. Instantly, she felt herself succumbing to his deep, erotic strokes.

Kama purred soft sounds of pleasure in his ear, and Amonmose shifted. He rolled , gently pulling her along with him, until their positions changed. She sat astride him and smiled down like a goddess waiting to be worshipped.

Kama began riding him with slow, undulating movements. Her pace was unhurried as her velvety walls stroked his hard member. Amonmose groaned with pleasure. As she arched her back and moved against him, he gently gripped her hips, his fingers digging softly into her delicate flesh.

Trapped between her soft thighs, Amonmose surrendered to her fully. Her wanton eagerness excited him, eager, and all too soon, he found himself responding to the molten heat building inside of him. His passion was like a run-

away horse, breaking free and galloping at full speed. He wanted this to be slow, so he could savor the feel of Kama's voluptuous body for just a few minutes more.

But she was relentless, pounding, grinding. She cried out, gripping his shoulder as they grew closer, shared the same heat. Amonmose thrust, urgently, reaching. Kama arched. They came together, shuddering and sighing. Kama pressed her hands against his chest as she breathed.

For the next few moments, they floated languidly, hanging on to the fading vestiges of ecstasy. Their breathing gradually returned to normal as their passions ebbed.

Amonmose breathed hoarsely in Kama's ear. "You are mine now and forever..."

In response, Kama wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. Surrounded by the fragrant aromas of the garden and bathed in the faint glow of the moonlight, their bodies lay entwined on the soft grass. Sated, they lay listening to each other's heartbeats until they both drifted off into a contented slumber.

Chapter Eleven

Kama awoke to the musical sound of birds announcing the birth of a new day. She stretched languidly, tangling herself in the cool bed linens. If she were a bird, she would soar across the sky all day and look down on the world with all its majestic sights. Then at night, she would return to the garden and rest amongst the beautiful, fragrant blooms.

She wrinkled her nose.

If she were a bird, she would never get to lie for hours in this soft bed. She would never feel tender caresses from Amonmose. She would never know the heated passion of their lovemaking. She smiled as she vaguely remembered him carrying her from the garden last night and placing her in his massive bed. He cradled her in his arms and snuggled her tightly, with his strong chest pressed against her back. She heard him whisper sweetly against the back of her neck. It all seemed like a dream. She was not sure what he said, but his lips felt warm and delicious against her skin, and she murmured a few sleepy words back to him.

Kama replayed the moment over and over again in her mind, trying to recall his exact words. She pressed her eyes shut and focused on the sound of his voice. Slowly, like a dense fog lifting, she started to remember. Something about taking a

journey. A journey? Why? To where?

Her eyes flew open, and she sat up, her hand reaching toward where Amonmose should be, but was not. Kama quickly scanned the room; it seemed so empty without him. Perhaps the journey was one he was taking alone. She sighed. She supposed she would have to get used to it.

Kama tossed the linens aside and got out of bed. She would not sit around moping all day. As she pulled on her dressing gown, she heard a knock at the door. When she opened it, she found Shu standing outside.

“Lady Kama, I have a message from Pharaoh Amonmose.”

Kama’s heart skipped a beat. “Yes?”

“He has taken leave for an important mission and he will return soon.”

That must have been what Amonmose was telling her last night when she was half asleep. “Do you know where he has gone?” she asked.

“He did not disclose his whereabouts to me,” Shu answered. “He only asked me to deliver the message.”

“When did he leave?”

“Early this morning, before the first rays of dawn.”

Kama tried to hide her disappointment, but somehow Shu must have read her mind.

“Do not worry,” Shu said gently. “I shall protect you. You are always safe

with me.”

Kama looked at Shu, and for the first time, she really noticed him. He was tall and thickset, with a bald head, as was the fashion. He was not nearly as handsome as Amonmose, but she did not expect him to be.

Shu’s dark skin was unblemished except for two strange branding marks on his left and right forearms. She had never thought to ask about them, about anything. She’d always seen him as reminder of her capture. But he had kind eyes, she saw now. And he was always there for her, always keeping vigil over her.

“Shu, how did you get those marks on your arms?” she inquired.

The gentle giant looked down at his brands with a mixture of pride and regret. “That is a long story, Lady Kama.”

Kama smiled. “Well, I have all day to listen. I am going to get dressed, and then you can tell me all about it while we’re out.”

“Out?”

“Yes.” Kama smiled cheerfully. “I think today is a fine day to visit the market, and I would be happy for you to escort me rather than be my shadow.”

Shu nodded with a faintly pleased expression. “Very well. Your wish is my command.”



Mutema carried a large basket of barely on her hip. Her day was just

beginning, and the work would last long into the night, but she had no complaints. Distraction was a blessing, and labor brought her the manageable pain of aching muscles.

In the past few months, she'd developed a resilience she did not know she had. When news of the fire and her family's death reached her, she cried day and night, bitter at the gods for taking her loved ones. She'd lost her daughter and the love of her life. She'd lost her heart from her chest..

She had not planned for life without Kama. No mother would expect to outlive her child. She'd tried so hard to protect her; she'd failed miserably. And now Kama would never know the joys of motherhood; the love of a good man; the confidence that comes with middle age; or the wisdom that accompanies old age.

With no bodies recovered, Mutema had even been denied the privilege of having a proper funeral procession. With no body to reside in, their *Ka* would be lost. Mutema prayed their souls would not be wandering the Underworld.

Now, she was alone in the world. She had nothing, save this house—for now. It was the house that Akahmen owned, and since he had no living heirs, the state would take it; now, it was only a matter of time before she was ousted. In a few short months, Mutema had grown thin, and her once glorious, dark mane of hair had turned into limp, white strands. Years doubled their appearance on her body. She spent her days making beer to sell and grieving over the death of her

family.

Mutema emptied her basket of barley into a large wooden vat and then began the arduous task of making a cooked malt. She mixed the barley with emmer wheat and water and then heated the mixture until it simmered. She worked slowly and methodically, stirring until the two grains were thoroughly blended. The whirling colors of gold and green melt into a muted brown. When she was satisfied with the resulting texture, she added her special recipe of yeast and uncooked malt. To distinguish her beer from other brewers, she flavored it with honey and various fruits. She sniffed deeply, breathing in the heady aroma. It was often said that wine was the ambrosia of the gods. That could be, but beer was the nectar that fueled the common man.

As she worked in her small kitchen, she heard someone calling her name.

“Mutema, are you there?”

The voice belonged to one of her neighbors. “I am in the kitchen,” she replied.

Seconds later, her neighbor, a plump older woman, appeared. She was out of breath and flushed. “Mutema, there are three men waiting outside for you.”

“Oh pity. This batch of beer will not be ready for days. I do not think I have enough from the last batch to sell. I wonder how much they require.”

Her neighbor placed a hand on her arm to halt her. “I do not think it is beer

they want. They look like soldiers.”

Mutema looked confused for a moment, and then her shoulders sagged. The magistrate had finally sent someone to remove her from the property. She breathed deeply and steeled herself for the inevitable. “I shall see to them. I may need to rely on your kindness for somewhere to lay my head tonight,” she added.

“Of course.” Her neighbor gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. “You are always welcome in my home.”

Mutema gathered her courage. She had survived the loss of her only child and endured the trauma of losing the only man she’d ever loved. She’d escaped poverty and an abusive husband. What more could the gods do to her? They had taken everything but the very air she breathed. In this absence, from this place of emptiness, she found there was nothing left in the world for her to fear.

She emerged from the cool interior of her house into the bright sunlight to find three soldiers on horseback waiting outside. Instead of wearing the traditional Nubian loincloths, they wore short white tunics knotted at the waist—the apparel of the Egyptians. But from constant interaction, many Nubians had adopted that style of dress. Mutema still preferred the handsome animal skins and rich textile patterns Nubia was known for.

One of the soldiers nudged his horse forward. “You are Mutema Nubemheb?”

Not trusting herself to speak, she merely nodded.

“Your presence is requested,” he told her matter-of-factly. “You may ride with me.” He extended his large, callused hand.

The soldier’s horse snorted loudly and stamped one of its hooves impatiently. Mutema gasped and scurried back. She’d never ridden a horse before. In fact, the only horses she’d seen had been securely attached to chariots, and from a distance they appeared a great deal smaller than this one. Almost everyone traveled by donkey or on foot, unless they were nobility and had the good fortune of owning a litter.

There was a time when Mutema might have accepted the challenge of riding a horse. It would have been an adventure. But those times were long gone, and even though her spirit was still strong, her bones were not.

“I shall walk,” she said, turning her nose up.

The soldiers offered no objection, and she willingly followed them as they kept a deliberately slow pace. She had no idea where they were taking her, and she did not ask. From the stony looks on their faces, they probably would not have told her anyway.

The midday sun had barely peaked when the soldiers led Mutema into an encampment outside the city. Dozens of soldiers were engaged in various tasks around a half dozen tents. Mutema watched their movements warily as she

followed the mounted soldiers. They came to a stop in front of the last white tent. One of the soldiers pulled the large flap of the tent aside and disappeared within.

He reappeared moments later and held the flap open for her. “You may enter now.” He waited as she passed through and then rejoined his companions.

Mutema did not understand. She’d assumed she would be brought to court, but she knew the moment she left her home, the soldiers were taking her elsewhere. She’d made no protest as she followed them through the city and to the edge of the forest where their tents were hidden. But she now worried for her safety.

She entered the dimly lit tent and stood hesitantly, waiting for her eyes to become accustomed to the darkness. From the outside, the tent appeared to be quickly assembled, but the furnishings inside bespoke a certain elegance. There were beautifully handcrafted rugs on the ground; a small table supporting a gold bowl heavily laden with fruit; a silver wine decanter with matching goblets; and a pallet of exotic animal skins atop a makeshift bed in the corner. The unmistakable odor of myrrh incense permeated the air. She knew one thing for certain. The occupant of this tent was accustomed to the finer things in life.



Amonmose sat in the comfort of his tent, enjoying a rare moment of relief from the oppressive heat. He longed for a cool bath in his massive tub, but the

nature of his mission did not lend itself to luxurious accommodations. Days ago, he'd left the palace early, while the first colors of dawn peeked through the tapestry of the morning sky. He took a secret entourage with him, which included Baal, thirty soldiers, and two tracking guides. They'd been riding hard, virtually nonstop ever since.

He sent a messenger back to inform his advisors of his whereabouts, but he'd told no one of his purpose, not even his beloved Kama. When he'd left her almost a week ago, she had been slumbering so deeply she had not stirred when he left.

He'd briefly considered making love to her one last time, but the sound of her slow, contented breathing convinced him otherwise. He drank in his fill of her image alone, her flawless skin and curvaceous body half-buried in the sheets. The memory would have to be enough to sustain him until he got back. She would be confused by his absence and hurt that he had not said goodbye, but it was a risk worth taking.

In the few months he'd known Kama, they'd shared more than just carnal desires. She'd told him of her life from before, and this was how he'd learned where to find her mother, Mutema. As soon as the woman entered his tent, he saw her sharp eyes survey her surroundings. She was small, with a cloud of long, white cloaking her shoulders. Upon first glance, he thought her to be an old woman, but

then he saw her young face and the same noble bearing that Kama possessed. Her dramatically high cheekbones were accented with red ochre. And black kohl liberally lined the rims of her sparkling, dark eyes. She was exquisite in every way, standing defiantly beside the entrance of the tent. Is this what his beautiful Kama would look like when she got older?

Mutema was dressed in traditional Nubian garments, a long, leather sheath that extended to her ankles, with elaborate beadwork bordering the edges. The necklace she wore was fashioned from dyed cowrie shells, and it draped around her neck no less than six times, with the longest strand dangling above her waist.

“Mutema, how is it that you have stark white hair, yet your face is so youthful?” Amonmose asked.

A shadow crossed her strong features. “Because I have been dealt a great tragedy, suffered a loss no mother should know. All that I had is dead, and each day is a struggle.”

The Pharaoh’s heart tightened in his chest. He was the reason for her misfortune; his orders had brought tragedy upon her house. But there was no changing the past or erasing the pains of loss. He could, however, certainly control the future. He’d brought foreign dignitaries to their knees, forced nations to surrender to his mighty army, and doubled the size of his kingdom’s coffers. If he was capable of doing all of this, surely he could make one woman happy.

“I am sorry for the hardship you have endured,” he said.

Her eyes narrowed. “My suffering has been compounded by your attempts to cast me from the home I have known for years.”

Amonmose frowned. “I’ve no desire to do such a thing.”

Her face clouded with confusion, and she pieced her words together slowly. “You dress as a nobleman...yet, the gold pectoral you wear is encrusted with the most brilliant turquoise I’ve ever seen. A magistrate would not possess such jewelry.”

He was traveling in disguise, dressed like a member of the nobility to avoid drawing attention to himself. Kerma was powerful in its own right, so he was not leaving anything to chance. He camped outside the gates of the main city and sent his scouts to make inquiries in the city. If Amonmose or any of his men were caught here, it was certain death. “I am not a magistrate and I have not called you here to force you from your home.”

“You stand like a man with the world at his command. Who are you?” she demanded.

If the situation were not so serious, he might have laughed. Mutema spoke in a confident and direct manner, much like her daughter. “I am a man of great importance,” he told her.

She eyed him warily. “You obviously know my name, and your soldiers

knew where I lived. So, if you are not here to evict me, what business have you with me?”

“I have traveled a great distance to find you and give you an important piece of news.”

She motioned to the objects in his tent. “You are someone of considerable wealth. Our worlds are far apart. What news could you have that would interest me?”

“Our worlds are not so far apart as you might think. In fact, we have something in common. I know your daughter, Kama. And I am here to tell you that she is alive and well.”

Chapter Twelve

Mutema's eyes narrowed. "You bring me here to spout cruelty? My troubles are abysmal, yet you dare to jest. What kind of creature are you?"

Amonmose had expected joy, gratitude . "I assure you, there is no intention of humor or malice on my part," he said. "I speak the truth."

Mutema digested this information slowly. "I was told...my child perished in a fire," she said. "I have resigned myself to this. And now, you come bearing rumors that she is alive?"

"It is no rumor. I can tell you for certain that she is not dead."

Mutema's heart skipped erratically as she battled to contain her emotions. Kama...alive? Could it be true? "How can you attest to such a fact?" she asked.

Amonmose motioned for her to sit down on one of the stools, and he sat across from her. "I know she is alive because I am the one who rescued her from the fire."

Mutema sagged with relief. The seed of hope that had taken root now sprouted wildly inside her. Kama was alive. Her sweet child was alive! She put her head in her hands and wept quietly. "I never...I thought..." she wiped her tears and clasped his hands. "Thank you for bringing this news. May the gods bless

you!”

“But”— he paused, giving her the feeling that she would not like what next came from his lips. “I am also the one who started the fire.”

She squeezed his fingers, as if that could steel her against the shock. Then, she slowly pulled away. “I heard of a great and powerful army that swept through the night and turned the village into a blazing inferno,” she said. “If that fire had not occurred on that particular night, my family would be alive today.” She drew back from him further as her understanding dawned. “You are...”

“I am Pharaoh Amonmose Tehutimes, ruler of Egypt.”

Anguish tore at her heart. “You are the man responsible for my family’s death. And now, you are telling me that Kama is alive?”

“I realize how great your pain is—”

“No!” she hissed. “You cannot! You cannot know a mother’s pain. You cannot know the feeling of confronting the very monster who is the cause of my misery.” Her eyes glistened with tears and she leaned toward him, her voice shaking with hurt and rage. “I want to claw your eyes out. I want to bury a dagger in your chest.”

Amonmose took a deep breath. “Mutema, I do not blame you for the way you feel. You say I don’t understand your pain – but I do. I too, have lost family. I did what I did for Egypt. I was protecting my citizens.”

Mutema stared at him a long time, then stood up and walked away, putting distance between them. “I forget myself. You are Pharaoh of Egypt; the closest thing to a god.” She glanced around, fear creeping into her heart. “You could have me killed for my disrespect. We’re at the edge of the city, and no one can hear me scream.”

“I mean you no harm, Mutema. I am not a monster. I came only to tell you that Kama has been in my palace at Thebes. She has adjusted quite well, and all of her needs are being provided for. She is safe there, and no harm will come to her while I am away.”

She nodded slowly, still in disbelief at this news.

“I see so much of her likeness in you,” he added.

Mutema sat back down, smoothing out her clothes. “My hair was once dark and thick like Kama’s,” she explained. “But it turned white when I learned of her death. She was my only child. She was beauty and strength and vivaciousness. She was everything to me, and my world was darkness when I learned I would never lay eyes on her again.

“Her uncle was a good man, a pious man, devoted to his gods and his family. He took us in and gave unselfishly of his time and his home.” She shook her head sadly and then made sure to catch his gaze. “His daughter, Satati, was a mere child, planning to be married the very next day. And even though I did not agree with the

marriage, I knew Akahmen did what was best for our family. I argued with him the day he journeyed to Aswan, but I'd promised myself that when he returned, we would put our differences aside and forgive each other. We always did."

A lone tear rolled slowly down her cheek. She felt weary from this discourse. It was all so unreal. "And then, this tragedy. A tragedy you caused. I never had the chance to tell Akahmen that I forgave him. He went to his death believing I was angry with him. You, Pharaoh of Egypt, took away all that I loved."

Amonmose was silent for a moment, a sympathetic pain squeezing in his chest. "I am sorry for the pain and profound sorrow I have caused you. I take full responsibility for the fire. I ordered it on the recommendation of my advisors, who assured me there was an uprising. These things are done in war. But, if I had the chance to do it again, I may have done things differently."

He would never have met Kama if he had done things differently. Someone, it seemed, must always suffer. Amonmose took Mutema's slender hand in his own. "I cannot change what happened. Satati and Akahmen are dead, but Kama is still alive, and I have come to bring you back to Thebes."

She looked at him with moist eyes. "Why?"

"To be with your daughter, of course."

"Can you not simply free her and give her leave to come home?"

Amonmose stood up and stepped away. He had not expected Mutema to ask so many questions; he supposed he should have. "I cannot answer that."

Mutema's voice did not waver. "Cannot or will not?"

The inquiry was spoken innocently enough, but Amonmose saw the spark of anger in Mutema's eyes. This was indeed Kama's mother. "I came here of my own accord to give you the news of your daughter's good health. She has no clue that I am here, risking my own death to find you. I'd hoped you would agree to return with me and be reunited with the child you claim you love so dearly. It would mean her utter happiness to see you. So, I ask you again, will you return to Thebes with me?"

