

...Han's sudden submission didn't just confuse Itamun. It alarmed him. The man had tried to get him killed and now here he was, on his knees. He circled around the Hittite, looking him over as he thought. This wasn't the submission of a household slave. It wasn't that Han feared him and so was giving into his will. It was an active choice. Submission as a gift. An intimacy.

"You'll accept anything I demand, hmm? Does that mean you'll let me kiss you now?"

"If that is what you want."

"Then stand up and kiss me."

His captive rose to his feet and stepped forward. Some of Itamun's alarm lessened as he saw the stiffness in Han's shoulders and the slight hesitation at leaning forward. He hadn't suddenly turned into another person, then. He'd relaxed his stubbornness on this, but it wasn't gone entirely.

Rather than make it easy for Han and initiate it himself, Itamun loosely clasped his own hands behind his back as he upturned his face for the kiss, closing his eyes. Moments dragged on as he waited, before he finally felt Han's lips brush against his. It was a brief, soft kiss, like the whisper of a warm breeze across bare skin. Before Han could pull away, Itamun wrapped his arms around him and drew him closer. One hand buried in the dark, silken hair of the Hittite as Itamun deepened the kiss. His lips parted against Han's as his tongue forced entry into the other man's mouth. It wasn't simply exploration, but plunder.

His cock hardened as he felt Han give in to the kiss and respond...

### BY

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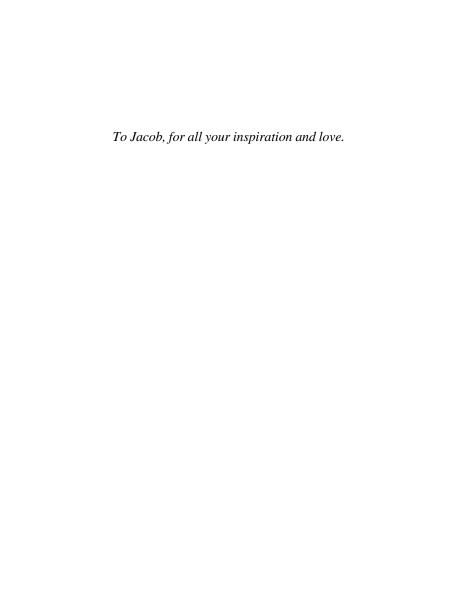
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## CHAPTER 1

Hantilis shifted his weight on the roof of the hut, bow at the ready.

The Egyptian soldiers were approaching the village, looking somewhat disconcerted to find it apparently abandoned. Hantilis looked over the soldiers, estimating their numbers. There were only around fifty of them, which instantly put him on edge. His village's scout had said the Egyptians' numbers were closer to a thousand. Either the man was an idiot, or this was only an advance guard. So long as the rest of the army wasn't going to circle around and catch all of the villagers who had fled, then utter disaster might still be averted. His own death would be a small price to pay for their safety.

Hantilis had been a child when the Egyptian pharaoh had first

attacked the Hittite nation of Hatti. The battles had continued intermittently with neither nation ever fully gaining the upper hand. It was to be expected in some ways, as they were two kingdoms that were far too close to one another. Yet Hantilis had learned that far worse than being on one side or the other was to be caught between the two.

There were three chariots among the Egyptians, with two men on each. The rest of the soldiers were on their feet. The majority of them wore nothing more than the simple shenti, the typical dress of Egyptians. The shenti consisted of a linen scarf wrapped around the waist and between the legs as a loincloth. Some of them wore something more, which looked similar to the kilt that Hantilis and his own people wore. The Egyptian version of the kilt was draped and folded decoratively, drawn up slightly in the front with no fear of accidentally exposing their manhood to danger because of the shenti beneath.

On one of the chariots there was a young man with closely cropped dark brown curls and a face devoid of hair. Hantilis had never heard of an Egyptian growing a beard, so his smooth face wasn't unusual. The hair on the young man's head was unusual, though. Most of the other Egyptians were bald. Only one other man was in the chariot, controlling the horses. The Egyptian chariots looked laughably small and flimsy in comparison to what the Hittites used in battle. The young man wore a kilt with a decoratively cut tunic over it, his sword a sturdy iron one instead of the more common bronze that most Egyptians carried. One of his hands rested idly on the hilt of that sword as he looked around with a casual arrogance. He looked to have just left youth behind, maybe two or more years younger than Hantilis, but his dress and his manner instantly marked him for what he was. Hantilis turned

his bow toward the young commander. If they took out this small group of them, it would at least give the rest of the village more time to flee. The chances of defeating close to a thousand Egyptians were poor at best, but they could delay them.

"Spread out," the young one said in the foreign tongue as he drew his own sword. "They're here somewhere."

Apparently having decided his chariot was of little use with no one to charge, the commander stepped out to search with his men. The soldiers broke up into small groups or men by themselves as they began pushing their way into huts. The commander went toward the nearest hut to rip down the flimsy hide covering the doorway. He was distracted, with his back turned toward Hantilis. It was perfect.

The silence was punctured by the hum of the arrow as it shot through the air. The commander ducked into the doorway and spun in his crouch as the arrow buried itself in the dried mud of the hut. The soldiers quickly fell into a defensive position, but their commander was already raising his hand to gesture to them.

"Hold," he ordered his men, before raising his voice. When next he spoke, it was in Nesili, the Hittite language. It had an accent to it, but was unmistakable. "If you give up now, we won't have to attack. Give Pharaoh his tribute and we'll offer protection from anyone else who may come."

"Back to the underworld with you!" a voice called from the far end of the village. The bushes rustled, as did the trees. There could have been a dozen men hiding themselves there. But that wasn't who the Egyptians should have worried about. On the roof across the village, simply waiting for the commander to step out of the doorway again, were two more men on their bellies beside Hantilis. They all waited, arrows drawn and ready to fire.

As the rest of the Egyptians turned their focus to the foliage, the commander's eyes swept across the village, then paused. Hantilis felt his heart skip a beat as the commander's eyes locked with his own.

"Shoot them!" yelled the commander, pointing to the archers a second before he ducked through the doorway again, narrowly missing two more arrows.

Hantilis didn't bother with wasting another arrow, already sliding down the back of the hut. He prayed his companions would survive the Egyptian archers as he raced between buildings. There was a window sans shutter at the back of the hut the commander had ducked into. Hantilis knew, because it was his own home. He slid through quietly, then dropped to the ground in a crouch, an arrow drawn. It wasn't a large space inside and the Egyptian would have a difficult time hiding from him.

He began to move slowly forward, careful to keep his steps light. The commander was near the doorway, waiting until he could move without being pinned down by a stray arrow. Hantilis straightened for a better shot at the other man, determined to not miss.

There was the slightest shift of the Egyptian's head, his eye flicking to the side, a moment before he spun and kicked a stack of baskets into Hantilis. The arrow flew, but buried itself in a basket instead of the commander's heart. Hantilis immediately dropped the bow and drew his sword, swinging it up in time to catch the Egyptian blade arcing for his neck.

The fact that he had been ready with his sword finally seemed to take the Egyptian by surprise for once, giving Hantilis enough of an opening to press his attack, pushing the commander back toward the entrance.

"Blow the horns!" the commander called out.

Outside, there was the sound of several horns at once. As they faded, they were replaced by the sounds of battle, more vicious than it had been even moments before.

Hantilis wasn't the most skilled of swordsmen in his village and he had never sparred inside of a hut before. As the Egyptian commander blocked his every thrust, he began to worry. Getting the man out into the open would make things easier, but the commander had other plans. Hantilis's next thrust was deflected into the wall as the Egyptian slid out of the way. Their blades still locked together, the Egyptian drove his elbow into Hantilis's ribs. The blow knocked the breath from him and made him grunt as he was thrown off balance and back into the wall.

Hantilis gasped, trying to regain his breath. "You Egyptian dog."