They were wasting time. He needed to get the camp dismantled and out of enemy territory as soon as possible.

"You have risked your life and the lives of your countrymen, all for the sake of a woman?" Mutema asked. "This seems strange to me. Almost as strange as saving her from a burning village and spiriting her away to your palace. I cannot help but wonder...is she being held captive? Is she your paramour?"

Amonmose did not hide his shock. "No! I have no need of a harem." He lifted his head. "I can have any woman I desire."

Mutema arched a curious eyebrow. "I do not doubt you've seduced your fair share of maidens. But Kama is different from most women."

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I could not agree more.”

“So, if she is free to leave, why didn’t you send her home to me?”

Amonmose sighed impatiently. “It would have been too dangerous for her to travel alone.”

“You could have provided an escort or a guard. She is Nubian; she would be safe once she passed your borders.”

“No woman is safe traveling so far,” he said. “Especially someone as ravishing as Kama.”

Mutema smirked. “So you admit, you find her beautiful?”

He gave her a sideways glance. “A man would have to be a blinded in both eyes not to.”

Mutema cast him a suspicious look. “You could have brought her with you, returned her to me. Instead, you force her to stay with you, with the man who killed her family. Have you not done enough? Do you think I am a fool? You have her confined to your palace, at your mercy, no doubt forcing yourself—”

“No!” Amonmose bellowed, surprising them both. He threw his hands in the air. “You are the very embodiment of your daughter, always pushing, digging for answers, trying to make me justify my actions. Kama is not my slave. She is not my concubine. I would never force her to do anything. She is more to me than a pretty face, old woman. She is captivating and intelligent and funny and gracious and

honorable. She has a strength that I admire, candor that I appreciate, and integrity that I treasure.

“Yes, she warms my bed, but only because she wants to. She is my soul mate, my confidante. And I cannot and will not part with her.”

Mutema stood, open-mouthed. “You love her, don’t you?” she asked.

They were alone in the tent, so there was no need for secrets. “Yes,” he said. “I love her.” He began to pace back and forth slowly. “The night of the fire, I could not take my eyes off her. She fought my men like a wildcat, and I’d never seen that quality in a woman before. It piqued my interest. So, I took her away as a captive, but it is *she* who has stolen *my* heart.” He gave Mutema a challenging look. “I love her and I will not be without her. I came to find you and bring you back so she will never think of leaving. If you want to come with me, I think it will make us all very happy. But if you will not, nothing has changed. I will not surrender her.”

Mutema’s gaze scoured him up and down “I admire your honesty,” she said. “And I can see that you truly are taken with her. I, too, only want happiness for my daughter. I will accompany you to Thebes, Pharaoh.”

He let out a breath he hadn’t meant to be holding. “Thank you.” Amonmose clasped her tiny hands in his. He breathed deeply and let out a nervous laugh.

“What do you find so humorous?” Mutema asked.

“Of all the wars I have fought and all the enemies I have faced, I do not think

I have met two worthier adversaries than you and Kama.”

Mutema smiled, revealing her perfect white teeth. “Just be grateful that we are both on your side,” she said. “For no matter how mighty a man is, no defense can help him in the battle against a woman’s contempt.”

Amonmose merely smiled.

Chapter Thirteen

Nadesh presided over the second stage of the foundation ceremony. His long, slender fingers passed a bowl of incense to the high priest, who in turn placed the bowl on the temple's offering table. The table was laden with flowers and elaborate garlands meant to symbolize growth and renewal. Several lower-ranking priests calmly waved fans, spreading the scent of the incense. Before entering the temple, the priests had purified themselves in water and then shaved their bodies from head to toe. They left no hair untouched, from ankle to eyebrow.

In addition to their rituals of purity, the priests were devoted scholars. They had to be familiar with every ceremony. They had to know each step, each movement, each song, and each prayer associated with all the temple rituals. They had to be intimately familiar with every god and goddess, knowing what pleased each one and what did not. They had to be prepared for any occasion, any shift in the public attitude, any change in the whim of the Pharaoh.

Nadesh watched them carefully as they carried out the precise steps for today's ceremony. The foundation ceremony was a critical step in the building process for a new temple. As each stage of construction was completed, it was blessed with a ceremony. Many things could go wrong during building: accidents,

deaths, weather delays. So far, no men had been killed on this project, and everything was in budget and on schedule.

Nadesh's face showed no sign of emotion as he fulfilled his duties. *Duties that Amonmose should be doing, instead of traipsing about the countryside putting his life in jeopardy.* The nerve! Sending some young upstart with a note telling him of his whereabouts. There was a time when Amonmose did not make a move without consulting his grand vizier. But Amonmose no longer wanted or needed his advice. He had a new confidante, and he'd made it clear that anyone who did not approve of Kama would be looked upon as a traitor. There was nothing Nadesh could do but bide his time. He'd outlasted every woman Amonmose had fancied, and, eventually, he would outlast Kama as well.

Nadesh lit a candle and started chanting the required incantations, his deep voice filling the air. He was ill and would rather spend his time laying in the comfort of his bed, with his two wives taking turns feeding him soothing honey beer.

The only good thing about Amonmose's absence was that no one had to see him flaunting his Nubian trophy. Kama kept to herself and quietly awaited Amonmose's return. For this, Nadesh was happy. Each time he saw her, he thought of the night in Aswan where she made his manhood rigid with raw desire. The lust was incomparable. He'd procured the talents of a prostitute, who did

things his wives would not dream of doing. But days later, a horrible burning threatened to eat his body alive. The whore had given him a disease that made his loins burn like fire.. He'd tried to track her down, but she was nowhere to be found. If he laid eyes on that slut again, he'd have her skinned alive. ...

The sound of a tambourine filled the air, signaling the end of the ceremony. Nadesh watched as a royal scribe chronicled the event. When he stopped, they were all free to go.

Nadesh had already spoken with Hai and Meketen, and they all agreed that a radical solution was needed to get their pharaoh back on track. They had all known him since his birth and seen him through the death of his parents. They'd helped him rebuild a failing dynasty and restore the kingdom to the magnificence of its past. Amonmose's reputation and legacy weren't the only ones at stake. They had all become powerful men, and they would do anything to keep that power. Anything.



Kama watched the small fingers of her teacher expertly pluck the strings of the lyre. The sweet melody that flowed from each cord floated through the air and wrapped itself around her like a warm breeze. She closed her eyes, momentarily hypnotized.

“No, no, no!” she heard a voice call out. The notes ceased, and she was

abruptly pulled from her reverie. “Kama, how can you learn how to play with your eyes closed?”

Kama gave an apologetic look. “I beg your pardon, Dyzet. You play so beautifully, it is hard to focus on the lesson.”

Dyzet smiled at the flattery. “Thank you. But if you want me to teach you, you really must pay attention to what I’m doing. Watch my hands.”

Kama willed herself to concentrate. These past two weeks, she’d done everything she could think of to pass the time and distract herself from thoughts of Amonmose. She watched as Dyzet softly caressed each string on the lyre.

“Kama, do you see how I place my second finger on this string and my third finger here? Now, you try.”

Kama played the very same chords, but her strained tune was the opposite of the Dyzet’s heavenly melody.

“Ugh.” Dyzet winced. “It sounds like two owls having a screeching contest.”

Both women laughed. “Your lyre is obviously better than mine,” Kama said.

“They are identical. You are simply not trying hard enough. I think perhaps your focus is elsewhere.”

Kama blushed. “Am I so transparent?”

Dyzet grinned. “Yes, but who can blame you? I wish I had the attention of a handsome man who adored me.”

Kama laughed with delight. “You’ve lifted my spirits, Dyzet. I think I am ready to continue our lesson,” she declared. “The owls shouldn’t be allowed to have all the fun!”

“Oh no. I think you have tortured my ears enough! Let us try again on the morrow. And next time,” she said, “I want you to put your heart into it.”

“You have my promise.”

Dyzet stood up and placed her lyre aside. “Speaking of promises, I told father I would help him with the maps today. I must take my leave.” She pecked Kama on the cheek. “I shall see you on the morrow.”

Kama yawned as she watched Dyzet leave. She had tossed and turned in bed last night, and today, her body was reminding her. She retreated to Amonmose’s chambers for a nap.

When she arrived at the private chambers that she and Amonmose now shared, she noticed the drapes were pulled back, letting the warm afternoon sun bathe the room in its brilliant glow. When she had left this morning, the drapes had been closed.

Something fluttering on the floor caught Kama’s eye. A gentle wind from the window pushed a tiny, white lotus flower along the floor. It tumbled into another and then another, and Kama realized a trail of petals beckoned her to the bedroom

suite. Tentatively, she followed the path, her heart racing in anticipation. She stopped dead. There, lying comfortably on the bed was the object of her affection. He lounged on his back, legs crossed at his ankles and his hands clasped behind his head.

She let out a yelp of delight.

“Gods be praised, you are a sight for weary eyes,” he said.

Kama ran to him and jumped on the bed, pressing kisses all over his face and throat. Amonmose wrapped her in his arms and claimed her lips with a long, slow kiss. He ran his hands down the length of her form.

“I have missed you,” he murmured against her soft lips.

Kama felt herself yielding to his tender touch, a touch she had longed for. After leaving without so much as a goodbye, he was back in her arms—*wait!* She pulled away and pounded his chest with her fists.

“How dare you!” She scowled. “You think you can leave in the middle of the night with no word and return here expecting me to fall into your arms? What kind of woman do you think I am?” She sat up and glared at him.

Amonmose flashed her his famous arrogant smile. “I *know* what kind of woman you are. You are the kind of woman who inflamed my desire from the moment I laid eyes on you. You are the kind of woman who makes my heart thunder and my loins harden. You are the kind of woman who has caused me to

ride day and night to get back to you.” His look turned smoldering. “You are *my* woman.”

Kama’s pulse quickened, and she momentarily forgot her protests.

Amonmose caressed her bottom lip with his finger. “Did you miss me?”

“Yes,” she said. “But I am still angry with you for leaving without telling me.”

She crossed her arms in defiance.

He propped himself up on his elbows. “What if I told you that I was on an important mission, one that required total secrecy?”

“I would still be upset.” She pouted.

“And what if I told you I had to bring something back that I could entrust no one to retrieve but myself?”

“Not good enough.”

“Very well. But what if I could promise that you’d never be cross with me again once you found out what I have brought back for you?”

Her interest piqued. “I am listening.”

Abruptly, he stood up, pulling her with him. “Come with me, and I will show you.” She took his hand, and he swept her into his arms. “You will not be disappointed.”



Kama followed Amonmose from their bedchamber through the familiar

hallways of grandiose statues, majestic paintings, and regal carvings.. She knew this area of the palace better than any other and surmised where they were going. Amonmose, as she had guessed, stopped outside the door to her room.

“Why are we here?” Kama asked, confused.

“There is something in here I want you to see. It’s a secret, and I wanted you to be the first to know of it.”

Kama smiled. So, he had arranged for her room to be decorated? Perhaps he had returned with beautiful fabrics or some ornate furnishings? But why decorate her chambers when she was sharing his bed? Was he trying to tell her something?

Kama entered the room, expecting to be impressed by the new décor. She instead found herself looking into the eyes of a woman who bore an incredible resemblance to her mother. “What—what sorcery is this?” she asked, voice airy and unsteady. The specter had the same dark, kohl-lined eyes, the same long nose, and the same determined chin. Her hair, however, was white as the moon. Stunned, Kama stood rooted in place, her eyes wide.

The woman rushed to her and threw her arms around her, hugging her fiercely. “Daughter...” Her words choked off.

But it was her mother’s voice, and Kama began crying as she squeezed her back. “Mother.”

The woman nodded against her shoulder, and they sobbed in each other’s

arms, oblivious to anyone else in the room.

Mutema sniffled and pulled back, holding Kama at arm's length so she could see. "You have ripened as a woman since last I saw you. You glow, and your eyes shine brighter than a star."

"H-how did you find me?" Kama asked, still unable to stop her tears.

"I didn't. I...believed you were dead. Amonmose found *me*."

"But how—" Kama turned around, but Amonmose had disappeared from the room.

Mutema let her go and settled herself on Kama's old bed. She patted the space next to her. "Sit down," she said, "and let me fill in the details for you."

Kama listened as her mother told her the story of her first meeting with the Pharaoh. When Mutema told her she thought Amonmose was the magistrate, Kama laughed, but she immediately sobered when she found out her mother was to be evicted.

She clasped Mutema's hand in hers. "I am so sorry."

Mutema gave her a sad smile. "I knew no misery so great as when I learned of your death. And now, I know no joy so abundant since learning that you are alive."

Kama hugged her mother and kissed her on both cheeks. She stared at her for a moment and then touched her mother's hair tentatively. "How did your hair

turn so white?”

Fresh tears gathered in Mutema’s eyes as she spoke. “I believe every seed of despair has been planted there. When I learned that all three of you were dead, I could not eat; I could not sleep; I could not stop crying. I would have done anything to take your place.”

“Oh, mother...”

Mutema touched Kama’s long, tightly braided locks, fighting for her composure. “Enough about me. I am happy to see you are well. Although Latmay did tell me you were a horrible patient.”

Kama scoffed and wiped at her eyes. “Well, you have to consider the circumstances under which I came here. I was told that I was to be the Pharaoh’s concubine. Latmay seemed kind, but how could I befriend my captors?” She paused, her voice cracking. “What had I done to deserve being alive? Satati perished before my eyes. I could not save her, and it could just as easily have been me.” Kama pulled the Pakhet amulet from beneath her tunic. “She gave this to me the day before her wedding. It is all I have to remember her by.”

Mutema squeezed Kama’s hand. “No. You have more than that. You have fond memories of her, and that is how she would want to be honored. You cannot blame yourself for her death.”

Kama nodded. “I know, but...somehow, I feel I am betraying her memory

by...giving myself to the man responsible for her death.” Kama looked at the floor, as she struggled with her words. “I tried to hate Amonmose. But when I finally met him, he did not seem like the monster I’d imagined. He seemed dignified and respectable, even likable. I want you to know, he did not force himself on me. In fact, it was just the opposite. He wooed me.

“I have never met a man with such confidence and charisma. I was drawn to him, and I could not fight my attraction,” Kama confessed. “You must be ashamed of me...”

Mutema brushed her hand over Kama’s hair, soothing away the guilt. “I know what it means to fight your attraction for a man. You never knew this, but Akahmen and I were lovers.” Kama’s eyes widened in shock, and Mutema smiled. “He made me feel like a queen. He understood me. And he loved me. Sometimes, no matter how much a woman’s head denies it, the heart will always tell the truth.

“I would never be ashamed of you, Kama. Just like the fire, your passion is something you cannot control. And it seems the same is true for the Pharaoh. Your beauty caught his eye, so he spared you. I too, feel torn between loathing him and forgiving him. But I am grateful that He risked his life to find me and bring us together.”

Kama was silent for a moment. “My uncle and my cousin are dead, yet I am still alive as the object of affection for the man who killed them. How can that be

right? How can you not be ashamed?”

“Kama, listen to me.” Mutema took Kama’s hands and squeezed them hard. “Wars are fought every day. Women lose husbands, lovers, brothers, fathers, and children in battle all the time. Amonmose cannot bring Akahmen and Satati back from the dead. but I believe he is sincere in his devotion to you. Right now, that is all that matters.

Kama absorbed her mother’s words, and for the next few hours, the two reminisced about their lives before and after the fire. They cried and laughed, then cried some more, until Mutema was too tired to speak and they both agreed to get some sleep.



Amonmose stretched his aching muscles, exhausted but pleased that Mutema was finally here. He hadn’t been sure she would accompany him back to Thebes. Like Kama, she had a fiery vitality and a bold streak of willfulness. Mutema’s obstinacy barely bubbled beneath her polished exterior; Kama wore her emotions more like a banner. That was what had attracted him to her in the first place. If she had been an agreeable maiden, she would never have made such a fuss that night in Aswan, and he would have never noticed her. Never would have had his spirit drawn so far into another. He smiled to himself. It seemed they were perfectly matched. “What makes you smile so?”

Amonmose was so deep in thought he had not heard Kama enter the room. The sight of her made his heart stop. He'd missed her more than he'd ever thought possible. The novelty should have worn off, but each time he saw her, he wanted her as badly as the last.

"Your beauty," he said simply.

Kama's eyes wandered the length of his tall frame. "I was thinking the same of you," she said.

He laughed and shook his head. "A man cannot be described so. It is reserved for women and jewelry."

Kama shrugged. "When a man has a face such as yours, sun-kissed skin, and a body fashioned by the gods it, there is no other word for him."

He gave her a smoldering look, his amber eyes darkening. "You flatter me."

She walked slowly toward him, then leaned over and traced the outline of his mouth with her finger. "It is you who flatters me, Pharaoh. Each time you possess my body and fan the flames of my passion, you flatter me. You have charmed me completely. And I am honored to be the object of your desire."

Amonmose felt his manhood harden. Kama had never spoken like this. He kissed her hard, stroking her tongue with his. As he lifted her up and swept her into his arms, she gasped, letting her hands linger at the back of his neck as he set her down on the bed.

Amonmose hovered over her, gazing into her dark eyes as he brushed his palms over the soft curves of her body. Her thighs were firm, but yielding. “Never leave my side,” his thick voice whispered.

“Never.”

Chapter Fourteen

As the first fingers of dawn silently stretched across the sky, a royal page from the palace summoned Nadesh from his deep sleep. The young boy bore the full brunt of Nadesh's foul temper, cowering away from the lashes of his insults. What could be so pressing that it could not wait until after breakfast? .

When he arrived in the Great Room, Nadesh found Hai smiling most agreeably, his fat cheeks healthy with color. He'd bet money that the royal treasurer had not skipped *his* morning meal.

"What is this about?" Nadesh asked.

Hai shook his head, confused. "I thought you were going to tell me."

Nadesh scowled. "Who called this meeting?"

"I did," Meketen answered as he entered the room. His long robe fluttered around him as if he'd been blown in by a strong gust of wind. Following on his heels was a young man not more than twenty years of age.

"For what purpose?" Hai asked.

Meketen looked at the young man who accompanied him. "An emissary from Giza has come bearing a message." He took a deep breath before continuing.

“It is news we’ve been dreading.”

Three pairs of eyes focused on the messenger. His voice was high pitched and nervous as he spoke. “I have come to ask for help,” he pleaded. “Our villages are being ravaged by the Hyksos. Their leader, Kyan, has formed an alliance with a Nubian prince named Nabutu. They are gaining momentum and recruiting men from each town they storm through.” The messenger paused. “Our men have no choice but to be recruited. You must give your loyalty or your life when the Hyksos army comes to town. Soon, they will take over Memphis and eventually...” If left unstoppable, the invaders would eventually conquer Thebes.

Hai spoke first. “We should speak with the Pharaoh immediately.”

“Where is Amonmose?” Nadesh asked.

“He is resting in his chambers,” Meketen answered.

Nadesh scowled. “After speaking with the emissary, he did not think it prudent to attend this meeting?”

“He does not know the emissary is here. I elected not to disturb him. I decided perhaps we should discuss a course of action first.”

“I think we should send a page to retrieve him,” Hai said.

Nadesh sneered. “He is undoubtedly preoccupied with his Nubian consort. He will not be happy about going into battle again so soon.

Meketen spoke. “As the Council of Advisors, it is our task to recommend an

immediate course of action—even if the pharaoh may not like it. We must ensure Egypt does not fall to foreign rulers.” He gave the other men a dark look. “The last time that happened, it nearly crippled us. The question now, is not *what* are we going to do, but *when* are we going to do it?”

“I agree,” Nadesh said. “We cannot allow the Hyksos to advance closer to our capital. Defending our own borders will not be enough to secure our safety. We must take our troops all the way to Avaris and crush them once and for all.”

Hai frowned. “What you propose is suicide, Nadesh. At last count, their army far outnumbered ours.”

“They are large in number but small in strength. Their soldiers are captives and unskilled laborers who’ve been forced into joining their ranks. Most of the men are only fighting under threats and coercion. They will have little enthusiasm and even less allegiance. Our forces, on the other hand, are made up of men who gladly volunteer for the glory of battle. They are dedicated to serving this government. They are happy and well rewarded, and they would lay down their lives to protect Egypt.”

“They are dedicated to serving the Pharaoh.” Hai corrected. “We would be unable to inspire this so called dedication without the involvement of Amonmose. The men gladly volunteer to follow *him* into battle.”

Nadesh sighed in annoyance. “Yes. Fine. We cannot wage such a war

without him. In fact”—he stroked his long mustache—“this might be just what we need to help Amonmose regain his focus. Lately, he has rushed through all of our meetings, neglected his temple duties, and shut himself in his chambers for hours on end. Now, he will be preoccupied with war instead of that Nubian woman.”

“Especially when he learns Prince Nabutu is involved,” Meketen said. “It would be quickest to follow the Nile to Hermopolis, one hundred miles south of Avaris. It is a major city, and the Hyksos will definitely invade it.” He smiled, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “It will be the perfect ambush.”



Amonmose watched Kama’s face as she slept. He could gaze upon her endlessly and never tire of it, but today was not the day to do so. He felt ill tidings in the air, an inexplicable heaviness in his heart. He was not a believer in superstition, but he always trusted his intuition, and today, something told him that things were amiss. Even at his side, Kama felt distant, somehow fleeting.

He softly traced the outline of her lush lips with his forefinger and smiled when she stirred. He grazed his fingers along her cheek, and Kama’s eyelids drifted open. Amonmose found himself gazing into her sparkling, onyx-colored eyes. The sunlight peeped through the drapes and danced on her face. They both stared at each other, grinning happily. He’d returned from his journey four days ago, and she’d practically had his undivided attention ever since. It hardly seemed possible,

but he'd grown even fonder of her in those few days. Even their lovemaking had changed. Kama had been sensuous and giving before, but now, he felt as if she poured every piece of herself into the act. It was hard to believe she was the same woman who stared defiantly at him the night of the fire.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"For what?"

"For bringing my mother here. For wanting my happiness."

He caressed her cheek in slow circles. "You have thanked me every day for the last four days." His finger strayed down her chin, past the hollow of her throat, and finally settled between her cleavage. "And you have shown me your *appreciation* for the past four days. Your energy is boundless."

She snuggled against his chest. "Are you afraid I will rob you of all your strength?"

He gathered her in his arms. "Never. Being with you fortifies me. With you by my side, I am undefeatable."

She lowered her eyes at his response. This was a side of Kama he'd never seen. They had verbally sparred in the past, and she was always prepared with a quick barb.

"I have a present for you," he told her.

"But you have already given me the greatest gift!"

Amonmose swung his legs over the edge of the bed, and Kama propped herself up on her elbows to admire him. He retrieved a large sword from the corner of the room. In one smooth flourish, he unsheathed it and presented it to her.

Kama marveled. “The craftsmanship is excellent,” she murmured. “Of course, I expect no less from a Pharaoh.” She carefully stroked the polished, sharp blade with her fingers. He watched her as she studied the sword’s design. At last, her eyes widened in astonishment. There, on the hilt for the entire world to see, was her name carved intricately among the gold hoops and precious stones.

She gasped. “It’s stunning!”

“I am glad you approve. Now, wherever I go, I will carry you with me.”

She gazed at him and spoke softly. “You honor me by doing this.”

Her sincerity lit fires in his body. “Kama, you have crept inside my heart and touched my soul like no other. The day I met you, I had hoped to possess your body, but it is you who has possessed me.” He laid the sword aside and pulled her close. “What I did, I did because I love you. I want to marry you and spend the rest of my days with you.”

Tears threatened to spill from her dark eyes.

Amonmose laughed nervously. “Kama?” His heart pounded. “Is being married to me such a horrible thought?”

Kama laid her head against his chest, returning his warm embrace. “These

are tears of joy,” she said. “After my capture, I vowed to hate you, but I could not. I fell prey to you, to your silken caresses. And I fell in love. I never imagined you would feel the same way. I never expected to be your wife.”

Amonmose chuckled. “Respectable men and women cannot continue to commit illicit acts of fornication forever. I want you to be my queen. I have already spoken with your mother,” he added, “and she has already agreed to my terms.”

Kama gasped. “Terms!” But she was smiling and playfully punched his chest. “You are a pompous, overbearing brute!”

He grabbed her fists and pulled her closer. “And yet, you love this brute, remember?”

For answer, she draped her arms around his neck and pulled him against her tempting mouth. Her kiss was deep and intense, starting a raging fire inside him that demanded to be quenched.



Hours later, a royal page informed Amonmose that his advisors were holding an urgent meeting and requested his presence.

Amonmose stormed into his audience chamber. “There had better be a good reason that *my* advisors are summoning *me!*” he roared.

Meketen cleared his throat. “Sire, an emissary from Giza arrived this morning to report that their borders are being attacked by the Hyksos. They have

stormed through Lower Egypt, pillaging every city in their path. They have forced the men to join their ranks. Right now, their leader, Kyan, is making his way toward Memphis, along with the forces of Prince Nabutu.”

Amonmose stood solid and cold as stone as he listened to the news. His face betrayed nothing, but hatred and revenge bubbled like a tempest in his gut. It was rumored that his father had been killed by a Hyksos assassin.

Nearly one hundred years ago, the Hyksos were successful in defeating some of Egypt’s weaker kings. Those kings had allowed the gradual immigration of an increasingly larger Hyksos population until ultimately, Egypt was overcome by the foreigners.

“I do not think I need to remind you of their deadline,” Meketen spoke up. They are a threat to our very existence. If we travel by boat, we can cut them off in Hermopolis and slaughter their army before the soldiers get to Memphis.”

Amonmose did not take much convincing. As soon as he heard the word *Hyksos*, he’d made up his mind for war. Centered in the eastern Nile Delta and Middle Upper Egypt, the Hyksos kingdom had been a continual threat to Thebes. In the past, other Theban rulers had been willing to share territory with the Hyksos, but that was the past. Their leniency had led to an influx of foreign power and ultimately war. Amonmose did not intend to repeat history, and he would never bow down and pay tribute to those mongrels.

“Assemble the soldiers immediately.”



Amonmose returned to his chambers agitated. Kama watched him open his large wardrobe and pull out his armor, and a wave of despair washed over her. He was leaving again. Her heart sank into the pit of her stomach as she stood by the window waiting to hear it from his lips.

“Those who are responsible for my father’s death have now threatened my kingdom,” he told her. “If I do not stop them now, they will never be stopped. I must prepare for battle,” he said simply.

They stood staring at each other like two long-lost lovers.

“Why must *you* go?” Kama asked. “Why can’t you send your soldiers and your generals?” Selfish tears welled in her eyes.

Amonmose approached her and tenderly held her face, wiping the tear tracks with his thumbs. “Kama, I love you, and I would do anything to protect you. But, I also love Egypt. As Pharaoh, it is my duty to protect the citizens from harm. I have never asked anyone to do what I am not willing to do myself. Only cowards send other men to fight their battles. I ride beside my soldiers to show them that I have as much at stake as they do. They know we are all fighting for the same purpose. I believe in them, and they believe in me.” He softly stroked her tear-

stained cheeks. “I wish *you* could believe in me.”

She looked at him through moist eyes. “I do believe in you.”

“Then believe that we are destined to be together, and upon my return, I shall make you my queen.”

Kama nodded, too choked up to speak.

“I must go,” he insisted. He kissed her, lingering over her bottom lip, and then turned to leave. “And Kama”—he cast her a determined look over his shoulder—“I *will* return for you.”

Chapter Fifteen

Amonmose stood staring stoically at the blackened sky on the shores of Hermopolis. Eyes that had just days before been molten hot with desire, were now hard as stone as he sat deep in thought. He and one thousand of his soldiers had boarded a fleet in hopes of cutting off the Hyksos in Hermopolis. Amonmose's men were docked in the harbor, waiting quietly.

It was the dead of night. Amonmose would permit his men a few hours of rest, and then they would surprise the enemy before dawn. It had been months since the last skirmish, and many of the men were anxious for some action. When they weren't fighting, the soldiers were patrolling the city streets of Thebes, guarding the palace walls, farming their lands, and tending to cattle and sheep. Tonight, some of them would die protecting the land they loved.

As Amonmose inspected his armor, Nadesh approached, a familiar blood lust in his eyes. Amonmose shared his sentiments. He would avenge his father's death and eliminate the threat of the barbarous Hyksos forever.

"Are you certain it's wise to wear that body armor?" Nadesh asked.

Amonmose smirked. "The Hyksos have some sophisticated weaponry, including scale mail, metal helmets, and daggers. I want to be well-equipped to

handle them.”

“A man wearing armor will stand out as someone of importance. You’ll be an easy target,” Nadesh countered.

Amonmose pondered the words of his grand vizier. It wasn’t uncommon for warring armies to kidnap and torture leaders. If he were identified as pharaoh, the Hyksos would definitely have an advantage. The capture of his crown by opposing forces would symbolize the complete and total surrender of the Egyptian Pharaoh. He must never allow that.

“Perhaps you are right, Nadesh,” he said, patting his shoulder. “I will dispense with the armor this time. Now, let us review our strategy.”

As Amonmose removed his armor, Nadesh confirmed their plan of action. “We will have one hundred chariots, each manned by two soldiers: a driver with a sword and shield and an archer armed with a bow and arrow. We will send fifty chariots from the east and the other fifty from the south. The remaining eight hundred men will be infantry soldiers. We’ll catch the Hyksos’s undisciplined soldiers by surprise. They will be totally unprepared to deal with our men.”

“Good.”

“And I have instructed the men to seize any valuables they can find.”

“Let us not have a repeat of Aswan,” Amonmose said. “Remember who our enemy is. It is not innocent women and children.”

“The soldiers are not to pillage?” Nadesh asked. Collecting booty was the best part of going to battle. Being the victor automatically gave the men rights to plunder. Nadesh had seen some soldiers so entranced by looting that they didn’t even bother pursuing the enemy. But this army was disciplined and only allowed to plunder after certain victory had been achieved.

“I want to make certain everyone remains focused this time.”

Nadesh sneered. “Need I remind you that had it not been for the soldiers pillaging, Kama would have never ended up in your bed?”

“Kama is my responsibility and my business.” Amonmose’s voice was hard. “You need not concern yourself with her.”

“I have known you since birth. I have seen females throw themselves at your feet, and I have watched you run through women like water. You can have any woman you want, and yet you choose this foreigner. What spell has this witch cast upon you?”

Amonmose pierced him with a murderous glare. “It is not wise to speak of your future queen in that tone. Others may overhear, and I will have no choice but to find you guilty of treason.”

The two men stared at each other in silent challenge.

“Pardon me.” Nadesh bowed his head. “I forget myself. It will not happen again.”

Amonmose gave a wary nod of approval to Nadesh's feigned acquiescence. The man never gave up an argument that easily. For a brief instant, he wondered if Nadesh was still loyal to him, if any of his advisors were. He had not forgotten the snake incident, and he was still uncertain of whom he could trust. But now was not the time. He was at war, and he had to concentrate on the enemy on the battlefield, not the enemy within his own palace.

Chapter Sixteen

Amonmose secured the leather straps of his shield across his bare chest. He had taken Nadesh's advice and mimicked the uniform of his soldiers: a wear a short, white tunic. Without his crown, he looked like any other charioteer. Amonmose attached his quiver of arrows and took his position at the rear of his chariot. The other man, known as The First Charioteer of his Majesty, was already in position. He'd driven for Amonmose in previous battles, and the Pharaoh trusted him with his life. Amonmose greeted him like an old friend, shaking his darkly tanned hand.

"Thank you once again for your service and dedication," Amonmose said. "It is my privilege to have you by my side today."

The First Charioteer pumped Amonmose's hand enthusiastically. "It is I who am honored to be by your side, Pharaoh. Your valor outshines my own and makes me proud to drive beside you as we crush our foes together."

Amonmose smiled. "Are you ready to demolish these bastards?"

The man smiled back grimly as he grabbed the reins that connected his horse to the chariot. "Ready and willing." He stood poised to spring into action the instant the Pharaoh gave the signal. He clasped his spear tightly in one hand and

his reins in the other. He would drive the chariot full force into the enemy while Amonmose shot their adversaries down. To protect them both, a long, rectangular leather shield was attached to one side of the chariot. It had a higher elasticity and would not split like bronze. They would need every advantage against the cunning Hyksos.

Moments later, Amonmose gave the signal. One hundred chariots erupted into motion. Their wheels rolled noisily, the din compounded by the heavy beats of the horses' hoofs. The Hyksos army awakened to the deafening sound, and they scattered like frightened rats. Disoriented and caught off guard, their soldiers ran for cover, pursued by Egyptian archers showering them with arrows. Amonmose could hear the constant, sharp buzz of arrows speeding through the air.

Hyksos archers were reputed to be just as skilled, but over half of their forces were inexperienced men that had been strong-armed into joining the army. Such soldiers didn't have the heart or the training for battle, and this unexpected attack had left them ill equipped to deal with the fluid onslaught of the Egyptians.

Amonmose relied on the skill of his driver to maneuver seamlessly among the bewildered Hyksos troops. He knew his charioteer's style of driving and moved accordingly. He leaned left when the chariot turned right, right when the chariot turned left, and he braced his legs each time the chariot gained momentum.

Likewise, when Amonmose was preparing to shoot, his driver made the

proper adjustments. He slowed to allow Amonmose to set up his shot, maintained a steady speed on the launch, and accelerated on the release. One by one, Amonmose struck his targets, the arrows landing with such force that the impact knocked several men to the ground. Some fled while others put up a brave, but futile fight.

Amonmose's heart thundered in his chest. Beads of sweat trickled down his body, and clouds of dust filled his nostrils. But he would not stop. He could not stop. He owed his father that much.

Amonmose turned toward the sound of battlecries; a group of enemy soldiers was running toward his chariot. As if reading his mind, his driver snapped the reins and began driving the chariot in a wide arc to allow time for him to set up his shot.

Confident in his First Charioteer, Amonmose took aim. The most lethal shots were those planned from a distance, not right up close. As he lifted his arms and pulled his bow taut, the chariot suddenly lunged violently, throwing him off balance. He grabbed the side of the chariot; his arrow hit the dirt.

"Damn!"

"We've lost a wheel!" his charioteer yelled.

The chariot wobbled, scraping the ground as the horse raced on. As it lurched wildly, both men grappled for position. The driver jerked tightly on the

reins, bringing the galloping horse to a stop.

Amonmose coughed and tried to clear the dust they had kicked up. He couldn't see! Shadows materialized through the cloud from all sides. One halted long enough to aim and launch a throwing axe. The weapon flipped end over end in precise flight. And it sank into his driver's heart. The driver's body crumpled to the ground, where it heaved violently and then became suddenly still.

Amonmose jumped off the chariot, looking for stable ground. If these mongrels thought they could be rid of him so easily, they were sadly mistaken. He fired off two arrows in quick succession. His shots were accurate, but even the swiftest archer could not handle so many alone.

As the men closed in, Amonmose grabbed the First Charioteer's khopesh to defend himself. A Hyksos soldier, either brave or stupid, rushed toward him, raising his sword in an arc high above his head as he swung. His sword clashed loudly against Amonmose's. The deafening sound of metal pierced his ears and the force sent Amonmose heavily to the ground. He rolled to his side, narrowly escaping lethal jabs. He tasted the bitter flavor of blood in his mouth as he sprang to his feet.

He charged forward and hooked the khopesh over the soldier's sword, forcing it downward. He'd made his opening and angrily thrust his sword into the man's soft belly—a miscalculation. His victim fell forward, and Amonmose let his

sword go to avoid being crushed by the man's weight.

As Amonmose turned, assessing, several Egyptian chariots raced close. The archers aboard shot into the crowd, and several Hyksos fell screaming. Without warning, an arrow sliced through the air and pierced him in the shoulder, sending a searing white-hot pain through his arm. He heard a deep grunt come from his own mouth and then felt warm blood oozing down his shoulder.

He staggered back, then lost his footing and fell to the ground, striking his head on a large rock. His vision blurred and limbs hung dead. He could hear the battle raging around him, but he was powerless to help.

As his body lay immobile, his thoughts drifted to Kama. He could not be dying. He could not leave her now. She'd entrusted her heart to him. And he'd failed her. Now, he would never see her again. This was his last somber thought as he closed his eyes and surrendered to the total darkness.