He was at a poor angle for using his blade, but he could turn his sword to strike the commander's head with the hilt. The blow made the Egyptian grunt in pain and he reached out to grasp Hantilis's wrist, pinning it back against the wall. The Egyptian slammed his hand into the wall twice and squeezed until Hantilis's fingers involuntarily lost their grip and the blade clattered to the floor.

"We're not here to kill you unless we have to, you idiot," the Egyptian snapped. "Surrender and all Pharaoh asks is tribute."

"Never. My people owe your king nothing."

Without his sword or bow, he should have had little hope of killing the commander, but as long as he had life he still had hope. There was the knife at his ankle, or he might be able to retrieve his sword. Hantilis struggled between the wall and the commander, trying to find some sort of leverage against the other man's body.

The Egyptian was of a somewhat lanky build, not quite as broad or muscular as Hantilis himself, and was a few fingers shorter as well. Overpowering him would be easy if only he could reverse their positions.

"Your people are on our land."

It was true, but only out of necessity. The current Hittite king—Hantilis's own uncle, Urhi-Teshub—had driven them onto the Egyptian border. They had paid tribute in the beginning, but then had found themselves besieged by outsiders and the Egyptians did nothing. What use was tribute to them without protection?

"Then your king should take better care of his land."

The young commander still held his sword, though he'd made no move to use it. That was his mistake. With his free hand, Hantilis gripped the younger man's wrist, digging his thumb between delicate bones there until the Egyptian cried out in pain and released his sword. At that same moment, Hantilis pushed himself away from the wall, spinning and slamming the Egyptian into it. There was a crack as part of the wall crumbled behind the youth.

This close, Hantilis could see the young commander had eyes a muddy color somewhere between green and blue. They were rimmed with kohl and widened in shock. Unlike the eyes of the Hittites, they were rounded rather than almond shaped. His nose was flatter than the hooked noses of the Hittites, though narrower than those he'd seen on peoples from farther to the south. His lips looked soft and full. Temptingly so. Hantilis could imagine doing all sorts of things with lips like that. The youth's skin tone had a different quality to it, like honey or bronze. Hantilis had the strangest desire to taste it. There was a graceful masculinity to the commander's face, but it was far from delicate. His strong jaw

with the faintest hint of a cleft in his chin made it clear he was no pretty, submissive youth.

The young Egyptian struggled between Hantilis and the wall, pressing himself back closer to it rather than pushing against Hantilis. The choice of that movement confused him and he tightened his grip on the youth's right wrist, but he didn't look down.

That was his mistake as the next moment he felt pain explode from one knee as that leg collapsed under him from a sharp kick upward into his kneecap. The commander twisted and leveraged his weight, forcing Hantilis down onto the ground and beneath him. The Egyptian sat straddling him, Hantilis's arms pinned over his head as they both panted into one another's face.

"Let me put it another way," the boy said. "Submit or you will be killed."

Hantilis's lover, Yutis, had been killed a year before, in a raid from an enemy people nearby. Yet in that moment he could imagine his lover alive again. They had been sparring partners. Once, he'd pinned Hantilis and kissed him roughly. If he wouldn't submit to him in battle, Yutis said, he'd find other ways to make Hantilis submit. And oh, did he.

This was different. The Egyptian commander would kill Hantilis for his refusal, not mount him, yet his body didn't seem to recognize that. The feel of another man's weight on top of him, of thighs wrapped around his hips, was more than enough to arouse him. Particularly when battle lust was still upon him, and his heart pounded.

"You will never make me submit."

"No?"

The commander shifted against him, sliding his hand up

Hantilis's thigh. The typical dress for a Hittite man was a leather jerkin that came down to mid-thigh, with a short kilt beneath it. For dealing with the heat and maneuverability, it was excellent. For keeping the Egyptian's hands off of him, it left something to be desired.

"Get off of me!" he barked, struggling again.

With only one hand to hold him down, the Egyptian had given up his advantage. A heave and his feet braced against the floor were all it took for Hantilis to flip them over, pinning the youth under his larger body. Now he could feel the young commander's cock against his own through their clothes. It was a hot, hard presence between them, throbbing with every beat of the youth's heart. It made Hantilis pause rather than draw his knife. He was so young, so beautiful, so exciting. It seemed like something that would anger the gods to snuff out such a life while looking into those haunting eyes.

Hantilis's hand was at his side, ready to pull the knife, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Pinning the youth to the floor had given him the clear advantage with his weight and size. The Egyptian was helpless.

Instead of killing the youth, Hantilis slid his hand back up under the Egyptian's kilt, pushing aside the younger man's underclothing. He pushed his own clothing up and out of the way, rocking his hips to slide their cocks together.

The Egyptian made a quiet sound that bordered on a whimper as he automatically thrust up against Hantilis. His hands came up to press against Hantilis's chest, pushing at him to fight against the pin, yet he never stopped rocking his hips and sliding their cocks along one another's length. Hantilis's hands worked under the Egyptian's body the next time the youth thrust up, gripping a

wonderfully taut, rounded ass. The young commander's hands stopped pushing at his chest, sliding around Hantilis's shoulders to hold him close as they worked together breathlessly.

Even in this, the battle wasn't over. Neither would submit to the other. It was simply a new way to struggle as their bodies slammed together and they wrestled for the upper hand. Hantilis felt it as the younger man wrapped his leg around him, as he shifted his weight and pressed to him. Then, the Egyptian twisted his body, shoving Hantilis over onto his back. Hantilis groaned as he was pushed roughly onto the floor, then groaned again as he felt the commander continue to work against him. The sweat of their bodies was making it slick as their cocks thrust together.

Hantilis arched his body under the Egyptian, gripping the other man's ass tighter. "You're well endowed...for someone of your race."

The young commander only laughed softly. "Fuck many Egyptians?"

"Stories," Hantilis gasped out. It was almost torturous now, that teasing rub of the other man's head as it slid along his length. "Our men are much bigger."

He felt the other man shift, sliding his hand between them. A moment later he felt the squeeze of fingers around his shaft, holding it together with the Egyptian's. The younger man stroked them together slowly, rocking into his own grip as he hissed through his teeth.

"So you're saying you're small among your people? Because we're the same size."

"Don't flatter yourself."

Hantilis could barely manage the words between the sounds he was making now. The excitement of battle and the struggle

between them, the knowledge that death could await either one if the other gained the upper hand, was all putting him more keenly on edge than he'd ever been before in his life. He gripped the youth's ass, kneading it hungrily.

The Egyptian said nothing, continuing to stroke them together. His thumb swept over their heads, spreading their pre-come and mingling it. There was the sharp press of teeth against Hantilis's throat as the commander bit and Hantilis couldn't help but moan out. He was going to come under the touch of this Egyptian bastard, while the rest of his village fought for their lives. It was too shameful. He had to resist.

"Please," Hantilis breathed out, "stop this."

The youth moved to nuzzle against his ear, flicking his earlobe with his tongue before scraping it under his teeth. "Stop what? What are you begging for?"

"Stop touching me." It was a struggle to say. He had to fight against himself, because he was far too close to loving it. To begging the Egyptian to finish him and feel the other man's come on his skin. He tried to shift away from him, but couldn't help an involuntary thrust back into that tempting hand. "Let go of me." The words were whimpered.

"You want me to let go?" the Egyptian breathed.

The other man let go of Hantilis's cock. He was still thrusting, though, his hand still moving. There were the softest, most tantalizing of knuckle brushes against Hantilis's shaft. Shifting under the younger man, he looked down between their bodies to see the young commander was still stroking himself, still painfully close.

"Y-yes." The word was unsteady. It wasn't even convincing to his own ears.

The younger man drew his hand back entirely. As he looked into Hantilis's eyes he licked his thumb, getting it slick before he reached down again to hold them together. His thumb rubbed slow, wet circles over Hantilis's head. Unable to stop himself, Hantilis thrust up as he groaned. The sound had a new quality to it. Desperation.

"Say it again, then," the Egyptian ordered.

"Please stop." Those two words were exhaled, sounding far more like a plea for something else entirely.