Chapter Seventeen

It was early morning in Hermopolis. The sun tiptoed across the horizon, illuminating the battlefield and the carnage. Dust floated in the air and slowly began settling upon the abandoned weapons and dead bodies. A makeshift recovery room had been set up for the wounded soldiers on one of the Egyptian vessels. Latmay was relieved that very few of them were in need of serious medical attention. Most had superficial injuries that were easily rectified. Of the one thousand men that had gone into battle, only forty had been counted as killed so far. Another seventy had been badly injured. The rest of the men escaped with barely a scratch. It was a testament to their skill and fearlessness.

Latmay opened his leather case and quickly rummaged through its contents. He carried a variety of treatments for anything that ailed anyone. Aloe vera for headaches, chest pains, and burns; Sandalwood for indigestion, gout, and diarrhea; garlic for flatulence and hemorrhoids; frankincense to stop bleeding; and turmeric to heal open wounds.

He'd been trained as one of Egypt's best physicians, but he rarely practiced all the things he'd learned until he followed the troops into battle. The Pharaoh had never had any maladies in the twenty-plus years he'd known him. Being

Amonmose's doctor had turned him into a fat, lazy old man. But he did not complain. He was paid well, and he ate well. Wasn't that what life was all about?

Latmay had just finished setting a broken arm when a soldier burst into the room and announced he was needed on the Pharaoh's boat. Fear gripped his heart. This could mean only one thing.

Latmay arrived to find Nadesh hobbling around the cabin, blood dripping from a cut on his leg, yelling orders to one of the infantrymen.

"Find him!" Nadesh barked. "He is still out there, I know it!"

The soldier bowed, unable to meet his eyes. "I am sorry. We are looking, but he is not easy to identify. Everyone looks the same out there."

Nadesh sneered. "Keep scouring the battlefield."

"We've got hundreds of men searching."

"Get more! We are not paying for excuses. We are paying for results!"

"Yes, sir." The soldier quickly departed the room.

"Can you believe this?" Nadesh turned to Latmay. "No one can find Amonmose. It is as if he's disappeared off the face of the Earth."

Latmay remained silent. Maybe he'd been kidnapped? It was not unusual for rival leaders to be held prisoner and used to bargain for money, land, trade routes, and even the crown itself. Latmay frowned, his body sagging with worry. Amonmose had no heirs. If something happened to him, one of his advisors would

have to take his place. Latmay bit his lower lip to keep down the rising bile as he watched Nadesh lower himself into Amonmose's chair.

He disliked the grand vizier a great deal, but right now, he'd rather have him as a patient than Amonmose. Latmay's heartbeat gradually slowed down as he turned his attention to Nadesh's leg. He'd seen worse cuts on the stray animals that occasionally ended up at his doorstep. He expertly cleaned the wound and applied a yeast poultice to reduce any swelling that might occur later. He wrapped the wound with a clean strip of fabric.

"You may have some pain after this wears off," he told Nadesh. "If you do, you can take this." He gave him a small pouch filled with crushed poppy seeds. "Use only what you need. This herb taken in great quantities is very addictive."

Nadesh snatched the small pouch from Latmay's hands. "My tolerance is higher than most." He sneered.

Latmay sneered in reply. "I wish I could say the same."



Edu picked through the bloody dead, searching for the bodies of his fellow soldiers. Many of them had wives not too different from his wife, who watched him go, not knowing if he would return. He would because the men next to him took down a Hyksos he had not seen coming; these others would not. He owed it to his fellow soldiers to get their bodies home to their families.

Edu's eye caught the edge of a white tunic as he scanned the battlefield, and his heart sank. Another one. He carelessly moved the heavy bodies of the dead Hyksos soldiers from atop his fallen comrade. He breathed sharply. The soldier was covered from head to toe in blood. The poor man had probably suffered a great deal before dying. Edu peered closer at the body to see how he had been slain, but there were no cuts through his clothes. The blood did not belong to the dead man. It was from the dead soldiers that had fallen on top of him.

He bent down and grabbed the man's arm, intending to sling him over his shoulders and carry him to the waiting cart. The corpse moaned. Then its fingers flexed, and Edu jumped back.

"We've got a man alive!"



Nadesh sat, nursing his wound. "I am going out there to look for him myself!"

Latmay kept his thoughts to himself. With each passing hour, he grew more fearful. What could have happened to Amonmose? Was he alive? A prisoner?

If the Hyksos found him dead, his lifeless body would have been mutilated and dismembered. Then, his body parts would have been presented to the enemy's king and put on display. Without being properly mummified, Amonmose would be unable to enter the afterlife. If found alive, he could have been taken as a

prisoner of war, tortured, or worse yet, enslaved.

No, Latmay thought, *Amonmose is far too clever to die in battle. And Egypt needs him far too much.*

Already, Nadesh was making arrangements to set up camp and continue the search. There was no other choice. They could not leave without him.

A young soldier came bursting into the cabin, and both men looked up. “We have found him, sir!”

Nadesh’s eyes grew wide as he watched two large men carry Amonmose’s unconscious body into the room. “Lay him down on that table and get out!”

The men carefully laid the Pharaoh down as though he were fragile. His face was caked with blood and dirt. His white tunic was thoroughly soiled, and his entire body was bloodied and bruised. It was no wonder it had taken so long to find him. Without his crown or armor, he looked just like every other dead soldier.

Latmay sprang from his chair.

“Is he alive?” Nadesh hobbled closer.

Latmay put his ear to Amonmose’s mouth and felt a faint, warm breath. “Blessed be the gods...” He looked up at Nadesh and nodded. “Alive.” The grand vizier breathed out in relief and stepped back as Latmay began moving around the table. He checked his pupils and his pulse. Amonmose was barely hanging on. A Hyksos arrow still protruded from his shoulder, and the flesh around it had turned

a grotesque, dark purple. A few more inches and it might have struck a major artery.

As he continued his inspection, Latmay noticed a nasty wound on one side of the Pharaoh's head. The blood had congealed, but he could tell that it was a hard, blunt blow. The impact was probably what had knocked Amonmose unconscious.

"He's taken a severe blow to the head," he said aloud.

"Get that arrow out first," Nadesh told him.

Latmay shook his head. "No, this wound to his head is more critical. The bleeding has stopped for now, but if I don't tend to it first, he could die."

He soaked clean linen strips in a mixture of water and turmeric. Then, he wrapped Amonmose's entire head with the careful precision he had learned from preparing mummies.

Once Amonmose was bandaged, Latmay waved a smelling salt under his nose. The Pharaoh came around slowly, twisting and turning his face away. He scowled and sucked a sharp breath when he tried to move his arms.

Amonmose's voice came out weak and lethargic when he spoke. "Where am I?"

Latmay answered, "Onboard your ship. You've suffered some substantial injuries that I'm attending to. Right now, it is imperative that I get this arrow out

of your arm.”

Amonmose’s eyes slowly focused. “Who are you?”

“I am your personal physician.” Latmay said.

“A doctor?”

“Yes, *your* doctor.”

Latmay glanced at Nadesh. “He may be suffering from some type of delirium from the loss of so much blood. There is no cause for worry.”

“You’ve got to remove that arrow,” Nadesh growled.

Amonmose slowly turned his head in the direction the voice came from.

“Are you also a doctor?”

Nadesh flashed Latmay a worried look. “I am Nadesh, your grand vizier and chief commander.”

Amonmose nodded deliberately. He took his time before he spoke. “If you’re my vizier...and he’s my doctor, then who am I?”

Chapter Eighteen

For the twentieth time darkness fell in Thebes, and still there was no sign of the Pharaoh's army. Wives waited patiently for their husbands to arrive, ready to soothe the grim echoes of sacrifice from their faces. When the ships finally sailed silently into port, it was well into twilight, when most citizens were asleep.

Amonmose was immediately taken to his chambers. He'd slept for most of the voyage home, waking only to ask more questions. Latmay tended to him as he floated in and out of consciousness. The wound in his shoulder improved some, and he seemed to take a turn for the better.

Nadesh had planned their return carefully to ensure that no one knew the extent of the Pharaoh's injuries. The men simply assumed he was resting as a result of the sleeping potion Latmay had administered. Once inside the palace, Nadesh was relieved to find that Amonmose's chambers were empty. He gave strict orders that only Latmay and the advisors were permitted entry, Baal was left to stand guard over the Pharaoh, and the advisors held a private meeting behind the closed doors.

As the four men sat alone in Amonmose's great room, Nadesh spoke freely. "He doesn't recall who he is, or who anyone else is," Nadesh said. "Until he regains

his memory, I suggest we keep him sequestered in here.”

Hai jumped to his feet. “Have you gone mad? You cannot hold a Pharaoh against his will.”

“He does not know that he is Pharaoh.”

“He is still our ruler and He is capable of making his own decisions. What you propose is imprisonment, Nadesh!”

Nadesh gritted his teeth. “I do not believe so. For his safety, he should not be wandering the halls of the palace. He needs time to recover.”

Hai crossed his arms. “I think the best way for him to regain his memory is to be around people who are familiar with him. It is our duty to help him recover, not punish him because he has amnesia.”

“Fighting will get us nowhere,” Meketen interrupted. “You both make good sense, but neither of you is medically qualified to deal with this condition.” He leaned forward and looked at Latmay. “What are your thoughts on the matter?”

Latmay measured his words carefully before speaking. Now that Amonmose was not himself, these three men had the most authority in the kingdom. “I have seen very few cases like this,” he told them. “His memory lapse might last a day or a month or a year. There really is no way to be certain. You definitely cannot keep him separated from the entire world for such long periods of time. He has duties to perform.

“In my opinion, interactions with other people will increase his ability to remember and he will recover faster. In the meantime, he must be reeducated about his role as Pharaoh. He’ll have to learn everything just as he did when his father died.”

They all fell silent at the memory. Meketen spoke first. “I agree that he should be reeducated, but we must be the only ones involved in the process.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Hai asked.

“By confining him to his quarters. Each one of us will take turns instructing him on the ways of a pharaoh and how this kingdom should be operating. For his own safety and the security of this dynasty, no one else can know about his condition.”

“You treat him as if he has some disease which we should shield him from.”

Nadesh shook his head. “No, Meketen is right. Things are far too unstable for us to allow this information past these doors. There are those who would seek to take advantage of him. Unscrupulous nobles would prey on his ignorance and use their own agendas to influence him. We cannot allow that.”

“So, it is settled then.” Meketen looked at each of them. “No one is to enter this room but us four.”

“But what of his duties?” Latmay protested.

“We shall perform them in his absence. Nadesh will preside over court

hearings and temple rites. I will handle ceremonies and meetings with persons who have business with the state. Hai, you will, of course, continue in your role as treasurer. Anything else can be assigned to the many nobles who would be overjoyed to do the Pharaoh's bidding."

Hai sat back down, shaking his head. "I still don't think all this subterfuge is necessary."

"It is for the best." Meketen put a hand on Hai's arm but looked at Latmay. "Latmay, you are free to come and go as necessary, but if you breathe one word of Amonmose's condition to anyone, it will be considered treason against the state. Do you understand?"

Latmay held his anger. "Yes, I understand," he said through tight lips.

"Then, we are all in agreement. We shall reconvene here in the morning."

Chapter Nineteen

Amonmose awoke in pain, his head aching as if split with an axe. When he struggled to raise himself up on his elbows, a jolt shot through his arm. He turned to see his entire shoulder wrapped tightly in linen strips. His arm had been placed in sling, which was bound against his torso to prevent any further injury. He stared at it, confused. Then, he remembered someone had pulled an arrow from his arm. How it got there, he did not know.

He sat up slowly and surveyed his surroundings. He was in a strange room with objects he did not recognize. The linens on his bed were made of the finest cloth. The furnishings that surrounded him were opulent and grand in scale. The decor was masculine, with the massive bed virtually dominating the room. There was a marble washstand trimmed in gold, a writing desk, a large wardrobe, and a few stools. Each piece appeared to be superbly constructed.

A pleasant odor wafted through the air, and Amonmose's eyes followed the subtle wisps of smoke to a tall lamp burning in the corner. Scented oil. He breathed deeply and stood up, then looked down and studied the elegant mosaic design on the floor. The craftsmanship was superior. Whoever had picked this pattern had excellent taste.

Tentatively, he took a step. A wave of dizziness rushed at him, but he closed his eyes and remained still until the unsteady feeling passed. Encouraged, he took a few more steps and cautiously walked around the bedroom before moving to the outer room. Sunshine spilled through an open window. The first things he noticed were the many scrolls of papyri. All were different in size and breadth. The owner of this library must be man of great intelligence.

In the center of the room, there was a large table inlaid with ivory and gold. Seated comfortably at the table was the man who had tended to his wounds. As if on cue, the man abruptly stood and gave a slight bow.

“Good Morning, Pharaoh. I did not hear you rise.”

Amonmose stared silently. The man smiled politely, as if waiting for a response. He had a kind face..

“You are my doctor?” Amonmose asked.

“Yes.” The man moved forward. “My name is Latmay. I have been your personal physician for over twenty years.”

Amonmose frowned. “Is that my age? Twenty years?”

“Gods no.” Latmay grinned. “You are thirty-two. Although you have the physique of a man much younger.”

Amonmose remained silent for a moment, absorbing the information.

“Would you like me to tell you about yourself?” Latmay asked.

Amonmose smiled. "Yes, I would like that very much."

Latmay was surprised by Amonmose's calm manner. The Pharaoh he knew did all things with a bold confidence bordering on cockiness. In this condition, Amonmose seemed unsure and almost vulnerable, his gaze wide and trusting.

"Your name is Pharaoh Amonmose Tehutimes," Latmay told him. "You are the sovereign ruler of Egypt. We are in your private quarters at your palace in Thebes. You have suffered a traumatic blow to your head as well as a wound from an arrow to your shoulder. You received these injuries in battle two days ago, while fighting your long time enemies, the Hyksos. As a result of your blow to the head, you are suffering from temporary amnesia. The task now is to reeducate you on your role as Pharaoh. There is much for you to learn, but your council of advisors has determined that for your own safety, this should be done in the privacy of your chambers."

One of Amonmose's dark eyebrows shot up in question. "Oh, have they?"

Latmay wiped the nervous perspiration from his brow. He hoped he had not said too much. He remembered the threat from the advisors. He paused before answering. "Yes. It is for your own benefit, Your Grace. It could take days or months for you to regain your memory."

Amonmose's eyes narrowed, and for a moment he looked every bit the shrewd ruler. "You have known me for twenty years. Tell me, am I the kind of man

who would listen to advice from these advisors?”

Latmay answered without hesitation. “You are a man of great intellect and compassion. You are also courageous and bold. The men in your council are in an advisory position only. You answer to no one.”

Amonmose seemed satisfied. He walked toward the table, his steps seeming more solid. “Do I have children? Do I have a queen?”

“No, you do not.”

“Why not? I am certainly old enough. Am I infertile?”

Latmay coughed down an inopportune laugh.. “Not that I am aware of. Physically, you appear to be in perfect condition. Socially, you are regarded as very handsome and desirable, and it is a known fact that you can have your pick of women. There are many ladies who have fancied you, yet you have chosen to remain a bachelor.”

“There are many women who have fancied me, but have I fancied any of them?”

Latmay bowed his head. “Only you can know the answer to that, Pharaoh. I am not privy to your personal life.” For a moment, he thought of telling him about Kama, but there had been very clear instructions where she was concerned.

Amonmose sat at the table, joining Latmay. “What else can you tell me?” he asked. “Where are my parents? How do I spend my time each day? What is

expected of me? Who do I keep council with? What pleasures me?”

Latmay smiled. “One question at a time.”



Over the next few hours, Amonmose listened to Latmay explain the details of his life. He was a pleasant, calming force, and Amonmose learned a great deal. Once the advisors arrived, however, his mood changed drastically. Amonmose did not recognize any of the advisors, and meeting them triggered no new memories. Nadesh was familiar to him only because he'd seen him on the ship. He remembered the tall, slender man giving orders to Latmay. His voice was gruff, and his manner was arrogant. Amonmose wondered why he'd appointed him as his grand cizier.

“What is your purpose as grand vizier?” he asked. “What duties do you fulfill?”

Nadesh answered confidently. “In your absence, I represent you and relay all judgments to your subjects. I preside over the council, and I am responsible for training and commanding the Egyptian army.”

Latmay had said the soldiers followed *him*. “As commander of my army, you lead my troops into battle?”

“I prepare them for warfare. You prefer to lead the troops yourself. They attack on your signal.”

“How long have you been grand vizier?”

“Thirty-two years,” Nadesh replied.

Amonmose did not hide his shock. “That is quite a long time. And it is as long as I have been alive. Who did you serve before me?”

“Your father.”

“I see.”

Earlier, Latmay had told Amonmose that his mother had died in childbirth and his father died when he was twelve. Latmay gave no other specifics. Nadesh had become grand vizier during that chaotic time. A myriad of questions swirled through his mind, but Amonmose asked the one that was most relevant. “Did I appoint you as Grand Vizier?”

Nadesh smiled tolerantly. “You were a young boy at the time. I was already serving as commander of the armies. It seemed a natural transition. You had no other to guide you.”

Amonmose nodded and tried to imagine what it would take to engineer such a promotion. Nadesh, it seemed, was a powerful man.

“Thank you for your honesty,” Amonmose said. “I only ask so I can gain more knowledge of my former life. No matter how you came to be my grand vizier, I have done nothing to change it in twenty years. So, you must be someone of extreme importance to me. I am pleased that you are on my council of advisors.”

Nadesh nodded and smiled.

Amonmose turned to Meketen and Hai. “Gentlemen, your turn, if you don’t mind indulging me.”



Nadesh left Amonmose’s room feeling drained. Amonmose’s questions had rankled. He should not be defending his position in the palace. Yet, could he blame the Pharaoh? The man had lost a lifetime of memories. They could tell him all about himself, but they could not give him back the private thoughts he’d had over the years. They knew little about his hopes, his dreams, or his plans for the future. Without a past, a man was like a ship lost at sea.

Baal was waiting patiently on the other side of the door when he emerged.

“May I have a word with you?” Baal asked, a look of concern heavy in his eyes.

He’d already been advised about Amonmose’s condition. It was necessary, since the two would be in close contact with each other.

“Is there some trouble?” Nadesh asked.

“The soldiers have been inquiring about the Pharaoh. They are asking about a victory feast.”

“There will be no feast for now. Tell the men he is still recovering from his wounds.”

Baal crossed his muscled arms over his chest. “I can only tell that lie for so long.”

“It’s not a lie!” Nadesh hissed. “He *is* recovering.”

Baal appeared unaffected by his tone. “There are people who want to see him. It is unusual for him not to make an appearance, especially after winning a battle.”

“No.” Nadesh shook his head. “No one can see him except his advisors and his doctor.”

“And what of Kama? She has been here twice.”

Nadesh felt spasms of disgust bubbling in his stomach. He had been convinced that Kama was some passing fascination for Amonmose. With her exotic looks and bold tongue, it was easy for a man to be curious about her *talents*. In the past, he’d taken delicate matters like this into his own hands, and this time would be no different. He glared at Baal. “If you cannot shield him from these curious idiots, I shall find someone who can. No one is to see him—especially Kama!”

From his hiding place, Latmay watched Nadesh walk away. He had been approaching Amonmose’s room when he overheard Nadesh talking with Baal. The grand vizier’s voice was thick with anger, so Latmay had slipped into a small

alcove in the hallway and listened, troubled by what he heard. Did the advisors truly think they could keep Amonmose ensconced from everyone? There was more going on than concern for the welfare of the Pharaoh. The question was whether Amonmose regain his memory before he lost the very kingdom he'd built.



“He doesn’t want me anymore.”

“Have you taken leave of your senses? Why would you say such a thing?”

“He’s been back for two days,” Kama told her mother. “Dyzet told me all of the soldiers have returned. Yet, each time I go to his chambers, I am told that he is not receiving visitors.”

“Whose words are these?” Mutema demanded.

“His own bodyguard. Baal takes his orders directly from Amonmose.” Kama sat on the bed in the room that used to be hers, wringing her hands in her lap. “What have I done to displease him?”

Mutema sat beside her, wrapping a comforting arm around her shoulder. “Daughter...” She held her in her motherly embrace and rocked her softly. “Surely, there must be some misunderstanding. You and I will go there, and we shall get to the bottom of this.”

Kama held back her tears. “He has given orders that he will not see anyone. If he will not see me, he certainly will not see you.”

“Perhaps it is quite the contrary,” Mutema said. “He may be injured from battle and cannot stand the thought of you seeing him in such a condition.”

“But I love him! I do not care if he’s wounded.”

“You may not care, but perhaps he does. Remember, a Pharaoh must be strong. His people must believe in him. He is accustomed to presenting himself as a superior being. He cannot appear before anyone in a weakened state, including you.”

Kama let the impact of her mother’s words sink in. She spoke softly and lifted her chin from her mother’s shoulder. “Do you really think this the reason he will not see me?”

“Yes,” Mutema said. “And I can prove it.” She kissed Kama on the forehead and headed for the door. “I am going to his chambers this moment. When I return, I shall have good news for you. You will see.”

Kama nodded and gave her mother a lopsided, half-hearted smile. She had seen her mother overcome some amazing obstacles. If anyone could make things right, she could.

Mutema did not return with good news. Like Kama, she had been turned away at the doors to Amonmose’s room.

“I told you!” Kama burst into tears. “Amonmose has grown weary of me.

There can be no other explanation.” Sorrow sliced into her flesh, and she clutched her chest, suddenly gasping for air.

“Kama!” Mutema ran to her side.

“I...I cannot...breathe,” she panted.

“Sit,” her mother said. “You must remain calm.”

“How? How...can I? ...lost.”

“Ssh...you are not lost. You are heartbroken, but you are not lost.”

Kama let her mother hold her and rub her back. When she was a little girl her mother would hold her like this and make all the evil go away. She wished her mother could do the same now. “I do not want to hear riddles, mother. Speak plainly and tell me, what have I done to deserve this?”

“I cannot answer that,” Mutema said truthfully. “I can only tell you that often things that are not clear to us in the beginning will be revealed in time.”

Kama wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands. “This...this is my punishment for falling in love. I never should have, and as long as I live, I swear I never will again.”

Mutema offered no words of encouragement this time. She merely held her daughter and rocked her as Kama cried herself to sleep.



Days later, Amonmose had fallen asleep fighting his own demons. The first

time she came into his dreams, she was dressed in a torn, white linen sheath. The wind whipped her long hair wildly about her. She was beautiful, and every inch of her magnificent body inflamed his desire. But the feeling was not mutual; her tone was venomous.

“I am slave to no master!” she yelled.

He saw the fire in her eyes, and it only made him want her more. He wanted to speak, but no words came out of his mouth. Then, as suddenly as she appeared, she was gone.

The next night, she came again. She crept into his dreams like a fine mist. She was riding with him in a litter, close enough to touch. Her dark skin was smooth like butter. Her black eyes shined like stars. This time when she spoke, she was not cruel, but she was still determined.

“Animals intrigue you. Exotic cities intrigue you. War intrigues you. Sire, I am not some pet or oddity to be kept caged for your pleasure. I am just a woman, a simple woman who begs leave to go home.”

He could see the quiet fear reflected on her face, yet still she fought against him. When he reached for her, she disappeared.

His latest dream was the sweetest of all. He was surrounded by a field of fragrant flowers. The cool night air tiptoed across his body, but it did nothing to calm the fire raging within him. Suddenly, the beautiful woman was lying beneath

him, arching her hips against his. Her eyes were wide with desire.

“Your body is perfect from head to toe. You are everything a man should be. Now, make love to me.”

She freely offered herself to him, and he willfully took, asking no questions. He made love to her and satisfied them both, over and over. When he awoke, he reached for the warm body that surely lay next to his. But he was alone, and it was only a dream after all. It had seemed so real. *She* had seemed so real. Their feelings for each other had been undeniable. It was more than pure lust.

After that, Amonmose was unable to sleep. He got out of bed and walked to the mirror in his room. The face that stared back at him offered no clues. He had so many questions that no one could answer.

He went to the open window to get some fresh air and looked down at the garden below. This oasis was one of the few pleasures he had right now. The colors soothed him. The smell of the flowers drifting up to his window relaxed him.

His eyes scanned his colorful paradise, and he breathed in the fragrance of the exotic blooms. His eyes flitted over the treetops and past the bushes to the dense field of daffodils. A soft breeze whispered through the foliage, making the leaves move and take on strange shapes.

Then he noticed something out of place. The full moon illuminated a figure

in the distance. His heartbeat quickened. *It was a woman.* He strained his eyes to see more clearly, but all he could make out was her long, white dress. He stood motionless, staring at her back.

Then she turned, and he could see her heart-shaped face. Her dark, mournful eyes stared into the distance. His breath caught in his throat. It was *her*—the enchantress from his dreams!

Amonmose rubbed his eyes and forced himself to think clearly. Obviously, he was still dreaming. He rushed to the washstand and splashed his face with water. He pinched himself, and the sharp pain told him he was wide awake.

He hurried back to the window, scanning the garden below, but she was gone. He shook his head. He must be suffering from delusions. There was nothing out there but the plants. He watched for a few moments as the wind blew a delicate breath through the canopy of trees. *That was it.* The wind had bewitched him into thinking he saw something that was not there. His heart slowed. All a mirage. He crawled back into bed and lay, waiting patiently for morning.



Kama walked slowly through the garden. She'd tried to sleep, but only a few hours after crying on Mutema's shoulder, she found herself wide awake again. She'd left her chambers quietly and wandered the silent halls of the palace. Her

steps had no purpose, and her feet somehow carried her to the garden.

It was a mistake.

Everything reminded her of Amonmose. She passed a tree laden with blue lotus flowers. That was the very spot where they'd shared a passionate kiss. It was a kiss to rival all kisses. The heat of it melted her to the core. Before that moment, she never knew a man could make a woman feel that way.

Walking on, she came to the field of yellow chrysanthemums. This was where Amonmose had professed his love for her with a smoldering look in his amber eyes. She remembered how her heart felt so full that day she thought it would burst.

She stopped when she came to a shallow pool of water surrounded by wildflowers. They had made passionate love next to this pond. He branded her with hot kisses and claimed her as his own. She would never know that sensation again.

Kama hung her head, fighting the tears of bittersweet memories. Why had the gods cursed her so? What had she done to warrant such punishment? She'd given everything she could give, and he'd cast her aside like a beggar's rags. She'd thought she meant more to him. Obviously, she was wrong.

Kama shivered with the sudden sensation of being watched. She turned in a small circle, but all she heard was the faint wind ruffling the trees. She paused, and

then remembered that Amonmose could see the garden from his window. Surely he was there, watching her. She looked up, prepared to meet him eye to eye. One look at her face, and he would know that she still loved him.

She glanced; his window was empty. There was only a fine linen drape fluttering in the breeze. The small hope she had built up broke apart, and Kama ran back to the tunnel's entrance, swearing she would never step foot in this garden again.

Chapter Twenty

Nadesh paced his quarters. Amonmose had begun asking questions about Kama. He claimed he'd dreamt about an ebony vixen for the past several nights. Nadesh had feigned ignorance. If he had ever doubted it before, it was clear now that Kama was indeed a witch. The Pharaoh had forgotten himself but remembered her.

When Amonmose insisted that he'd seen her in the garden, Nadesh suggested it was a vision brought on by unsated lust. He offered to bring him a slave girl, but Amonmose politely refused. Nadesh scowled and bit his tongue, impatient to call another meeting of the council.

"He claims he saw her in the garden one night," Nadesh explained to the others. He paced back and forth across the tiled floors of the great room, his fists clenched.

Meketen's eyes widened. "Did she see him? Did they speak?"

"No. He said he gazed upon her from his bedroom window. He thought he was dreaming, and when he looked again, she was gone."

"So, he doesn't know for certain it was her?"

"No, but it is only a matter of time before it happens again."

“We must see that it doesn’t.” Meketen grimaced.

Hai sneered. “And what do you propose to do? Have her confined to her room as well?”

Meketen turned his cold, dark eyes on him. “Of course not.”

“Thank the gods.”

“We are going to have her confined in prison.”

Hai’s jaw dropped. “Prison? You have gone too far now, Meketen. The girl—”

“The girl is a menace! We cannot afford to have Kama loitering around the palace, meddling in our plans. Amonmose needs time to concentrate without distraction. If she is free, she might be seen, and she will only confuse him.”

Nadesh nodded, momentarily ceasing his pacing. “I agree with Meketen. Kama is a complication we don’t need right now. We cannot trust her to stay in her room, and if we put guards at her door, the palace will be alive with wagging tongues. We need to sequester her away—only until Amonmose has regained his memory and is well enough to deal with her.”

“Latmay said the Pharaoh may never regain his memory.” Hai looked at them both. “Will you keep her imprisoned for years?”

“Be reasonable!” Meketen snapped. “It will not take him years to recover. That old doctor is a pessimist.”

“But—”

“It’s for the best, Hai.” Nadesh glowered, daring the treasurer to challenge him. Hai backed down and slowly looked away. The matter was settled.



That night, Kama awoke to loud sounds outside her door. When she went to investigate, she found Shu surrounded by armed guards.

“Move aside,” one of the men spoke. “We’ve come for the two women.”

Shu’s moved the tip of his sword through the air, holding each soldier at bay. “I’ll spill the blood of any man who dares try to enter this room.”

“We’ve got orders to kill anyone who interferes.”

“I am sworn to protect Kama with my life. If you’re ready to die, then so am I.”

The men exchanged glances and raised their swords.

“Please stop!” Kama cried. She threw the door open wide. “There is no need for violence.” She placed a hand on Shu’s shoulder. “I shall go willingly.”

A short time later, Kama and Mutema found themselves being led to an area deep within the bowels of the palace. As they made their descent, Kama could feel the temperature change. It was cool and damp and dark. A trail of sparingly placed oil lamps dimly lit the corridors. Down here, there were no beautiful pictures, no

gold busts, no carvings, and no ornate tile.

They were led into a private room that was not much more than an animal's den. The earthen floor smelled of age and must. Kama turned on one of the guards. "Why are we being left here?" she asked.

"We've been ordered to confine you here," he answered simply.

"By whom?"

"By order of the Pharaoh."

Kama gasped. Amuonmose would not dare do this to her. No matter what his personal feelings had become, she refused to believe he would have her imprisoned. "What offense have I been accused of?" she asked.

"There is no charge. You are being held here—indefinitely."

Kama shook her head. "That cannot be... I demand to go before a court."

The guard smirked. "Since there is no charge, there is no court to which you can plead your innocence."

Kama gaped. "So we are being forced to rot in this dungeon until someone deems it appropriate for us to be released?"

"Yes. I...apologize for the meager accommodations." Kama gave him a narrow-eyed look as he tried, and failed, to keep his eyes from sweeping over her body. "I will make sure you are well fed and have everything you need while you are staying here."

Kama fumed. “And I suppose I should thank you for that?”

The guard shrugged. “You could be sharing a room with the other male prisoners. If that’s what—”

“Thank you for your kindness,” Mutema broke in. “We would be grateful for anything you can do to help us.”

He gave her a long look that softened. “Maybe there is someone I can talk to on your behalf...”

“Yes?” Mutema’s eyebrows lifted with hope.

“You would need a man with the Pharaoh’s ear. Perhaps Nadesh, the grand vizier—”

“Forget it!” Kama scoffed. “Nadesh would never help me.”



“Your shoulder looks much better,” Latmay said. “Have you had any more pain?”

“No, just these headaches,” Amonmose replied. “Three weeks and still I suffer one each night.”

Latmay pressed his fingers around the angry red scar on Amonmose’s scalp. “It’s healing very nicely. You will always have a small scar, but your crown will cover it when you’re in public. I can see no reason why you should be experiencing headaches.”

Amonmose nodded and sighed. "I have not been sleeping well."

Latmay opened his black bag. "I can give you something to help you relax."

"No! No... If I sleep, I shall be haunted by her again."

"Whom?"

Amonmose stood and shrugged dramatically. "I don't know her name, or even if she has one. I only know her face, her unequalled beauty. Her skin is dark as ebony and smooth as marble. Her eyes rival the deepest obsidian."

Latmay listened as the Pharaoh continued on, describing all the lurid details of each dream.

"Each encounter with her is so real. I can hear her voice, feel her skin, smell her scent, taste her lips. We make beautiful love together. She consumes me, body and soul, Latmay. But when I wake, I am alone. I have made inquiries, but no one can recall the stunning creature I have described. I feel certain that this woman is real, from my past, perhaps. My dreams are just too vivid for her to be a fantasy." His laugh was bitter. "I might be going mad—do you think I'm going mad? I cannot focus on my lessons." He shook his head. "My thoughts keep drifting back to her..." Amonmose gave Latmay a pitiful look. "Have you any advice?"

Latmay could feel the pain in his voice. What the advisors were doing was wrong. He should end this farce once and for all and tell Amonmose about Kama. As their ruler, he deserved their loyalty. As a man, he deserved their honesty.

Amonmose loved her, and no matter how hard the advisors tried, they could not change that.

Latmay took a deep breath. “Pharaoh, there is something you should know...” He paused, wondering how to tell him. A sharp rap at the door made him jump like a nervous feline.

“Yes?” Amonmose called.

Baal opened the door. “The grand vizier has arrived.”

“Give me a few moments before sending him in.”

Baal nodded and closed the door again.

“Continue with what you were saying, doctor.”

Latmay gave the closed door a wary look. “It-it was of no importance,” he said. “I only thought you should know that it is possible you do know this woman while no one else does. You may have met her in your travels, or you may be having a clandestine affair, which no one is privy to.” He closed his bag and walked toward the door. “You should not be afraid of these dreams, Pharaoh. They may very well be the start to helping you regain your memory.”

Amonmose nodded thoughtfully. “Thank you, Latmay. You have been very helpful, as always.”

The doctor smiled shyly before walking out. He had not been nearly as helpful as he could have been. But in time, he would make up for it. It might cost

him his life, but dying honorably was better than living foolishly.



In the weeks that followed, Amonmose slowly regained his confidence. He'd mastered his history lessons on Egypt and the surrounding countries, and had settled into his role as Pharaoh. The beautiful woman still haunted his dreams, but less frequently, and her presence was more of a comfort to him than anything else.

As his confidence rose, he began making decisions on his own. He arranged for a midday meal in his chambers with the advisors to tell them his news.

They all sat down to a lavish feast, featuring dishes Amonmose knew each of his advisors would like.

Hai filled his plate. "Pharaoh, how did you know I like roasted pig with dried plums?"

"I made some inquiries."

Meketen eyed him curiously. "What other *inquiries* have you been making, Sire?"

Amonmose shrugged "I have learned that as Pharaoh, I can find out practically anything about anyone I want to—except myself, of course." He smiled politely and took a sip of wine from his goblet. "That is one of the disadvantages of amnesia. I am at the mercy of others to help me solve my own mysterious past."

"And we are delighted to assist in any way that we can," Nadesh said. "You

have made exceptional progress. You should be proud of your efforts.”

“I agree. That is precisely why I called all of you here today. I am now ready to resume my role as Pharaoh.”

Meketen paused in lifting his wine goblet. He set it back down with a self-conscious smile. “While it is true you have progressed a great deal, it is still far too soon for you to assume your duties, Sire. We have taken over all of your public functions so you can take your time recovering. You need not worry about making any hasty decisions.”

Amonmose turned and stared at Meketen, boring into him. “I am not asking for your permission. I am telling you what I am going to do. I called you here as a courtesy.”

Hai broke in before Meketen could respond. “It sounds like you are more than ready, Pharaoh. If you want to start out by making a few appearances, we shall arrange it.”

Amonmose gave him a patient look. “I am capable of *arranging* anything that needs to be done. I will make my first formal appearance three days from now.” He glanced at each of his advisors one by one. “My first act as Pharaoh will be to find my queen.”

Shocked silence hung over the table. Then all three advisors began speaking at once. Nadesh’s deep voice drowned out the others. “This is quite a coincidence,”

he said. "Before the Hyksos battle, you discussed taking a bride."

"Truly?" Amonmose arched an eyebrow. Latmay had told him that he had not fancied any particular woman.

"Indeed. You were concerned about carrying on the royal lineage. You had your eye on a beautiful redhead named Zahra. And I agree, she would be a perfect match."