And then the younger man's hand was gone. He drew back, kneeling over Hantilis, his cock so achingly hard it nearly touched his stomach, but his hands touched neither of them. Hantilis stared in shock, not quite believing that the Egyptian had actually stopped. He doubted that he could take that as evidence of having won their struggle. No, because it wasn't a physical struggle at all; it was a battle of wills. The Egyptian was playing with him, not simply giving Han what they both wanted but making him face and submit fully to every desire.

Unable to stop himself, Hantilis reached out. His hand went back to the Egyptian's ass, tugging him down as his other hand fisted their cocks together. No more teasing this time, he stroked the both of them in long, even movements. The younger man moaned softly, burying his face into the side of Hantilis's neck. Both of them thrust into his hand and against one another. Every throb and twitch in either of their cocks could be felt as he squeezed them in his fist.

If one of them started to come before the other, it was impossible to tell. It seemed as though they both jerked and groaned at the same time, bodies tense and rocking together as jet after jet of sticky heat poured over Hantilis's hand, making its

journey all the slicker. Their chests were pressed together, their hearts hammering so near one another it felt as though they should have touched. Every breath, every movement from the other man danced across Hantilis's skin until he thought they had to have become a single warrior.

"By the gods," the Egyptian whispered against his throat. Hantilis would have agreed with him, had he enough breath to respond.

After a moment, the younger man suddenly stood and straightened his clothing. He leaned over to scoop up both of their swords, then edged toward the door, one eye on Hantilis. For the first time, Hantilis realized that the sounds of battle had stopped. How long ago the battle had ended, he had no idea, but he felt a rush of shame that he'd been in his hut rutting with the Egyptian commander when it had happened.

"How goes it, Captain Meriatum?" the young man called out in the Egyptian tongue.

"We appear to have captured all of the men, your highness."

Hearing that, Hantilis was snapped out of his guilt to stare at the youth in horror. A prince. He'd had a prince of Egypt pinned to the floor and rather than taking a knife to his throat he'd jerked him off.

"Are there any captives inside?" the captain was asking.

"Just one. Search the village for any other weapons. Take them. Once we have all of them, I want you to release the men again."

Hantilis listened as he straightened his clothes and pulled the knife from his ankle. The prince was busy speaking to his captain now and no longer paying as much attention. They hadn't lost much. Weapons that were replaceable. Honor that would be regained. It wasn't as bad as it could have been. Perhaps he had

even helped by keeping their prince busy. And perhaps he could be of more help, now, with a knife in the back.

"What of the tribute, your highness?"

"For now they'll pay it in their blades and hospitality. It's a tiny village. I'm not going to take their food away from them."

Hantilis paused, blade in hand. The prince was being generous for the moment. Almost kind. If he killed him, he doubted the captain would feel as charitable. With the rest of his men captured, that wasn't something he could afford to do. In addition to that, as little as he wanted to admit it, he'd just laid with the prince. Killing a lover was shameful, even if that lover was an enemy. Even if it had been a brief, confusing, yet all too pleasurable encounter with a man he should have been fighting.

Hantilis stood with the blade, but tossed it at the prince's feet harmlessly.

The prince gave a jerk as he caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, then turned to stare at Hantilis for a moment. After passing off the captured sword to one of the Egyptian soldiers and putting his own back on, the prince picked up the knife.

"Who's in charge of this village? We will be staying nearby for the time being, but will offer our protection as long as we keep your weapons."

"I am, for now. Our elders had all evacuated the village. I was left in command of the attack." It was a lie to conceal the true nature of their community, but one that he and his father had decided on long before.

"Then you'll be the one I negotiate with until then. Once we have our camp set up, come to it. You'll be led to my tent."

The prince looked down at the knife in his hand thoughtfully,

then tucked it into his belt. He turned to go, then paused again and turned back to Hantilis. "I am Itamununemwia, son of the pharaoh."

"Hantilis." No family ties or title, as he doubted the Egyptian would care about whatever lie he told him. Nor was he worth wasting the breath on them.

## CHAPTER 2

It was pettiness, pure and simple. Itamun knew that a few hundred at best of the Hittites were no risk to their kingdom. His father knew it as well. That didn't stop the wish to crush the people his father still harbored after all of these years, even when it had proven to be impossible. Itamun had grown up hearing stories from his older brothers about the sieges. They'd been tiny then and still had their side locks, but their father had taken them to battle, to prepare them to be warriors like their father.

Part of Itamununemwia wondered if that was his father's reasoning for sending him on this campaign. He was twenty-two, with a bride, and even a child on the way. Perhaps his father had worried he'd become too soft if he didn't see battle soon. Over the past several months he'd seen too much of it.

It galled him to be sitting in a tent, looking over the inventory of a Hittite village, when he should have been at home. His wife, Ashaki, was the daughter of the previous head priest at the temple of Hathor. It had been a political match as most royal marriages were, but they had known one another since childhood. That emotional intimacy helped, even if they lacked a more romantic connection. They didn't love one another as husband and wife, but they had an understanding. She had been sympathetic to the fact that he had little desire for women and had encouraged him to take male lovers, so long as he came to her bed often enough for them to have children. From her lack of concern over his lovers, he suspected she had as little desire for men as he had for women.

The thought of desire sent his mind automatically back to the Hittite, Hantilis. While Itamun had bedded other men before, he'd never had anything quite like that. Many servants were eager to offer themselves up to a son of the pharaoh, though he wasn't sure of how many of them truly desired men and how many were simply hoping to gain influence and wealth. There had been a novel mutuality with Hantilis, a give and take that had been lacking in his other encounters.

The man was utterly unlike any of the other men Itamun had bedded. He was tall and powerfully built, as though the gods had designed him for war. His arms and chest were particularly well-muscled, illustrating in every sinew that he had trained for years on the bow. Momentum could aid a man swinging a sword, but it took ironclad control and strength to draw a bowstring and shoot accurately. No soft palace servant could compare. People of many different races came petitioning to the palace, so that the man's paler skin and his straight black hair were exotic, but not unusual. The Hittite's eyes, as dark as night that flashed with fury and

passion, were unusual though. The man's features looked as though they had been carved from stone, harsh and sharp. Only the soft black depths of those eyes and the haughty curl of his lips hinted at something more than just coldness and rage.

"Your highness, the Hittite from—"

"Yes, Hantilis. Send him in." Itamun didn't raise his eyes from the skin the inventory had been written on. It afforded him a few more precious moments to reign in his thoughts and get some control of himself so he didn't behave like a stallion in need of gelding. With two guards, the captain of the troops and a scribe present, he couldn't afford to openly hint at his lust for the man.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see as the Hittite entered the tent. Itamun frowned as he poured wine into his cup, then finally glanced toward the entrance of the tent. "Do you want some?"

"No." Hantilis answered in Egyptian, his tone abrupt. The fact that he spoke the language intrigued Itamun, as he'd assumed the man was uneducated. The Hittite crossed the tent to sit on the floor across from the prince, defiance in his eyes.

Itamun raised a brow slightly at the abrasiveness and idly wondered if the man understood exactly how much of a disadvantage he was at. They were on Egyptian land and had failed to pay their tribute for the year. Killing them all would have been perfectly justified. Of course, Itamun had no intention of doing that, so making the threat would be meaningless. A threat he wouldn't follow through with would only weaken his own position, and as insolent as the Hittite was being Itamun had no desire to see him or his people dead.

Since the Hittite had started speaking in Egyptian, Itamun decided to continue the negotiations in that language. "Aside from

food and iron, there isn't much your village has to offer. And I imagine you need your food." The prince set the skin down before raising his cup to sip from it. He saw Hantilis's eyes dart down to the inventory. Could he read as well as speak Egyptian? The Hittites were a literate race, though their written word was all in strange little wedge shapes. "Your evident hatred of Pharaoh aside, I can see why you didn't pay tribute."

"My people owe you nothing. Half of our village was murdered last year in a raid. Some have thought that it wasn't bad luck at all, but under the direction Egypt. Whether it was directly your fault or because your men failed to protect us, you deserve nothing."