Amonmose lifted his hand in objection. "The woman I choose will not be any ordinary woman. She must possess loyalty, poise, intelligence, ambition, and political savvy. She must have beauty beyond compare, with dark skin, beautiful eyes, and delicate bone structure."

Nadesh's dark brow furrowed. "It sounds as if you are looking for one particular woman."

"Perhaps."

"Is this the woman from your dreams? I have told you, no such person exists."

Amonmose slammed his goblet of wine down on the table, spilling most of the contents. "She does exist, and I will find her! Send out a royal summons immediately. No, make it a mandate. Failure to comply is an offense punishable by death. I want all of the women within Thebes and the neighboring cities assembled. Whether they are single or married, I want to get a good look at each

and every one of them.”

“And what if she is not among them?” Meketen ventured. “What will you do then?”

“She will be there. I know it.”

“Meketen brings wisdom to this issue, Nadesh said. “If this mysterious woman does not show up, you will need to choose someone. It hardly seems appropriate to assemble all the women and look them over simply to dismiss them.”

Amonmose stood and slowly stroked his goatee, looking at each of his advisors in turn. “Am I not the Pharaoh?” he asked eventually.

“You are,” Nadesh answered.

“Am I not the divine law of this land?”

“Yes.”

He leaned his fists against the table. “Then, I care nothing of wounded feelings and what you consider inappropriate. I am Pharaoh, and I answer to no one!”

Nadesh took a deep breath before speaking. “Your command is our pleasure, Sire. In five days time, the women will be here as you have ordered.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Mutema cradled Kama's head in her lap. She had been sick for days, sapped of life. She had no appetite and slept more than she should. Mutema rocked them both slowly and coughed, a hard tearing sound. She bent, convulsing, and struggled to breathe between hacks. Six weeks in this dark, damp dungeon was taking its toll. Today, she had finally able to convince the guard that Kama was in need of medical attention.

When the cell door opened, she was shocked to see Latmay standing there, disheveled, as if he'd just been roused from his bed.

He seemed just as surprised to see her as she was to see him.

"What deception is this?" he asked the guard. "I was told there was a patient in critical need of my services. Why have you locked these women down here?"

"Orders," the guard answered tersely.

Latmay's jaw worked for a moment. "Ord— Do you know who these women are? When the Pharaoh learns of this, he'll have your head!"

The guard stared at him. "The Pharaoh was the one to give the order."

Latmay's mouth dropped, but he quickly composed himself. "I'll need some privacy to examine the patient," he told the guard. "I won't be long."

“Take your time.” The guard shrugged and ambled back to his post.

The moment the door was closed, Mutema rushed to hug him. “Latmay? What have we done? Why has Amonmose sentenced us here?”

Latmay pushed slowly from her embrace. “This is not the Pharaoh’s doing,” he told them both. “His advisors are acting on his behalf. They have taken over all of his duties, and I am certain they are the ones responsible for this treachery.”

“But how can that be?” Kama asked, her voice weak. She lifted her head to look at him.

Had they lived in ignorance so long? Of course. Everything had been kept a secret. Latmay sighed and motioned for Mutema to sit. “What I have to say is not easy. Amonmose was injured during battle. When we found him, he was unconscious. His body was caked in dirt and mud, and an arrow was deeply embedded in his shoulder. He’d also suffered a nearly fatal blow to the head. After I’d tended his wounds and cleaned him up, he finally came to, but he had no memory of the event.”

Mutema frowned. “I don’t understand what that has to do with—”

“He has no memory of anything.” He paused. “He did not recall any details of his past. He didn’t even know he was Pharaoh.” Both women gasped. Latmay continued. “The advisors decided it was in everyone’s best interest if the Pharaoh’s condition were kept a secret. He’s been sequestered in his room since the night he

returned from Hermopolis, allowed to see only me and his advisors.”

Kama’s voice was a whisper. “That must have been why Baal refused to let me see him.”

“Yes...they are treating him like a child, intervening in every aspect of his life. Anyone who is a threat to their plans is swiftly dealt with.” Latmay looked at Kama, and he put the pieces together. “That explains why you are here. Amonmose saw you in the garden one night. When he asked about you, his advisors told him no such woman existed. They convinced him that he must have been dreaming.”

“I thought I felt someone watching me,” Kama said. “But when I looked up at his window, I saw no one.”

Mutema shook her head and peered at Latmay. “We must do something.”

His tone was grave. “We are dealing with extremely powerful men. They threatened to kill me if I told anyone. What can I do? Whom can I trust?”

Kama sat up. “Mother is right. They are demons, and they must be stopped.” She tried to stand, but fell back down.

Mutema pulled Kama close. “She has been sick like this for days,” she said to Latmay.

“Tell me about this illness.”

“She has fainting spells and nausea. One moment, she is ravenous, then, she has lost any desire to eat. I think it’s this damp. We must get her out of here.”

Latmay took Kama's slender wrist in his hand and listened for her pulse. He gently felt her lymph nodes along the graceful curve of her neck. He let out a long breath. "You are right, Mutema. It is vital that she be removed from this prison immediately."

Mutema steeled herself and took Kama's hand. "Please help her. I cannot lose her again."

Latmay smiled grimly. "You misunderstand. What I mean that a prison is certainly no place to have a baby."

"A baby?"

He looked at Kama. "I will have to perform the test to be sure, but from my diagnosis, it appears that you are pregnant."

"I—I am to be a mother?" She blinked at him.

"It seems so."

A look of conviction crossed her face. "This babe belongs to Amonmose."

"I believe it."

"He...has no clue that I carry his child!" she said. "The future leader of Egypt is growing in my belly, we *must* do something." She tried to rise again, but Latmay urged her back down.

"I want you to get plenty of rest and make sure that you eat," he told her. "You may experience more nausea, but it's to be expected. The sickness is different

for each woman. It could last a few weeks or a few months, depending on the difficulty of the pregnancy. In the meantime, I will try to speak to Amonmose without anyone knowing. I shall return shortly.”

Latmay glanced back as he left. If he could not get to Amonmose, there would be no one else left to help them.

Latmay arrived at the Pharaoh’s chambers out of breath. He’d hurried through the palace as fast as his legs could carry him. This calamity had gone on long enough. It was time the Pharaoh knew what his advisors were doing under the guise of *protecting* him.

Baal stood guard at the door, along with three other armed men. “The Pharaoh gave orders that no visitors were to be permitted entrance today,” he said.

Latmay wondered if this dictate was from Amonmose or his advisors. “I have brought something to assuage his headaches,” he said innocently.

Baal shook his head. “I cannot allow it.”

Latmay’s eyes narrowed in thought. He stepped closer to Baal and lowered his voice. “Tell me,” he whispered. “Do you really think the advisors should deny the Pharaoh the medical care he needs?”

Baal shifted. “No, and I do not agree with everything they do, but this request came directly from the mouth of the Pharaoh himself. He has asked me not

to let anyone in.”

“But I am his doctor.”

“*Anyone*, Latmay. Not you, not the advisors, not anyone.”

Latmay lifted an eyebrow in surprise. “He does not wish to see the advisors either? Why not? What is he doing in there?”

Baal gave him a long measured look. “Preparing for his wedding.”

Hours later, the palace was buzzing with news of the Pharaoh’s mandate. When Latmay learned that Amonmose was determined to choose a wife, he rushed back to the prison to give Kama the news. She took it better than he expected. There were no tears or tantrums. She held herself with the composure of a queen.

“I cannot let evil triumph over good,” she said. “I owe that to Amonmose. My child has a destiny to fulfill, and I must make sure he succeeds. I will not be a victim, waiting for events to unfold. I love Amonmose. Anyone who is his enemy is my enemy. The advisors must pay for what they’ve done.”

Latmay considered Kama’s words. “I too want them to suffer for their treachery, but what can we do? I am an old man. You are locked in here. How can the three of us challenge their authority?”

“You mean four of us,” Kama corrected, and slowly smiled.

“Four?”

Kama looked at her mother. “A wise woman once told me that I can use my brain for more than just reading and writing.”

Mutema smiled. “Women who didn’t have the opportunity to be educated had to rely on their feminine wiles to get what they wanted.”

The two women looked at one another and laughed.

Latmay scowled. “Ladies, I fail to see the humor in this. What do you mean ‘four?’ What are you planning?”

Kama sobered and gave him an intense stare. “I have an idea. It is bold, and it could get all of us killed.”

He sighed. “Then we’ll be no worse off than we are now.”

“Precisely. Now, this is what we are going to do...”



Amonmose sat with his advisors in the great room listening to the battle report from his chief deputy. The man stood, legs apart, his tall, stalwart frame at attention. “All soldiers have been accounted for,” he said. “Fifty-one are dead and seventy-four were injured.”

“Have their wounds been tended to?” Amunmose asked.

“Yes. Most are recovering with no ill effects.”

“And our chariots? “

“All one hundred have been recovered. Approximately twenty-five suffered the usual damage and have since been repaired.”

“Good. Stay prepared. We never know when we may need them urgently.”

The chief deputy nodded, then seemed to hesitate. “There is just one more thing. There was one chariot that had an unusual break in the wooden axle between the two wheels.”

“Unusual?” Nadesh asked. “How so?”

“It was not a normal break, jagged from the stress of impact. It appeared to have been purposely severed. And...” He took a deep breath before continuing. “Some of the spokes on one wheel had been removed.”

“Why is this so odd?” Meketen asked. “Cogs are frequently lost, causing the spokes to loosen.”

“True, but each chariot was inspected before battle. There were no loose or missing spokes.”

Meketen’s eyes narrowed. “Perhaps you missed one.”

The man shook his head. “Not likely. Especially considering the fact that this particular chariot belonged to the Pharaoh.” He looked directly at Amonmose. “I personally inspected it before battle.”

“Are you suggesting my chariot was tampered with?” Amomose asked, shocked.

“I am.”

Nadesh frowned. “How can you be certain it belonged to Amonmose?”

“The First Charioteer’s shield was still securely fastened to the side.”

Silence filled the room as the implication of what the commander was saying sunk in. Finally, Amonmose spoke. “Thank you, for your report, commander. You are free to leave. However,” he said, “you are to discuss this information with no one else. Do you understand?”

The commander nodded. “Yes. On my life, I pledge to you that no one else will learn of this.”

Amonmose sat back somberly as he watched the man leave. A sandstorm of emotions spiraled through him. Could the commander be right? Could someone have deliberately tampered with his chariot? Did someone want him dead? Whoever it was had nearly succeeded.

He stared uneasily at his advisors. It had to be someone close to him with access to the chariots. But who? He shook his head, confused. He had not a clue. But one thing was certain: He had to be more cautious now than ever.

Chapter Twenty-two

Five days had passed since the Pharaoh's royal mandate, and women from Egypt's finest cities to its most remote outposts arrived by the masses. They were led to a great room, where a lavish feast was offered for their enjoyment.

There were platters of succulent duck, roasted pig, and curried goat. The tantalizing smells of fresh perch, mullet, and sun-dried catfish filled the air. More exotic dishes included pigeons stuffed with sweet onions and figs; wild geese smothered in a tangy sauce of garlic and honey; and roasted lamb with cabbage and imported apples.

Smaller tables were overflowing with pomegranates, dates, peaches, melons, cucumbers, turnips, beets, lentils, chickpeas and beans. Anyone with a sweet tooth could help themselves to the tables laden with raisin bread, sweet cakes, and honey. It seemed no expense had been spared. Nadesh watched the stream of females that poured into the room and smirked. There were many beautiful women here today. They had come from far and wide, in all shapes and sizes. Some had come willingly. Others came because they had no choice. If he were Pharaoh, he certainly knew which one of these beauties he would choose for nothing so respectable as marriage. He already had two unfulfilling wives.

Nadesh eyed one of the women that passed by him. One night between her legs would be worth suffering any disfavor from his wives. He licked his lips. Any other time, he would have approached her, but today, he had to remain focused. There was only one woman he wanted Amonmose to notice.

He searched the room until he found her. Zahra laughed and threw her head back, her cinnamon colored hair swept gracefully from side to side. He called Zahra his niece, but she was niece to his sister's husband. He'd met her at a family gathering, and he was immediately struck by her beauty. His wives' homely looks paled in comparison.

He'd considered bedding her, but it was much too dangerous. If his wives to find out, one or both could divorce him, and he'd be forced to financially compensate them. He would have to return each wife's dowry, all of her personal effects that she brought into the marriage, and any funds given to him at the beginning of the marriage for her maintenance. Not only would he be embarrassed, he would be damn near penniless.

Instead, Nadesh befriended Zahra and kept her around in case he needed her. He soon learned that her greedy ambition rivaled her stunning beauty. It was a deadly combination, but one that could work in his favor. With Zahra as queen, he could ensure not only his position, but also his continued wealth for many years to come. Now, all he had to do was get Amonmose to notice her



Latmay's heart was palpitating. He hoped Kama's plan would work. Being a doctor, he'd spent all morning at the temple, praying for their success. If they were discovered, it was certain death. He was not afraid of dying, but to die in vain was another matter all together.

As he made his way down the familiar dark, damp hallways, a mysterious figure shrouded in long, dark robes and an oversized hood followed him closely. The person nearly blended in with the abysmal surroundings.

The guard looked up as Latmay approached. "I am glad you made it so quickly," he told Latmay. "The young woman is feeling very ill again today."

Latmay nodded. He had been anxiously waiting all day for Kama's summons. "If you don't mind, I'll need some privacy to examine her."

"Of course." As the guard prepared to unlock the door, the dark figure stepped from the shadows. The guard caught the movement and turned suddenly, grabbing his sword. "Who's that?" he demanded.

Latmay casually looked over his shoulder. "Oh, you needn't be worried," he said easily. "It is only my assistant."

The guard eyed the shapeless form suspiciously. The person, a woman based on the kohl-rimmed eyes, was draped from head to toe in dark garments, her head covered and her face veiled. "Why is she dressed in that manner?" he asked.

Latmay shrugged. “When she was a young girl, she was burned in a fire. The entire right side of her body and her face were left horribly disfigured.” He leaned in and whispered to the guard. “She is very sensitive about it, so she keeps herself covered.”

The guard’s eyes narrowed. “I will see these burns for myself.” He inclined his head toward the woman. “Remove your hood.”

Latmay frowned. “Is that really necessary?”

The guard’s fingers tightened around the hilt of his sword. “Yes.”

The woman seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then, she tentatively raised both arms and pulled her hood away from her face to reveal lumpy scars on the right side of her forehead and cheekbone. The effect was gruesome.

The guard released his grip on his sword. “You may proceed,” he said.

The woman did not speak, but instead gave him an embarrassed look before covering her face and head again.



Inside the cell, the four of them stared silently at each other.

“Well,” Latmay prompted. “It’s now or never.”

The cloaked figure hastily pulled her robes off, and Kama immediately hugged her. “Dyzet...”

“I missed you so much,” Dyzet whispered. “I had no idea you were being

confined here. Thank the gods you are in good health.”

“I have missed you as well,” Kama replied. “But we’ve no time for reunions. We must get changed quickly.”

Mutema peered at Dyzet. “How did you make your face appear disfigured?”

The young woman puffed with pride. “I melted wax onto a piece of parchment, and then while it was still warm, I applied it to my face and molded it against my skin. Now, it has hardened, and it will stay put until I peel it away.”

“How clever!” Mutema touched the wax on Dyzet’s cheek.

“Latmay warned me that the guards might demand to see my face, so I had to be prepared.”

Kama hugged her again. “I am honored to call you my dearest friend. Thank you so much for risking yourself for me.”

Tears welled up in Dyzet’s eyes. “I would gladly risk my life to help someone as deserving as you.”

As Latmay kept watch, Kama and Dyzet switched clothes. Beneath her robes, Dyzet carried everything Kama needed. Within minutes, the transformation was complete.

Dyzet took her place in Kama’s bed and covered herself from head to toe. Anyone peeking in would only see a figure huddled under the blankets. It was the perfect ruse.

Latmay hurried them along. “Ladies, we must go. We don’t have much longer.”

Kama embraced her mother quickly. They had already said their goodbyes last night. They both knew that if Kama’s plan was not successful, they might never see each other again. Kama felt a range of emotions coursing through her. She squeezed her mother’s hand reassuringly and gave her a silent nod of encouragement before veiling her face and covering her head with the large hood. She took a deep breath and stepped into the hallway. The guard was nowhere to be seen.

“He must have gone to relieve himself,” Latmay said. “Let us hurry.”

He took Kama’s arm and quickly led her down the dim corridor. Kama knew that once they made it to the upper levels, they would not be stopped. Latmay’s presence in the palace was commonplace. No one would even think to question him or his “assistant.”

They had just reached the end of the corridor when a voice called out, “Halt!”

Kama wanted to run, but she knew they would not make it far. Besides, she was with child. If she tripped and fell, she could lose the baby. She steeled herself as not one, but two guards approached, pointing at her.

“Is that her?” one of the guards asked.

“Yes, that’s her.” The guard from before gave them a peevish grin. “My friend wants to see the woman’s face.”

Fear shot through Kama’s body. Now, she would surely be exposed, and both Latmay and Dyzet would certainly be killed.

“Please,” Latmay pleaded. “There is no need for this.”

“Take your hood off,” the second guard ordered Kama.

Latmay moved to stand in front of her. “How can you ask this of her? This is an insult. She is a human being, worthy of respect.”

Without even meaning to, Kama began weeping. Her shoulders hunched in true sorrow. Her sobs echoed through the dark corridors, sounding like a wounded animal stranded in the darkness.

Taking her cue, Latmay put his arm around her. “Please don’t cry, dear. They will not hurt you. They just want to look at you.”

Kama wailed louder, and laid her head on Latmay’s shoulder, awash in tears.

“See what you’ve done?” Latmay shot a look at the guards. “Crushed the spirit of a fragile girl, a gifted assistant in the Pharaoh’s employ.” He glared at them.

Guilt washed over the features of the first guard. “Get her out of here,” he muttered. “We’ve got prisoners to tend to anyway.”

Latmay offered a perfunctory nod and quickly led Kama away. Only when

they'd reached the end of the corridor out of earshot of the guards, did he speak. "Kama, I can tell you that performance was worthy of applause. I never knew you were such a talented actor."

Kama still clutched his arm. She squeezed it tight as she sniffed back tears. "That, my friend, was no act."



Amonmose gazed into the sea of faces assembled in the great room. It was filled to capacity with women of every shape, size, and age imaginable. They milled about, talking to each other and eating the variety of delicious food that was offered. Amonmose sat at the end of the room, lounging comfortably in a gilded chair adorned with his signature lions' claws. Many women cast promising looks in his direction; some even gazed boldly. Yet others pretended not to look at him at all.

"I bet I can tell you what you're thinking," he heard a soft voice purr.

Amonmose turned to find a stunning woman standing beside him. Her lips pressed together in a sexy pout. No other woman in the room had dared to approach him. He was impressed by her bravado. "I have serious doubts that anyone can predict my thoughts at this very moment," he replied.

She fixed him with an intense stare. "I'm willing to wager that I can."

He smiled, amused. . "What are the stakes?"

Her eyes swept the length of his body. “A night with me.”

“And if you win?”

“The same.”

He chuckled. “So, I have nothing to lose?”

“And neither do I.”

Amonmose stroked his goatee. “That sounds like an interesting proposition coming from a beautiful, albeit strange woman.”

Her expression changed, hovering between anger and shock. “Stranger? You do not remember our last encounter? We shared a passionate kiss and you spoke sweet words of tenderness.”

Amonmose stared at her. Surely, he would remember being intimate with someone as alluring as she. “How did I come to know you?” he asked.

“I am, Zahra, your grand vizier’s niece.” She politely explained, eyeing him. “Most men find me unforgettable.”

Amonmose grimaced. *Nadesh*. Now it all made sense. This was the redhead he spoke of. “You are indeed a woman of immeasurable beauty,” he told her. “And I am certain our paths have crossed before. But our encounter could not have been that impressive—because I do not recall any of it.”

Zahra rebounded with a seductive rebuttal of her own. “Just because you do not remember something, that doesn’t mean it never happened.”

He watched the exaggerated sway of her hips as she walked away. He would have to keep a wary eye on Zahra.



When Kama and Latmay arrived to the great room, they found it a flurry of activity. Crowds of women surrounded tables abundant with fruits, meat, and a variety of delicious dishes. Wine and beer flowed freely. Dancers with tambourines and zills twirled about, flaunting their flexible bodies. In the background, the sweet sounds of harps and flutes floated lazily through the air.

Kama's eyes darted back and forth across the room. The animated chattering matched her frantic heartbeat. There were so many women here. Some were attractive. Some were not. She could feel their curious stares upon her, but she refused to make eye contact with any of them.

Latmay whispered in her ear. "There he is."

She followed the doctor's gaze. For the first time in nearly two months, she was able to look at the man she loved. Her breath caught in her throat. Time stood still as she stared at him, drinking in the sight of his powerful body and his handsome face. He was dressed regally in a short tunic crafted of the finest linen. A thick, gold necklace encrusted with turquoise, coral, and lapis lazuli graced his neck. At his wrists were equally stunning gold bracelets, adorned with gemstones and engraved with ornate designs. She'd never seen him look so ceremonial. His

strong, slender fingers protectively gripped his royal flail. And he wore his intimidating crown, sending a clear message to everyone that he was indeed in charge.

His body was exactly as she remembered. Beautiful bronzed skin. Strong, taut muscles. Lean, chiseled physique. She shivered as she recalled all the intimate moments they'd shared. Even now, her skin was tingling, desperately itching for his tender touch.

At his side was a woman for which she harbored no love. *Zahra*. She was flaunting herself in front of him and coyly batting her long eyelashes. Kama clenched her fists. She wondered if the woman knew Amonmose had amnesia.

Latmay touched her arm. "Be at ease," he said. "You must stick to the plan. An argument with Zahra will do us no good."

Kama nodded. Latmay was right. She was glad to be hidden beneath her veil and robes. Her anonymity comforted her. "Take me to him," she whispered.



Amonmose shifted restlessly. Like a preying hyena, Zahra had returned to lavish him with compliments and lustful promises. Her efforts were comical, but he was spending so much time with her that it was hard for him to focus on anyone else. Then, he noticed a familiar face approaching him.

He smiled in greeting. “Latmay, I am surprised to see you here.”

Latmay returned his smile and bowed slightly. “Your mandate required the presence of all women today, so I made haste in getting here.”

Amonmose frowned slightly. “I don’t understand.”

“A thousand pardons.” Latmay bowed again. “I am here to make certain this young lady is properly chaperoned.” He extended his arm with a flourish. “May I present my niece?”

Amonmose’s gaze settled on the veiled figure standing beside Latmay. She was draped from head to toe in loose-fitting, dark garments. A hood and veil concealed her face so all he could see were her dark, sparking eyes.

He smiled patiently. “I share a love of mystery perhaps even more so than the next man. But do you think your niece could indulge me by removing her veil?”

Without further hesitation, Latmay pulled off the veil and the oversized hood covering the woman’s head.

Amonmose’s breath vanished. She had skin as smooth and dark as the rich soil that prospered beside the Nile. Her kohl-lined, dark eyes twinkled like stars in the night sky. Long braids framed her exquisite face and cascaded down her shoulders. She removed her robe and he saw that she wore a finely spun, white sheath dress embroidered with gold threads. Gold bracelets adorned her arms, and at her neck was an amulet of the goddess Pakhet.

His heart kicked wildly. He knew what lay beneath her clothing. He'd seen the supple curves of her breasts, the pucker of her dark nipples, the rising swell of her firm backside, and the gentle slope of her thighs. He'd seen it all before. He knew where she liked to be kissed. He knew how to pleasure her. He'd made love to her many times in his dreams. *This was she!*

Standing before him in the flesh, she was even more bewitching than in his dreams. She openly gazed back at him as if she knew him, as if she was familiar with him, comfortable—as if they shared a secret that no one else knew.

The woman bowed. "It is an honor to be in your presence, Pharaoh."

He stood and silently approached her. When he spoke, it was for her ears only. "You are the most ravishing creature that I've ever laid eyes upon," he whispered softly to her. "Tell me your name."

"I am called Kama," she answered.

Amonmose studied her, staring into the mysterious depths of her eyes. Something held him captive in her gaze, pulled him closer. Her look was almost pleading, as if begging him to do something. But what?

"Do I know you?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "In some ways, you know me better than I know myself."

Amonmose knew she was telling the truth. On unsteady legs, he walked back to his chair and sat. From the corner of his eye, he saw Nadesh approaching.

Nadesh advanced toward Amonmose, barely containing his smile. Zahra sat on the other side of the Pharaoh. Perhaps she had finally made an impression on him.

“I have made my choice,” Amonmose told him.

Nadesh followed the Pharaoh’s gaze to the dark woman standing in front of him. Nadesh’s gate faltered. *Kama!* How had she managed to get free? And look more exquisite than the last time he saw her.

He masked his horror with a look of false concern. He took a seat next to Amonmose and leaned over, whispering in a conspiratorial tone. “Sire,” he spoke cautiously. “There are many women here worthy of your affections. This foreigner cannot possibly be your choice. Let me introduce you to my niece—”

“Silence!” Amonmose hissed. “You may dismiss all the other women—at once!”

Zahra flashed Kama a contemptuous look before slinking away.

The Pharaoh’s other advisors approached quickly and visibly held their tongues. Kama had to admire their tact. She forced herself not to laugh out loud at their eerie silence, instead, focusing on Amonmose and holding his intense gaze with her own.

Abruptly, Amonmose stood and turned to Latmay. "Thank you," he said. "You have helped me find the precious gem I have been seeking for months. I am in your debt."

Latmay nodded graciously, but remained silent. There was still one last piece of the plan to put in place.

Amonmose extended his hand to Kama. "Would you join me for a private dinner?"

When their palms connected, it was like a lightning strike. A powerful spark spiraled through Kama, heating her body from head to toe. For so long, she'd yearned for his touch. She missed him more than she'd thought humanly possible to miss anyone, including her own mother.

The moment Amonmose and Kama had left the great room, Latmay spoke. "Gentlemen, I can see that you are astounded as well as infuriated by Kama's presence today. I'll wager that this turn of events was not a part of your grand plan. When you imprisoned her, I'm sure you were only thinking of the Pharaoh's best interest." He smirked. "In the short time I have known her, I have found Kama to be a very intelligent and resourceful young woman. She also has a memory as long as the Nile."

"What do you imply?" Nadesh sneered.

Latmay's voice was low and soft, but there was no mistaking the underlying threat. "Kama has always been the Pharaoh's choice. No matter how hard you try to control his attraction to her, there is no denying the chemistry between them. Even with amnesia, he still dreamt of her.

"She was brought to Thebes under protest. She did not ask to be captured, and she did not ask for your hatred of her. She was merely a victim. Yet, each one of you, in your greed and wickedness, sought to destroy her. You have far overstepped your bounds as council to the Pharaoh. *If* he were to learn of your deception, he would have all of your heads, for certain."

"If?" Meketen prompted. "Why do I have the feeling we are about to be asked to make an unyielding sacrifice for the Pharaoh's paramour?"

Latmay shrugged. "She will be queen. There is no doubt about it. Even now, she carries his child. The sacrifice you refer to is a small price to pay for what you have done. But, what do I know? I value my life far more than my pride. Perhaps your life is of no consequence to you."

Hai blubbered, tears in his eyes. "I never wanted to do this."

"You're just as guilty as the rest of us," Nadesh bit out. "We never forced you."

Latmay cleared his throat. "Kama has laid out specific terms that you are to abide by if you wish to save your sorry hides." He glared at each one of them. "If I

were you, I'd do exactly as she commands.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Amonmose closed the door to his chambers and slowly turned to face Kama.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Their eyes locked, but his gaze still showed little recognition. Cool disappointment slipped through her veins. She thought surely the shock of seeing her would cure him of his amnesia.

“I am Kama,” she answered gently.

“You know my advisors,” he said. It was more of statement, than a question.

“Nadesh and I are old acquaintances,” she offered. Amonmose lifted an eyebrow. “We have not always seen eye to eye.”

“I see,” he said, and he did seem to understand more than she had said.

“Who are you to me?”

Kama gazed into his eyes and spoke softly. “I am your lover.”

He stared at her, his expressions transforming from surprise to acceptance and then to anger. “Where have you been?” he demanded. “Why did you not come to me all these weeks? Did you know I’d lost my memory?”

“I was told you did not wish to see anyone. I just learned of your amnesia yesterday,” she replied. Kama did not elaborate on her prison confinement, as part

of her deal with Amonmose's advisors.

"I gave no such order," he said, growing thoughtful. "I believe my advisors were operating without my knowledge." He sighed. "The fault lies with me. I should have taken control sooner."

Kama's heart grew heavy. "You cannot blame yourself. You have known those men your entire life. You had no reason not to trust them at the time."

Amonmose walked to the window and stared out into the garden. "I saw you one night, down there," he told her. "I dreamt of you many times. I wish you had been here to help me. He turned to look at her as she took her place beside him. "The garden was our special place," she said, caressing his face. "I am heartsick that we could not be together when you needed me most. But I am here for you now. And I will never leave your side. I made that promise to you once, and I intend to keep it."

"There is still so much I do not know. Tell me everything about yourself..."

Kama sighed and gazed out the window. The past...she wanted to forget the past and instead talk about their future. She wanted him to hold her. She wanted to believe this nightmare was over. She looked at him. "I was born Kama Nubemheb," she said. "I lived with my parents in Nubia until I was twelve. My father was a very cruel man. So, one day my mother and I ran away to Kerma."

Amonmose had a look of melancholy in his eyes. "We have something in

common. I also lost my father when I was twelve.”

A flurry of hope surged through Kama. “You remember that?”

“No, it was told to me by Latmay. Please, continue.”

“We lived comfortably due to the hospitality of my uncle. He provided for us and educated me until I turned twenty.”

“And then what happened?”

She smiled. “I met you.”

Amonmose returned her smile. “And what of your mother? Is she as beautiful as you?”

“You asked me that when we first met,” she said, smiling. “Yes, she is beautiful, inside and out. She is a wise woman who passed along her streak of independence to me.”

Amonmose gazed fondly at her. “You speak of her with great reverence. She sounds like someone I would very much like to meet.”

Kama grinned. “You already have. In fact, you were so worried that I would be homesick for her that you went to Kerma to bring her back and unite us together. She lives in the palace now.”

“Truly, did I do that?” He seemed surprised.

“Yes.”

He gazed into her eyes “Then, I must be in love with you.”

Kama returned his look. Any other time she would be lost in the bottomless depths of his honey-colored eyes. “Only you can know the answer to that, though you did profess your love to me. We’ve shared many intimate moments, and you let me see a side of you that no one else was privy to. You have a tenderness that melts my insides. When you touch me, I know no greater pleasure. For me, there is no other that can lay claim to my body or my heart.”

Needing no further convincing, Amonmose pulled her against him and captured her lips with a heart-stopping kiss. His tongue swept inside her mouth, taking command and reclaiming her as his. She let herself be ravished by his touch as his hands roamed across her body.

Somehow, they ended up on the bed, and in one swift movement, he’d pulled her tunic up to her waist. She found herself lying beneath him, legs apart, welcoming him into the soft folds of her womanhood. She gasped with pleasure as he entered her. His stroke was just as she remembered. Bold and powerful. Yet, tender and caring. She clasped her legs around his back and pulled him inside her, wanting to feel every inch of him.

Amonmose felt currents of excitement ripple through him. His body was already lingering over passion’s precipice from the moment he laid eyes on her. Her touch had only served to ignite the smoldering fire within him. He groaned with

pleasure as he entered her warm haven. Kama's body was made for his. She smelled like fresh jasmine and she tasted like deep, burgundy wine.

Her velvety skin clung tightly to his as if they were one entity. As he thrust deeper and deeper, he felt her hips grind against his, matching the intensity of his stroke. The soft warmth of her core consumed him, and he could feel her sinewy walls tugging on him, coaxing his essence from his manhood. He buried his face in her sweet smelling hair, and within seconds, he found himself engulfed in a red-hot chasm of ecstasy. His body was wracked with forceful spasms as he emptied his seed into her.

Kama immediately followed. She bucked and clung to him, panting, squeezing, drawing out the last thread of euphoria. Then, he felt her body finally relax as the last of her passion ebbed away.

Afterwards, they lay nestled in each other's arms. Amonmose held her tight in his embrace. "I am fortunate to have you, Kama. And now that I have found you again, I will let nothing separate us. Any man who tries to do so will pay with his life."

"I believe you," Kama said solemnly. If only he knew how close he'd come to fulfilling that very prophecy.



Sometime during the night, Amonmose heard a light rapping on his door. He frowned in irritation at being awoken from his pleasant slumber. He reluctantly left the warmth of Kama's tender flesh to answer the insistent summons. He found Baal outside his door holding a note.

"A thousand pardons, Sire," he whispered. "This note was delivered by a royal page who requested that you read it immediately."

Amonmose sleepily rubbed his eyes as he accepted the delicate piece of parchment. He unrolled it and read it slowly.

Pharaoh, you are encircled by a ring of deceit. There is a traitor in your midst who seeks to destroy you and seize your crown. Meet me in your private temple and I will reveal this treacherous snake to you.

Your Humble Servant, Meketen.

Amonmose's eyes narrowed as he read the note again. He turned to Baal. "I must go," he said curtly. "I will return soon."

Baal jerked to attention. "I will come with you."

"No." Amonmose held up his hand. "I need you to keep vigil over Kama while I am gone."

Baal placed a strong hand on the Pharaoh's arm. "It is foolish to go alone," he said. "I cannot, in good conscience, agree to this. Especially not after your *accident* with the snake."

Amonmose's brow furrowed in confusion. "What encounter do you speak of?"

Baal's face darkened. "Before you lost your memory, you were attacked by a poisonous snake while you were hunting. You killed the serpent, but you were lucky to escape with your life. You confided to me that you believed your life was in jeopardy. You told me to keep my eyes open." He paused and looked at the note in Amonmose's hand. "My eyes do not like what they see right now."

Amonmose let the information sink in. There were probably those among him who viewed his amnesia as a blessing. If there was someone close to him who was trying to harm him, he or she would be grateful that he did not recall past events. A lapse in memory would alleviate any previous suspicions he harbored. It could also give an enemy a dangerous advantage over him.

There were few people he felt he could trust, including his advisors. Nadesh was the most ambitious, shamelessly putting his agenda before everyone else's. The way he constantly peddled his niece, Zahra, was evidence of his single-minded aspirations. Hai was a good man, but he was soft. He could easily be manipulated. Someone with no backbone was the worst enemy to have. Lastly, there was Meketen. He ranked somewhere in the middle of the other two. He was intelligent, he was observant, and he was usually the mediator amongst the three. If Amonmose had to trust someone, it may as well be him. If Meketen had come

into possession of some information that would give him the upper hand, he had a duty to learn what it was.

“Thank you for your concern, Baal. I will heed your warnings in the future. Tonight, however, I will go alone.” He shook his head when Baal prepared to speak. “You need not worry,” he assured him. “I am meeting with Meketen at my temple. He is one of my closest advisors. What harm could come to me?”



Nadesh paced back and forth. He had not yet left the palace as Kama had instructed. He couldn't believe this was the end. He was done. Finished. Disgraced. His wives would be livid that he'd been relieved of duty. He could not tell them the truth, of course. Everything he'd worked so hard for was ruined. Thanks to Kama.

He smiled ruefully. He had to admit, she had been a worthy adversary. He'd underestimated her from the beginning. She'd outwitted him. At first, he blamed her good fortune on her ability to seduce Latmay. But the more he talked to the old doctor, the more he realized the man loved her like a daughter. The advisors had relied on Latmay to keep his mouth shut, but they hadn't counted on the budding relationship between the two of them.

She'd surprised them all with her ingenuity. She fought like a warrior, taking no prisoners. And in the end, her only request was that the council leave.

She had spared their lives. And she had spared Amonmose the painful knowledge that his advisors were guilty of treason.

He now knew the full extent of Kama's love for Amonmose. He had misjudged her. Anger and frustration had gotten the best of him, and now it was too late. He was banished with nowhere to go. No means to support his family.

His foolishness had ruined him and nearly ruined an innocent girl who deserved, if nothing else, an apology for her suffering. Nadesh stopped. *That was it!* He would apologize. He would go to her and beg her forgiveness. He would make her understand his motives, and he would pledge his allegiance to her from this day forward. He would also gain Amonmose's trust back. He could do it. He had to do it. His future depended on it.