Itamun raised a brow slightly and locked eyes with the Hittite. The idea that someone would change their allegiance to a king because he had failed them was a foreign one to Itamun. To act against Pharaoh wasn't an affront to the man Ramesses-Meriamon, but a grave insult to the gods. Since Hantilis spoke Egyptian quite well, Itamun could assume he was educated. If he was educated it could be assumed he knew of the belief in Pharaoh's divinity. Yet he would deny a supposed living god his tribute. Instead of offending him, Itamun found himself fascinated by the man's will.

Hantilis's eyes narrowed. "Here are my conditions, prince. My people go free. Everything you have taken, you will return. And you will never again come to us, or take from us, or ask anything of us."

"Interesting proposal."

Itamun looked the man over curiously, before his lips curled into a smile. There was no threat in it, because he had no reason to make a threat. The man was utterly at his mercy and either didn't realize it or was too stubborn to admit it. There was something perversely, sadistically exciting in that. For a brief moment Itamun

wished he was alone with the Hittite, but he pushed that thought aside. Now wasn't the time to think with his cock. The young prince picked up his cup again, taking a sip off of it. He savored the wine and let the moment stretch out agonizingly before he set the cup down again.

"All we have taken thus far have been your weapons, and only to keep you from stabbing us in the back. They'll be returned to you when we leave. I honestly don't want anything from you. However, Pharaoh feels differently. He requires tribute. Something must be done."

"I could have stabbed you in the back. Instead I gave you my knife."

"And I appreciate that." It was more than he would have expected from a Hittite. They were considered a fierce and warlike people. This group of them were apparently in some sort of disfavor with their king, but that didn't mean that they were at all different from the rest.

A confident smirk spread across Hantilis's face. "It's a shame you'll have to disappoint your king."

"Well then. The tribute will be paid in flesh. Thank you for volunteering. You're quite self-sacrificing for your people."

It was fascinating to watch as the realization spread across Hantilis's face. First his eyes were narrowed, his lips curled in anger. Then he froze before his face slowly relaxed into a look of shock. "You can't do that." The words were barely more than a whisper.

"If a foreign prince refuses to submit to Pharaoh's will, he or one of his children is taken from his people to ensure they will behave. You're hardly a prince, but you're the current leader of your people. I'm feeling generous, so rather than force your people

to do Pharaoh's will, I'll simply force you to do mine."

He was already going to have to pay for a great deal of this campaign out of his own pocket, as he had refused to let his men pillage. It was how they were normally paid for their efforts in war, but it would have led to the village being utterly wiped out. Pillaging followed by further demands from his father the following year for tribute would leave them too poor to survive, or too angry to concern themselves with it. An armed revolt would have been likely under those circumstances. It wasn't what his father had ordered him to do, but it was the most logical way to handle the situation. The Hittites would be more likely to pay their tribute the following year with a hostage in the palace and their own meager wealth still intact.

"I should kill you where you sit," growled Hantilis. His hands were curled into fists, unconsciously miming strangulation. The gesture wasn't lost on Itamun, but he made no move to defend himself against the man. The guards standing behind Hantilis stepped forward, but Itamun raised a hand to stop them.

"And if you tried, you would die and then every man, woman, child and goat in your village would be slaughtered."

At that the fight drained out of Hantilis. Itamun could see his shoulders sag and his hands go limp as he bowed his head. "You won't trouble us again?" Kohl black eyes looked up at Itamun through his lashes.

"Tribute will still be expected next year, but so long as its paid your people will be safe. They can't live on Egyptian lands without being subject to our law."

"Then why take me at all?"

"For what you owe this year and to guard against your people refusing to pay next year. Should they refuse payment or revolt,

you will be executed."

"They won't." There was a despondent surety in that statement. "So that's it, then? I give myself to a lifetime of slavery and everyone will be safe."

"Something like that." Itamun had no desire to keep the man for the rest of his life, nor were hostages usually treated as slaves. So long as they were cooperative, they were treated nearly as well as members of the royal family. He wasn't going to sweeten the deal by pointing any of that out, however. The man had a remarkable defiant streak and would get himself killed promptly if he arrived at the palace with that intact. Only if he was properly humbled would he make a suitable hostage.

Since Hantilis remained silent, Itamun went on. "We'll remain here for two more nights and then we will press on. There are other battles in this campaign yet. Your people won't be molested during our stay."

The other man only gave the barest of nods in acknowledgment.

"Do you give your word that you won't act against me?" Itamun asked.

At that, Hantilis gave a bitter little laugh. "What choice do I have?"

Itamun said nothing, waiting. They both knew that he ultimately had little choice. All that remained to be seen was if he would submit willingly or not.

After a moment, Hantilis spoke again. "Can I return to the village for tonight?"

"Yes. You can also send runners to go seek your elders and tell them of what has happened. You didn't stab me in the back when you had the chance."

"Then you have my word."

Satisfied with that, Itamun waved the man out and turned back to the inventory while the guards and scribe left. Captain Meriatum remained behind and settled on the floor across from the makeshift desk. The prince ignored him for a moment as he finished scratching out notes. His father would be disappointed with the inventory, but at least the Hittite village would be forced to submit now.

"You handled him well."

Itamun glanced up, feeling a small smile curl one corner of his mouth. "It's easy to handle someone when they don't have any options."

"You should handle your priests similarly."

That made Itamun pause, thoughtful. He'd struggled to keep control of the temple ever since Ashaki's father had died and a new head priest, Ramose, had been selected. His father had originally planned for Itamun to take over as the head priest of the temple of Hathor, which was a large reason why he had been wed to Ashaki. Yet his father-in-law had been murdered days after the wedding and the support for Ramose had been strong. To avoid it looking like an assassination, Pharaoh had allowed Ramose to ascend rather than give the position to his son. Instead, Itamun was but a state overseer for the temple, ensuring things ran smoothly and tributes were properly funneled to the palace. The chaos that Ramose continually sowed reflected poorly on Itamun for failing to control it. The pharaoh had moved his capital to the delta, far from Thebes and the powerful influence of the priests of Amun there. The fact that the priests of the goddess Hathor were growing so influential in the House of Ramesses made Itamun look like a fool.

"Taking someone captive is a little different from subduing a temple," said Itamun.

"A temple full of priests is simply a different sort of village." The other man inclined his head slightly. "But an old warrior may not be the best to give advice on politics."

Itamun chuckled, shaking his head at the false modesty. One of the things he'd found most endearing about Meriatum was the fact that the man seemed incapable of keeping his thoughts to himself. At times it could be frustrating, but Itamun valued his honesty. It was a rare trait.

"I'll take all the advice I can. I still have to go back there and clean up that mess."

\* \* \*

Hantilis was allowed to bring what he could carry, but nothing more. The mercy somehow made it worse than simply being captured in battle. Rather than having no choice, he was aware that he had given his word. Once the elders returned to the village, his father had been ready to pay double the tribute if it meant keeping Hantilis, but he wouldn't let his father do that.

"It's a ridiculous agreement, Han. You're accomplishing nothing by doing this," his father said as he snatched up a bundle of Hantilis's belongings.

His father had been a powerful man and a feared warrior in his youth, but civil war and being driven out of Hatti had aged him. Hantilis felt a wave of guilt, knowing that this would be a new burden on him. It had been his father's desire to save their nation from King Urhi-Teshub's incompetence that had led to their exile, but none of it could have ever happened if it hadn't been for Han.

He gently took back the bundle from his father. "I failed to fight them off. This is what I deserve."

"They surrounded the village and sent in a few of their men to make you attack and reveal yourselves. The best you could have done is died fruitlessly."

"Death is more honorable than defeat."

"I suppose Tarhun should have died after he was defeated by Illuyanka."