It was late when Nadesh arrived at Amonmose's bedchambers. He found Baal standing guard outside. "I need to see Kama," he said, offering no explanation why. "Kama cannot be disturbed," Baal informed him.

"Please move aside, Baal. My business is important."

"*Kama cannot be disturbed,*" Baal said again. He placed his back against the door and stared stonily ahead as if Nadesh did not exist.

Nadesh balked. Baal had never used a disrespectful tone with him. What had changed? He doubted that Baal knew of Kama's ultimatum to him. She'd

promised that only Latmay and the advisors themselves would be aware of it. If there was anything he knew for certain about Kama, it was that she kept her word.

“Baal, it is imperative that I see Kama right now. I have an urgent message that cannot wait a moment longer.”

Baal smirked. “First Meketen and now you. Oddly, there seems to be a multitude of pressing matters that cannot wait until daylight.”

Nadesh’s ire spiked . “What nonsense do you speak of? What has Meketen to do with any of this?” Suddenly, Nadesh had a sickening thought. What if Meketen had arrived before him with the same mindset? What if he was ensconced in a private meeting with Kama at this very moment, offering apologies and asking for absolution? He wouldn’t put it past the man. Reaching for the door, he tried to move past Baal. *He must get in to see Kama!*

Baal’s thick fingers quickly wrapped themselves around Nadesh’s long, slender neck. With one brawny hand, Baal lifted Nadesh and shoved him against the chamber door, pinning him tightly against the hard wood. The scuffle was over before it had begun.

Nadesh was practically standing on his toes, wedged between the unyielding door and Baal’s iron grip. “Please!” he choked, in a high-pitched voice. “I must see—”

“Come back in the morning,” Baal cut him off. Normally, he regarded Nadesh as a pesky gnat. In the same way that gnats existed to plague the happy flourishings of fruit and flowers, Nadesh had become a necessary evil that had to be tolerated. Tonight, that tolerance wore thin. It was unsettling to see the Pharaoh summoned in the dead of night by a mysterious note. Then, moments later, Nadesh unexpectedly appeared at his chambers. There could be no good reason for him wanting to see Kama. Amonmose had ordered him to protect her, and that’s exactly what he would do, even if it meant denying the grand vizier access to her.

Before Nadesh could continue his pleadings, Kama pulled open the door, and the strong weight of the wood collapsed behind him. Still, Baal did not lessen his viselike hold. Nadesh flailed in the air with Baal on one side of him and Kama on the other.

Kama stood back in shock. “In the name of all that is holy, what is going on here?” she demanded. She blinked rapidly, allowing her eyes to adjust to the bright light of the corridor.

Baal and Nadesh spoke at the same time, Baal’s deep voice drowning out Nadesh’s incoherent squeals. Kama held both hands up, as if she could physically thwart the cacophony of voices. She motioned to Baal to release Nadesh, then cast

a hostile look at the man who was responsible for her prison sentence. "I thought I made myself clear, Nadesh. What business have you in the palace?" she asked pointedly.

Nadesh rubbed his sore neck. His breathing was shallow, and he stared at Kama, then he took a deep breath and bent before her on one knee. "My Lady, I come asking for your forgiveness."

She sneered. "Now, I am 'Your Lady' when before, I was a common Nubian whore?"

Nadesh swallowed "The error was mine," he admitted. "I used poor judgment. My only fallacy was in believing that I was acting in the best interests of the Pharaoh."

She dropped her jaw. "By lying to him, locking me in prison, and coveting his crown? You make a mockery of me, pretending to be contrite, offering your feeble excuses for your sinister actions." She eyed him with contempt. "You must think me an ignorant buffoon to believe such a lame performance. The only remorse you feel is that your heinous scheme has been uncovered."

Nadesh shook his head and rose to his full height. He looked her straight in the eye when he spoke. "It is true, I have had my way for many years. And I have not always been righteous." He backtracked when he saw her look of rebuff. "I have never been righteous," he corrected himself. "I never had to be. I married

wealthy women, and in my role as grand vizier, I've had money and power. No one ever challenged my authority.

“As second in command to the Pharaoh, I hold great influence. Amonmose respects my opinion, and I am greatly rewarded for my council. I want to be grand vizier and naught else. This position affords me power without the responsibility of answering to the citizens. I answer only to Amonmose. I have never coveted his crown. I had no reason to do so.

“You think I am jealous of him? You are wrong.” He looked at the ground, avoiding her eyes. “I was jealous of *you*. From the moment you arrived, you made Amonmose question himself. He changed. He no longer kept council with me. You were fast becoming his first priority. I worried for myself, and I worried for him. I loved him like a son, and there you were, infiltrating the bond I'd built between us. I didn't know how to handle you,” he admitted. “So, I fought you every chance I got. My foolish hatred blinded me to everything else.” He gave her a pleading look. “I ask for your forgiveness not because I have been caught, but because for the first time in my life, I want to do the honorable thing.”

Kama stared at him, speechless. She'd never seen this side of Nadesh, and she wasn't certain if he could be trusted. He'd made her life miserable since the day he and his men tried to rape her in Aswan. He was evil incarnate. Did she dare believe he could change? She decided she would not grapple with this decision on

her own. She would talk to Mutema in the morning and get her thoughts. She knew her mother slept soundly right now, guarded in her old room by the ever-faithful Shu.

“We will speak again tomorrow,” she told him. “I am tired now and slumber has clouded my thoughts.”

Nadesh nodded. “I should like to speak to Amonmose as well,” he said. “I would like to explain my behavior to him so there is no misunderstanding. I can mend this broken relationship. I give you my vow and my allegiance.”

Kama thought it over. Yes, she would rather have Amonmose present. “When he returns, I will send a page for you.”

Nadesh frowned. “Returns? From where?”

“I...am not sure. When I awoke, he was not with me.” She gave Baal a questioning look. If Amonmose had left during the night, he would know of it.

“He’s gone to meet Meketen,” Baal supplied.

“At this late hour?”

Baal nodded. “He requested to meet him at his temple most urgently.”

Kama brushed past the both of them. “I’m going to find him,” she said tersely. Her tone invited no questions.

Baal stalked after her, brandishing his heavy khopesh. “Not without me,” he said.

Horror washed over Nadesh. His gut instinct told him that Amonmose was in danger. Whoever was enemy to the Pharaoh was also enemy to him. He had foolishly left his own weapon behind, but that did not stop him from following Kama and Baal. He would prove to all of them where his loyalties lay.

Chapter Twenty-four

Amonmose found Meketen waiting at the temple as promised. His chief counselor looked haggard as though he'd lost weight recently. Amonmose had not noticed it before. Perhaps he'd been too preoccupied with his own problems. "I received your note," Amonmose told him.

"Thank you for meeting me," Meketen said, stepping forward. His face was devoid of any emotion. He looked small and insignificant next to the towering stone columns that dominated the temple. His feet were bare, and they made almost no sound trekking across the jeweled, ornate tiles on the floor.

"I know you've been under a great deal of pressure lately," Meketen said. "You must have experienced great distress losing your memory and having to relearn everything about yourself."

"It was frustrating," Amonmose admitted.

"Yet, you have surpassed all expectations. A weaker man would have crumbled."

"Perhaps."

"You are a strong man, there is no doubt. To have survived battle with the Hyksos, endured severe wounds, and had your memories ravaged by amnesia. That

takes strength. Truthfully, I never thought you had that kind of strength. But you survived each accident untouched, like water slipping through a sieve.”

Amonmose sensed bitterness in Meketen’s carefully chosen words. “I am blessed by the gods,” Amonmose said. “They supplied me with the talents I need to outwit my opponents. From what I’ve learned about the Hyksos, they were a nation of incompetent fools, who became leaders only through a few lucky skirmishes.”

Meketen’s face contorted with anger. “The Hyksos are more shrewd than you’ll ever know! Your father realized how cunning they were, but by the time he found out, it was too late. He paid for that knowledge with his life.”

Amonmose scowled. “You pulled me from my bed—”

“It was a risk for you to come here and put your trust in me.” Meketen’s beady eyes grew hard and unforgiving. “But it was a risk you should not have taken.”

Amonmose felt chills spread along his entire body. It was then that he knew. “You killed my father.”

A deadly smile lifted the corners of Meketen’s lips. “And here I thought I was going to have to send you to your grave in ignorance.

“Why did you do it? So you could be Pharaoh?”

Meketen snapped. “Of course, you idiot! I came to Thebes when your father

was still a young man. He had no idea I was a Hyksos prince. Nobody did.”

Amonmose sneered. “You weren’t satisfied with running the Hyksos Empire? You had to have more?”

“I had to have *something*. I was born as the third son. Even if I killed my eldest brother, the next son would then be in line for the throne. One death might be regarded as an accident, but two suspicious deaths would look like murder. I would obviously be guilty then. That would never do. So, I came to Thebes, invented a new identity for myself, and the rest is, well you know, history.”

“Why kill my father when you could have continued to be a royal advisor, even after his death? You are living proof of that.”

“And be the lackey of some Egyptian? Why be a lackey when I could be pharaoh. After your father, there was only you.” A dark look crossed his face. “But Nadesh guarded you fiercely. By the time I could get you alone, it was nearly two years later. You had already begun developing into a respectable pharaoh—well protected by your bodyguards. I am patient, Amonmose. But my patience has run out.” A dagger appeared in his hand. “All this time you’ve been worried about your past, when it is your future you should be concerned with.”

Amonmose circled him warily, regretting that he had not listened to Baal. He’d left his chambers unarmed. “Is this the mark of a real man?” Amonmose said. “You lull me here with no way to defend myself, while you brandish a knife in my

face?”

“You leave me no choice,” Meketen sneered. “Each time I plan some fatal accident, you escape. I could not give you an opportunity to prevail this time.”

Amonmose’s eyes narrowed to venomous slits. “You put the snake in my path that day.”

“And I loosened a wheel on your chariot! And still you lived...”

Meketen lunged, and Amonmose jumped out the way, sidestepping the long blade by mere inches. The older man sliced angrily through the air, making quick stabs in an effort to strike Amonmose wherever he could. But Amonmose lithely shifted his body back and forth, avoiding the deadly blade. He jumped back to separate them, and the next time Meketen advanced toward him, he was prepared. He ducked and plowed his shoulder into Meketen’s soft belly. The force knocked both of them to the ground and sent the knife sliding away. They grappled for it, but Amonmose reached it first. Meketen jumped on his back, and smashed his head to the ground. Amonmose’s chin crashed against the tile. His teeth clenched as Meketen slammed his head against the tiled floor a second time. He gripped the dagger tighter as he fought the dizzying pain. His vision became blurry and white spots clouded his sight. His heart beat wildly in his ears like thunder.

Suddenly, bursts of colorful images shot through his vision. They swirled around him like a violent storm, overwhelming his senses. He recalled his failures,

his successes, his hopes, his dreams—his past! He remembered his trust in Meketen, and that trust betrayed.

Amonmose rolled them both, still gripping the knife. In one swift movement, he raised his arm high and brought it down with bone-crushing force, thrusting it deep into Meketen's heart. He twisted the dagger, just to be sure. Meketen's eyes rolled back into his head as he gasped for his last breath of air.

Amonmose heard loud footsteps and looked up to see Kama, Baal, and Nadesh hurrying toward him. Their eyes were wide with disbelief as they watched Meketen's rich red blood stain the mosaic tile floor.

Kama rushed to Amonmose and sank to the floor on her knees beside him. "Are you hurt? Are you bleeding? Speak to me."

"I remember now," he said breathlessly. "I remember everything."

Chapter Twenty-five

Two Months Later

Amonmose sat in a chair in his chambers reading a report from his newly appointed treasurer, Sadiki. He was as steady as Hai had been soft. At least Egypt's coffers had not suffered under Hai's supervision. Amonmose dropped the report and picked up a second scroll, this one from Nadesh.

Nadesh had been harder to let go. The man had been like a father to him. They had not always seen eye to eye, but Amonmose was never one to surround himself with mindless followers who would easily bend to his will. To his surprise, Kama interceded on Nadesh's behalf. She believed he had the capacity to change for the better, a truly stunning act of forgiveness on her part. He trusted her judgment, so he had allowed Nadesh to keep his role as grand vizier. So far, it was a decision he had not regretted.

A soft knock interrupted Amonmose's thoughts. "Yes?" he called.

Latmay practically skipped in, a smile lighting his face from ear to ear. "I've come to see about my patient," he announced cheerfully.

Amonmose waived him away in mock protest. “I told you, I am fine. My injuries are all healed. Now stop fretting.”

“Not you,” Latmay sighed. “The *other* patient.”

“Oh.” Amonmose feigned surprise. “You mean Kama. I haven’t checked on her today.”

Latmay snorted. “I seriously doubt that.”

Amonmose laughed. “Am I that obvious?”

“Yes. But there is no shame in it. She is the light of your life. I’m sure you will spend many more years making beautiful babies.”

“Let us just get through the first one!” Amonmose said as he led Latmay into his bedchamber to examine Kama.

She was lounging comfortably, supported by a stack of soft pillows. She had the healthy glow of a pregnant woman. “My two favorite men.” She smiled and patted her stomach tenderly. “Soon to be joined by a third.”

Amonmose sat beside her and caressed her growing abdomen. “How can you be so certain it will be a *he*?”

“I dreamed of him.”

Amonmose gave her a lopsided grin. “I don’t know if you can put much credibility into dreams.”

“It worked for you.” Kama teased. “Your dreams led you to me.”

“Hmm. I cannot argue with that logic.” He leaned in and gave her a long kiss.

She kissed him back. “I want to spend the rest of my life making new memories with you.”

“No need to wait.” He devoured her with a hungry look. “We can start this moment.”

She returned his smoky gaze. “I’m ready, if you are.”

They kissed again, surrendering to the smoldering heat that was the first flowerings of passion. Somewhere in the distance, they heard Latmay discreetly cough. They had forgotten all about him and seconds later heard the door quietly close.

Kama pulled herself from Amonmose’s tender lips for a brief moment. “You were lucky to have found me, you know,” she murmured.

“It was not luck,” he answered. “It was destiny.”

Her gaze locked with his amber eyes. “You own my heart, Pharaoh. And I will never belong to another.”

“You *are* my heart, temptress, and I shall never want another.” He gently caressed her cheek. “Remember, you will always be the Pharaoh’s desire.”

The End

Author's Historical Note

I hope you enjoyed Kama and Amonmose's story. Although they are fictional characters, their type of love was real. While the majority of the nobility married members of the same class, it was not uncommon for them to marry commoners and foreigners, especially to forge political alliances. Many nobles had multiple wives, as in the case of Nadesh. From writings, journals, and other documentation, we can see that Egyptians enjoyed sex and marriage, and many were passionately in love with their significant others. I tried to capture this passion by writing about Kama and Amonmose.

Many readers may not be familiar with the relationship between Ancient Egypt and Nubia. The period from 1040 B.C. to 1640 B.C. is known as the Second Intermediate Period in Egypt's history. This era was characterized by extreme chaos and disorder. The Egyptian population was threatened by the increasing presence of outsiders and foreigners who came to trade. The popularity of the pharaohs also decreased; the crown often passed haphazardly from one pharaoh to the next. It was a period of social upheaval, religious separation, and unpredictable behavior.

One of Egypt's most formidable enemies was Nubia. Located in present-day Sudan, Nubia was directly south of Ancient Egypt. It was also known as the Kingdom of Kush. With its natural resources, its advanced form of government, and its deadly army of archers, Nubia was a force to be reckoned with. Historical records indicate that Nubia had a flourishing population, rich in precious metals, ivory and ebony, livestock, exotic animals, and agriculture. In addition, they possessed military expertise and educated scholars. The Nubians also built great pyramids. Research confirms that their vast amount of pyramids far outnumbered those of the Egyptians.

Egypt and Nubia shared a common border. They fought constantly, with the two cultures ruling each other intermittently over the years. Reports vary, but some show Egypt dominated Nubia from 1950 B.C. to 1100 B.C. But 1,000 years later, when Egypt collapsed into civil war, Nubia was able to conquer it and rule from 800–656 B.C.

The two cultures had a significant influence on each other, and the peoples lived among each other, worshipping the same gods, following the same customs, and marrying amongst each other. At one point, it became difficult to identify an Egyptian from a Nubian. Both cultures were similar in color, but they labeled themselves based on origins of nationality, not in terms of race.

In antiquity, Nubia was a land of great natural wealth and prized trade

routes. There is speculation that this great civilization eventually ruined itself by exhausting its natural resources. Trying to keep up with the great demand for steel, it is thought that Nubians over-harvested their crops, destroyed their forests, and polluted their lands. Traders went elsewhere, and the population gradually died out.

Present-day Nubia is the homeland of Africa's earliest black culture with a history that can be traced from 3800 B.C. Nubian monuments and artifacts, as well as written records from Egypt and Rome, confirm the existence of this empire. In the 1930s a large proportion of the Nubian villages along the Nile were totally submerged. This was due to the construction of a faulty dam that was originally built in 1889. The dam was subsequently raised twice, but each time the dam was raised, the waters also rose higher. A second dam (known as the Aswan High Dam) was constructed in 1960. Nubians who were settled in the area between Aswan in Egypt and the Sudan were relocated, and their great Nubian monuments were dismantled and reassembled on higher ground. However, many historical sites were drowned and lost for good. Archeologists are still trying to decipher the mysteries of Nubia's lost civilization.

Due to their close proximity to each other and their intermingling of cultures, it was inevitable that ancient Egyptians and Nubians would meet and fall in love. Amonmose and Kama were no exception. If you are interested in learning

more about ancient Egypt and Nubia, try the following sources:

Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt by Rosalie A. David

Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology by Paul Nicholson & Ian Shaw

The Nubians: People of the Ancient Nile by Robert Steven Bianchi

The Black Pharaohs: Egypt's Nubian Rulers by Robert G. Morkot

Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Rival in Africa by David B. O'Connor

The Hyksos: New Historical and Archaeological Perspective by Eliezer D.

Oren

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Author Bio

Chanta lives in Dallas, TX with her husband and a tankful of tropical fish that keep mysteriously keep multiplying. When she's not writing, she enjoys making jewelry, shopping, traveling, and collecting Native American pottery. She's currently hard at work on her second novel, *The Highest Bidder*.

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Pharaoh's Desire