The reference to their sky god made Hantilis pause. Tarhun had failed in his first battle with the great serpent Illuyanka and lost his eyes and heart. For his revenge, he had married the mother goddess Arinna and fathered a son, Sarruma. When his son was grown, he married the serpent's daughter and Tarhun demanded his eyes and heart as a wedding gift from the serpent. Once they were returned, he went to do battle with the serpent again. But his son learned of how he had been an instrument of vengeance and followed his father to the battle, demanding his father kill him alongside Illuyanka. And Tarhun did.

Hearing his father mention that story was startling. Yutis had been taken from him because the Egyptians had failed to give their protection as promised. In many ways, Han had lost his own eyes and heart that day, as he no longer saw the world with any joy in it, nor did he expect to ever love again. The Hittites made war their art and vengeance was the inspiration. Was his father suggesting he follow Tarhun's example?

"I'm sure his son would have preferred that."

His father's hand came down on his shoulder, turning Hantilis to make him meet his eyes. "You have no son, Han, and your word given at the point of a sword is not meant to be kept."

Han felt as though his head had become impossibly light.

Though he stood with his feet on the floor of his hut, it seemed he was floating far above and looking down upon the scene. He could feel the shifting tides of time and destiny. Nothing would ever be the same after this. It was a rare knowledge, as usually it seemed that fate hit him blind. This time he understood he was creating his own fate.

When he spoke, Han's voice sounded distant and hollow to his ears. He barely felt his own tongue moving in his mouth. "Killing the prince does nothing. Pharaoh likely has a hundred more sons. I honestly doubt he knows all of their names."

"The prince isn't your true enemy, but he can give you your rightful vengeance."

"How?"

"Wouldn't you have done anything for the man you loved?"

And with that the numbness faded. Han felt warm and alive and a bit sick to his stomach. Itamununemwia was young and clearly desired men. The young still had fresh hearts, not yet scarred by disappointment. They could love easily, with no walls to protect them. They could be destroyed so easily that way as well. It was a cruel thing to consider, but even if he couldn't manage to use the youth for vengeance against his uncle, he could at least have some small measure of retribution by breaking the heart of the prince who conquered them.

"What should I do, then?"

"I'd assume it would be like making anyone else love you. Find what he enjoys and give it to him."

But what did the prince enjoy? Han knotted his brows together as he thought over that. Making others submit. Having control. Apparently, he also enjoyed Han's body, if the looks the prince had been giving him during negotiations were anything to go by. In

some ways his tastes seemed similar to Yutis's, yet taken to more of an extreme. Hantilis had to force himself not to relive the very private battle he and the prince had waged on one another's bodies.

Once Han was finished packing his meager belongings, there were stoic goodbyes. Some of the village came out to see him off, but many didn't. After the raids and so many deaths, the only people he remained close to were his parents.

When the Egyptians left, Han was directed to the prince's chariot, where he was largely ignored except for the occasional question about the region. As night approached and they stopped to make camp he was surprised that he wasn't put to menial labor. Instead, the prince kept him by his side to ask more pointed questions.

"Our scouts have found a camp here," the prince explained as he showed a rough map on papyrus to Han. "They appear to mostly be Assyrians, but they have Hittite slaves. Are you familiar with them?"

Han frowned deeply as he looked at the Egyptian map. It was different from how the Hittites drew theirs, but easy enough to understand and he was familiar with the region. "I believe those are the ones who raided us last year."

"So close? Why haven't you struck back?"

The Egyptians could potentially have enough power to take on the raiders. It would be strangely fitting, to help one enemy destroy the other. "It's more than simply a camp. They use that spot frequently for hunting or raids, but they can quickly retreat back to their walled town. May I?"

Itamununemwia nodded and handed his stylus to Han, who laid the papyrus down flat on the prince's makeshift table as he began drawing. He had a skilled hand at it, though had done little in the

way of decoration since Yutis had died.

"If you don't know where it is, it's easy to miss. They have it tucked behind these hills and retreat there when an attack comes. We didn't have the manpower to keep attacking and trap them in there until their supplies ran out."

The prince made a sound of disgust in the back of his throat. "I don't want to stay here for months at siege."

"They're skilled and brave. They'll fight to the last man."

There was no response. Han glanced up from the map to see the prince looking at him with a thoughtful expression. "I don't need to fight every last man. I just need to find that one moment of weakness."

Han felt heat flood his face in a flush as he glanced away quickly, thinking of his own moment of weakness. "What do you mean?"

"No defense is perfect. There's always a flaw, some weakness to exploit."

"Ah. Of course. You have a talent for finding the weak one, don't you?"

"I don't know if I'd put it that way. I'm more concerned about getting what I want than glory in battle. It's served me well."

"And what is it you want from these people?"

"I want to conquer them."

Something about the way he said that sent a chill down Han's spine. "Tribute and their allegiance, like with my people?"

"No. Your people informed us of what they were doing and have done little except fail to pay Pharaoh tribute this year. These people have been on the border long enough to build walls around themselves. They're clearly not peaceful Assyrian merchants, as they have some of your people as slaves. These can't be shown any

mercy."

Han found the word mercy coming from the Egyptian to be almost laughable. His mercy for Han's people was virtual enslavement. What he would do without mercy might be downright terrifying. Han considered asking what that might entail, but before he could speak the prince had already switched back to Egyptian and was giving instructions to his captain.

With a shock, Han realized they'd spent the entire conversation speaking his native language, Nesili. The prince switched between the two languages so naturally Han had taken it for granted that the young man wasn't using Egyptian to speak to him. Han's own Egyptian was perfectly serviceable and he imagined he'd be practicing it on a daily basis now, but the fact that Itamununemwia casually spoke Nesili was surprising. Somehow, Hantilis would have expected a warrior prince to have not bothered with things translators could do for him.

"If we come around from the north we can move to surround the walls and prevent the raiders from getting inside. They'll be forced to fight us out in the open instead," the prince was saying as he showed the captain what Han had drawn.

"What prevents them from simply running away and leaving the town under siege?"

"I'll direct six hundred of our men from the north, while you come with the remaining men to push the raiders back toward the walls. It should be a noisy approach with a great deal of dust so they go back toward their city all the faster."

The captain chuckled, nodding in understanding. "Like herding cattle to slaughter."

"Precisely. Their own cleverness becomes their death."

The prince and the captain continued to discuss their plans

through the evening meal, largely ignoring Hantilis. Hours passed before the captain, guards and scribe all left the tent and Hantilis and the prince were alone. Apparently once he had given his word not to act against Itamununemwia, the prince had decided he was completely trustworthy.

Han watched silently as the prince stripped off his clothing for sleep, revealing a taut, lean young body. His shoulders were broad and he'd likely finish growing into them in the next year, but he still carried about him some of the sleek grace of youth. His body was devoid of hair, all the better to highlight the definition of his muscles and show his cock to its full glory. There had been stories of the Egyptians pulling their body hair out with honey and strips of linen. Apparently it was true. Han found himself intrigued and aroused by the thought of feeling that smooth skin against himself.

"Where should I sleep?"

The prince gave a small start, his head jerking to the side to stare at Han with those green-blue eyes. "Wherever you can find space. I hadn't given it much thought."

Clearly he hadn't. Han had never been taken as a captive before, but it seemed to him that a man experienced in the matter would have made plans for what to do with him at night. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

Three years younger than Hantilis. He'd been the same age Itamununemwia was now when he'd been exiled. The thought of how much had changed since then was daunting. "You're barely a man."

"I assure you, I'm fully a man."

His earlier thoughts of seducing Itamununemwia returned in force. Partially because the sight of the nude young man made him

ache with longing, but also because of the prince's words to his captain. *Their own cleverness becomes their death*. Trapping Han as a hostage against his people had probably seemed like the perfect solution to the spoiled prince, but simply because Han wouldn't take a blade to him didn't mean Itamununemwia was safe.

In three quick strides Han had crossed the tent and closed the distance between them. He reached out, fingers skimming up the outside of the prince's thigh, then around to lightly stroke at his ass. The younger man inhaled sharply, stiffening, but didn't back away. No, instead he took a step forward. It would be easy to press against the prince's body and lose himself in pleasure for the night, but Han stilled himself. He'd enjoyed the prince pushing submission onto him before. Itamununemwia obviously had as well.

"I don't think you've proven that yet." Han smirked.

"Is that an invitation?"

"No."

With great satisfaction, Han turned away and found where his bag of clothing had been set. He moved close to the fire with it before lying down, using the bag to support his head, his back turned to the prince. The youth had already demonstrated he wasn't the type to force lovers. His reward for that decency would be a night of frustration as Han planned his next attack. The prince might be the one making Han submit in the end, but only because Han had driven him to it.

# **CHAPTER 3**

It was not a beautiful or exceptional town, except perhaps in the audacity of encroaching on Egypt's borders. The buildings were squat and crude, nearly hidden behind walls twice the height of a man. The walls themselves looked as though a sustained attack might be able to topple them in a few places. Itamun made careful note of where those places were, in case his plan failed.

This settlement was clearly one of undesirables who had been driven out of their native land. There had been stories of raiding along the borders for quite some time, but harassment of peasants far away from the farmlands along the Nile were of little concern to anyone. It had only been when tribute stopped coming from the small group of Hittites known to be in the area that orders to look for raiders as well had come. Itamun and his men had already dealt

with several small groups of them farther to the west, but this one was a bit larger and more settled. It had to have taken them years to build up the walled town. Itamun hoped to see it topple within days.

They had settled in the valley between two hills, forcing any attackers coming from the west to move through the valley in a highly visible way. There was no such natural protection from the other side, though. Circling around the hills and then coming from the northeast let them skirt the camp as well as spread out so that they were able to surround the town before anyone could escape to warn their warriors.

The walled town locked itself up well and, other than the occasional head peeking over the walls cautiously, there was little sign of life within. The Egyptians set up camp in the valley, where the raiders had diverted water for irrigation. There was talk of destroying the meager crops there, but Itamun ordered the men to leave them alone. If they did have to stay for a lengthy siege the crops would be useful for keeping them sustained outside as those within starved.

Now it would be a matter of waiting.

Normally patience was one of his greatest strengths, yet Itamun had found it frazzled by the time he ordered Hantilis to go help set up camp. The entire journey, the captive had leaned against his body, breathed questions into his ear. When they had to camp along the way, Hantilis made himself scarce as soon as they were alone, artfully avoiding the prince's tentative attempt at seduction. Itamun had never found himself so on edge, having never had to deny himself for so long. He felt as though his entire body was quivering with tension like a bowstring pulled too tight. The break away from the captive while camp was set up wasn't nearly

enough after that. By the time he went into his tent for the night, his mind was still full of Hantilis and the things he wanted to do to the other man.

Finding his captive sprawled naked in his bed when he entered the tent made him pause, looking the other man over.

"Is it an invitation this time?" Itamun asked dryly.

"Is it? Why thank you, I accept. There's a pallet on the floor for you."

It was simply too much. He'd tolerated Hantilis's insolence before, finding it amusing how defiant the man remained with nothing to his name, but taking the prince's bed was too far. If he didn't do something about it now, there'd be no controlling him. Pharaoh wouldn't find it amusing at all, either. He'd be more apt to kill Hantilis than anything else.

Itamun stripped off his sword and removed his belt, but kept the leather in his hand, doubling it over as he crossed the tent in three long strides. Hantilis saw his approach and started to move, mild alarm flashing in his eyes. Before the captive could escape, Itamun had his hand on his shoulder to push him back onto the bed again. While the rest of the men had to make temporary beds on the ground, he was the son of a living god and even here had a plush, comfortable bed, soft enough for Hantilis to sink into with their combined weight as Itamun climbed on top of him. One knee was planted on either side of the Hittite's hips, mirroring the position they had been in when their struggle had taken on a new form. Yet this time the other man wore nothing to hide the splendor of his battle-hardened body. As tempting as it would be to feel Hantilis's skin against his own, Itamun resisted the urge and kept his tunic on, reinforcing which of them was in control of this.

"If you want to live, you're going to have to learn how to

submit," the prince spat out.

Hantilis brought his hands up against Itamun's chest. He didn't push, simply rested them there for the moment. "Are you threatening me?"

"No. I'm teaching you."

Before his captive could protest or play any more word games with him, Itamun had taken hold of Hantilis's arm and pulled it into a joint lock behind his back, using it to flip him onto his stomach. The other man began to struggle, but now Itamun had the advantage of leverage. The Hittite's ass was pure, tempting muscle. The callused fingers of the young warrior slid over the curve of Hantilis's backside and the other man went still under his touch. Whether it was from submission or desire, he couldn't tell, but silently prayed that it might be both. By the gods, had he ever wanted anyone with the dizzying distraction that he wanted this one insolent foreigner?

Hantilis had said nothing, but Itamun could feel the other man shifting back into his touch, wordlessly asking to be touched further, to be taken. That would have to wait. He had to understand how important submission was for the sake of keeping his head. Itamun drew back without letting go of Hantilis's pinned arm, grasping the belt again to strike it across the other man's ass. He watched as Hantilis gasped, his body arching in shocked pain, which was to be expected. What he hadn't expected was the way the other man rolled his hips back, as he had done to the teasing touch only more urgently. Heat flooded Itamun's body, settling low in his belly as he felt his cock hardening.

"You like that?" Itamun asked, but Hantilis shook his head in defiance.

Another blow. Itamun watched that enticing, creamy flesh turn

pink as the blood came to the surface. He hit him again, rewarded with a stifled moan this time. Encouraged now, he kept whipping Hantilis at a slow, relentless pace, transfixed by the sight of the other man as he rocked to the blows, groaning. As Hantilis leaned back into his beating, his knees grew wider apart, giving Itamun a view of his thick cock hanging between his thighs, twitching in arousal with each blow.

Setting aside the belt and releasing the other man's arm for the moment, Itamun gave into his own temptation for a moment. Just a moment, he told himself. His hand slid between those enticingly parted legs, fingers brushing against his captive's heavy balls. Hantilis flinched, as if expecting new pain, and Itamun stilled, waiting until the other man had relaxed slightly. Then he cupped the tender sac in his palm, applying gentle pressure as his fingers stroked over it. A shudder ran its way through Hantilis's body, ending in a soft sigh as he rolled back toward Itamun.

"Do you want more?"

Another defiant shake of the head from Hantilis made Itamun growl in frustration. He released the other man, but only to move up his body, fingers tangling in that thick brown hair to tug Hantilis's head back, forcing his body into an awkward arch. This time when he picked up the belt, he was far less gentle. The first blow met with a resounding crack and Hantilis cried out, his body jerking down against the bed. It made Itamun hesitate, worried he might cause the other man serious harm.

"Please," Hantilis whimpered.

"Please what?" Itamun demanded.

"Don't stop. Keep doing that."

Several heartbeats of utter stillness passed as Itamun sat there on his knees, his fingers still tangled in the other man's hair,

staring at Hantilis as if he'd never seen him before. Some men found it exciting to be lightly flogged, but this went far beyond enjoying the rhythm and faint pain of a sensuous whipping. Suddenly, the other man's defiance took on a new light. He *wanted* to be overpowered. It was such a bizarre, new idea that Itamun wasn't sure what to make of it at first. Did he want to be beaten, abused, forced? How far did such masochism go, and was Itamun a monster because the idea of this new game made his body nearly vibrate with tense hunger?

Hantilis turned his head as far as he could while Itamun held his hair, looking at him from the corner of his eye. His tongue darted out, wetting his lips. "Please...my prince."

The belt came down and Hantilis jerked in pleasured pain, his hips thrusting down against the bed. Unable to stop with such temptation before him, Itamun continued to whip him hard enough to turn that pale skin red. Every muscle in Hantilis's body was tense, flexing beneath his skin as he shifted, alternating between rocking down against the bed and leaning back to meet each blow. Itamun shifted his grip, letting the leather strike lower, earning a startled whimper from his captive when he struck where thigh and ass met.

That whimper was the final blow to Itamun's self-control. He dropped the belt and slid away from the bed as he pulled off his tunic and went to a trunk of his belongings at the end of the bed.

"What are you doing?"

Itamun glanced up to see Hantilis pushing himself up on his elbows, turned at the waist to look over his shoulder at him. His ass was still in perfect view, temptingly striped in red.

"Don't question me," the prince told him coolly.

Once his hand closed around the tiny stoppered jar of sweetly

scented oil he'd brought for his skin, he climbed back onto the bed again. One hand went to the back of Hantilis's head, though this time he didn't pull his hair. His hand only guided the other man's head around, forcing him to rest his forehead against the bed. The gentle rise and fall of Hantilis's back as he breathed became more pronounced, the tension returning to him again. Was it fear or arousal? For this wonderful, enticing man, Itamun wasn't sure there was a line between the two.

Itamun's hands slid down Hantilis's body, taking hold of his hips to pull them up as his knee nudged the other man's thighs farther apart. With his head against the bed and his ass presented so temptingly, it was an awkward position. Certainly, it would make it difficult for his captive to move much. Itamun found he liked that idea quite a bit.

He poured some of the oil into his hand to stroke it over his cock, then slid two slick fingers between the other man's cheeks. The sight of Hantilis spread open and vulnerable like that was shockingly exciting in a way no eager slave boy had ever been. His fingers massaged back and forth over the tight hole before they pressed forward slowly. Just as he'd guessed, Hantilis must have done this before, and his body relaxed just enough to allow the passage. His fingers worked in and out of the tight heat, softening up what resistance remained in the other man's muscles. Yet there was little resistance left in the rest of him, judging by the way Hantilis groaned and rocked back to meet Itamun's hand, toes and fingers curling.

"Do you want me to fuck you?" He worked a third finger into Hantilis, slowing his movements teasingly. The only response to his question was a soft moan and a shudder running down Hantilis's spine.

Itamun's eyes narrowed and he drew his hand back, winning a whimper from Hantilis as he left the other man achingly empty. "Answer or you can sleep alone on the floor," he warned.

Hantilis turned on one elbow to look at Itamun over his shoulder, his expression challenging. "Don't ask. Just take what you want."

"But what I want..." Itamun leaned over the other man, kissing up his spine. His hand went to his own cock, guiding it to press against Hantilis's ass and tease at that tempting hole without pushing forward. "Is for you to want me." As he reached the back of the Hittite's neck he scraped the sensitive skin there with his teeth and rolled his hips forward, earning a body wracking shudder from the other man.

"Yes." Hantilis gasped. "Please, I want you."

That simple confession rang sweeter in Itamun's ears than any cries of pleasure or promises of devotion from his previous lovers. One hand slid back to hold Hantilis's hip as Itamun thrust forward, burying himself in the heat he'd been aching for ever since he'd laid eyes on his beautiful enemy. Their twin groans mingled as he rocked his hips against Hantilis's ass for a moment, savoring his possession of the other man's body. Several heartbeats passed as Itamun stayed pressed close to Hantilis, barely moving save for a slow, rhythmic roll of his hips, because he couldn't bring himself to pull away far enough to thrust again.

Nor could he pull away when Hantilis made a soft sound like a whimper, leaning his head back to nuzzle at the side of Itamun's face. Itamun's eyes closed automatically as he turned into the touch, his lips just barely grazing Hantilis's cheek.

The moment was broken when Hantilis jerked his head away suddenly and bowed it to rest his forehead against the bed.

Confusion washed over Itamun as he stared at the other man. Just when he thought they were coming to some sort of understanding or at least a sort of peace between them, Hantilis was retreating behind the walls of an inner fortress.

"Fuck me harder." Hantilis's whisper was so quiet for a moment Itamun thought he'd imagined it.

Apparently beating and fucking him was one thing, but *intimacy* was off the table.

Pulling away slightly, Itamun straightened up before slamming forward into Hantilis hard enough to make the other man gasp in shock. There was nothing tender or savoring remaining in it. That was also apparently just what Hantilis had been asking for, as he groaned and rocked back to meet him. Itamun gripped the other man's hip with near bruising strength, holding Hantilis there to guide his movements as he pounded into him. It was rough, savage, and nearly as violent as the whipping. Part of it was to punish Hantilis for rejecting his more tender lovemaking, but Itamun knew in his heart that it was mostly just raw desire.

When he saw Hantilis's hand slipping under himself to stroke his cock, he considered forbidding it. His captive had told him to *take*, after all. Yet the feel of the other man under him, thrusting down into his own hand, and the quiet, pleasured sounds he made was too much to resist.

Itamun's hand tightened even more on Hantilis's hip as he began to thrust faster, pausing to grind into the other man's ass each time their bodies slammed together. Hantilis was rocking back to him on each thrust, whimpering and groaning under his breath. The play of muscles under his back as he arched his spine and drove himself back onto Itamun's cock was nearly hypnotizing.

Then Itamun felt the hot grip of Hantilis's internal muscles clenching around him like a fist, and his eyes snapped shut. His hips bucked forward, jerking against Hantilis's ass as he flooded him, pumping jet after jet of his hot seed into Hantilis's waiting body. As he came, he was dimly aware of Hantilis thrusting down into his own hand, groaning and writhing with his own release.

The waves of pleasure began to recede and Itamun let himself relax against Hantilis's back, resting his cheek against the back of the other man's shoulder. Eyes still closed, he simply lay there and caught his breath. Under him he could feel the pounding of Hantilis's heart and his unsteady breath as the Hittite slowly relaxed into the bed until his body was flat against it.

"Itamun," he murmured as he brought one hand up, brushing the back of it against Hantilis's cheek.

The other man shifted slightly to try to look at him over his shoulder, brows knotted in confusion. "What?"

"It's what I'm called by personal friends. Not *prince* or *your highness*. Itamun."

"Oh."

Itamun fought against the vague annoyance at Hantilis's reaction. It was a gift of great intimacy to invite the other man to use his personal name, but the Hittite obviously had little interest in any sort of intimacy between them except for fucking. It would take patience and effort to win him over, yet he still felt compelled to try. Whether Hantilis realized it or not, he'd opened Itamun's eyes to a new world of possibilities and pleasure. He couldn't simply walk away casually from this awakening.

Rolling over onto his side next to Hantilis, he wrapped an arm loosely around the other man's waist as he prepared for sleep. "Good night, Hantilis."

There was no response at first. The moments stretched out silently and Itamun had almost drifted off before Hantilis finally spoke again.

"Good night, my prince."

# CHAPTER 4

Words drifted around Han as he was dragged from sleep, yet he couldn't make sense of them at first. He felt cool air replace the warm body that had been draped against him and the weight shifted off of the bed.

"How soon will they be here?" It was the prince's voice, hushed.

"Before the sun rises. They're moving quickly." Another voice, one Han didn't recognize. He forced his eyes open as he pushed himself up on one elbow to look. Itamun was dressing as he spoke to another man. He was clearly Egyptian by his dress and speech, but not one of the men Han recalled seeing around frequently. A scout, most likely.

"Get the standard-bearers and tell those on guard duty to start

waking the men so they can prepare themselves."

The scout bowed briefly, then ducked out of the tent.

"What are you going to do?" Han asked, unable to control his curiosity. He'd seen his fair share of battles, but he had never had the privilege of spending the morning with an enemy commander.

Itamun jerked at his voice, turning sharply to face him. "I thought you were still asleep."

"Did you think I'd sleep through battle, too?"

The prince's lips curled into a wry smile, which only served to accentuate the sensuous fullness of them. Han felt his cock twitch in response as his mind instantly went to all the delicious things that mouth could be used for.

"No, but I thought I'd have a chance to discuss strategy with the standard-bearers before you woke up."

"You don't trust me enough to discuss it in front of me?"

Itamun rolled his eyes and scoffed as he put on his sword. "If I didn't trust you that much, I certainly wouldn't let you sleep here while we were planning. I don't mind your presence because this is a mutual enemy we're facing."

Han fell silent and simply watched Itamun as he prepared himself for battle. Part of him wanted to warn the younger man that he wasn't trustworthy at all. He had no plans to sabotage the Egyptians, not when the blood of Yutis's murderers would be spilled by Egyptian blades. There were so many other things he could do, though.

He'd enjoyed the game of teasing the prince, arousing him and denying him release. The reality of actually laying with someone with ulterior motives had been different. He hadn't taken a lover since Yutis had died and now he was doing it for the sake of revenge. Every moment of pleasure the prince had given him had

been something to feel guilty over. He'd never enjoyed another man more, yet he couldn't forgive himself for what he was doing. The whipping had helped, assuaging that guilt. The tenderness afterward had left him unable to breathe, his chest frozen around a pit of self-disgust. When the prince had brushed his lips against Han's cheek as though he were going to kiss him, Han had nearly panicked. Whatever faults Itamun had, he was young and earnest. His desire for love was palpable, whether he fully realized it or not. Even if the youth was the perfect weapon against Han's enemies, he couldn't feel right about using someone whose heart was so open. Yutis would have been disgusted with him for doing such a thing.

When the first of the standard-bearers entered the tent, the older man's eyes lingered on Han even as he bowed to the prince. It made Han uncomfortably conscious of his nudity. There was no shame in it, but he was still lying in Itamun's bed like a ravished concubine.

"Your highness, are you sure you wish the...Hittite to be present for this discussion?"

The prince glanced over at him, then sighed and looked heavenward as if beseeching the gods as he waved a hand dismissively. "Get dressed and get out, Hantilis."

Han blinked, stung. He was probably being foolish for caring at all, but he couldn't stop the pang in his chest at being sent away. Silently he slipped off the bed to pull on his clothes, then excused himself from the tent.

Outside, Egyptian soldiers could be found all around in the dim light, stretching and practicing with their weapons, preparing themselves for battle. There were only the briefest of glances toward him before the men refocused on their efforts. Han found

that far more insulting than if they had stared and treated him as untrustworthy. He wasn't trusted *or* feared. Simply beneath notice.

Since no one cared to even watch him, he went to where his belongings had been left at the side of the tent. He'd only been permitted to bring what he could carry, but one of those things he'd carried on his back was his bow and quiver. He pulled them on now, having no intention of being caught in someone else's battle without a weapon.

That taken care of, he stalked off away from the camp. The valley was relatively narrow and it wasn't long before he had to climb to get farther away. An archer had to be capable of finding cover for himself, so the climb was nothing new for Han. He only went far enough to keep himself out of easy range of the raiders' bows. The Hittite and Egyptian bows were superior in accuracy and distance, but in this battle he doubted any Egyptians would be shooting at him. He settled into a comfortable spot half-hidden by several large rocks and rested his head back against the limestone.

Though the scout had said the raiders were coming quickly, ages seemed to pass while Han waited. Thoughts of a previous battle kept returning to him.

It had been the rainy season then, a short and violent burst of storms. Without it, that far from the Nile's annual flood no one would have ever been able to survive on the edges of Egypt. They hadn't been expecting any attacks because of the storms, which made it difficult and dangerous to travel far. Yet the raiders had come. Images of the battle and the blood spilled, of the people he'd failed to protect, flashed through his mind, agonizing him.

He purposefully hit his head against the rock wall he'd been resting it against, in an attempt to drive away the memories. There was nothing he could do for Yutis or the children now, having

buried them over a year before. The coming battle would not be like that one. He had no one left to lose. Telling himself that didn't seem to stop it. The memories of his failure taunted him, worsened by the guilt he felt over letting the Egyptian prince bed him.

Just when he thought he might go mad from it, there was movement in the dim, predawn light. He sat up to look, catching sight of the raiders being driven down the valley by the pursuing Egyptians. He considered calling down to the valley floor, to give warning that they were approaching, but before the thought was fully formed he heard a horn from above. Looking up sharply, he saw the scout from earlier, perched atop a pile of rocks halfway up the side of the mountain, the horn still raised to his lips.

Han felt a brief flash of annoyance that he hadn't heard the scout moving up there. He'd been lost in his own thoughts and could have been killed had it been anyone else.

A rain of arrows from the Egyptians met the raiders as soon as they were in range and Han saw at least ten of them fall. Another wave of arrows took out more of them before they'd ever had the chance to raise their swords. Then the Egyptians swarmed forward, catching the raiders between the two halves of their army.

Seeing them like this from above, he was able to properly appreciate the attack. There were five squadrons of chariots, with twenty-five chariots to each. Each of the chariots had two men. One drove while the other was armed with a bow, a sword, a shield and a javelin. The horses the Egyptians bred were smaller than what he was used to, but now he saw the usefulness of that small size. Their shorter legs and more compact bodies meant that they could turn sharply, turning the seemingly flimsy Egyptian chariots into fast and deadly weapons. Yet even as devastating as the chariotry was, there were still another seven hundred or so ground

troops.

What had attacked his village had been a tiny percentage of the prince's forces. Had they wanted to they could have not just conquered his village but wiped it off the face of the earth. They'd clearly borrowed many of their war techniques from the Hittites themselves, but with their superior numbers and faster horses there would have been nothing he could have done to stop them.

One of the chariots caught his attention as it waded through the melee. That uncommon grace he'd seen in Itamun before was unmistakable. The prince had foregone his bow for the moment as several raiders had climbed onto the sides of the chariot. His driver had picked up the bow instead, using it to pick off Assyrians who were attacking the horses. Itamun raised his sword and brought it down in a smooth arc, burying it into the shoulder of one of the raiders. The man's mouth opened in a scream before he fell to the ground. Itamun kicked another off and paused to catch his breath, but Hantilis could see that was a mistake. Another of the Assyrians was climbing over the other side.

Automatically, Hantilis nocked an arrow on his bow and aimed. In his mind's eye, it wasn't this battle alongside the Egyptians. He was back in his village. Yutis was about to fall to an Assyrian blade. This time, it would be different. He would save him. Yet even as he saw it in his mind, he knew it wasn't the truth. It wasn't Yutis below him, but an Egyptian prince. One who had taken him from all he knew to use him as a hostage against his own people.

Hantilis grew still as he struggled with himself. If the prince died, there would be confusion. The Egyptians would likely still win the battle, but they'd have to return to Egypt quickly. The funeral rites for a royal person would require it. They wouldn't

have time to look for a lost captive.

Down below, everything seemed to move slowly as though he had all the time in the world to make his decision. Itamun turned and saw the raider. He brought his sword up, catching his attacker's blade to block it, but the momentum of the other man was too much for him and slammed his body back against the side of the chariot. He was twisting as he kept turning his blade to block the other, his face a grimace of effort. The prince's eyes flicked past the raider's shoulder as they fought, just a brief glance. Likely, he was looking for other attackers. Instead his eyes happened to fall onto Hantilis himself, then opened widely in shock.

Hantilis felt numb as he relaxed the bowstring and lowered his weapon. His eyes never left the prince's. Confusion followed by pain filled the younger man's eyes. Even this far away, he could see the betrayal clearly.

Suddenly, the chariot driver was there, burying a javelin deeply in the raider's back. It might not have been an immediately fatal wound, but it caused the man to stiffen in pain and he lost control of his sword arm. Itamun refocused on his attacker as he shoved the man away with a kick, then plunged his sword deeply into his chest.

The prince took a quick look around, then turned his eyes up the mountain without raising his head. As his eyes met Hantilis's again, the Hittite felt a chill down to his soul. That boyish vulnerability he'd seen before in the young man's growing attachment to him was gone. The look held nothing but promises of violence.

\* \* \*

The battle didn't last much longer. The raiders were both outnumbered and outmaneuvered. Rather than slaughter them all on the battlefield as Hantilis had expected, the majority were taken captive. The men were tied on their knees, lined up before the gates of their city as the prince paced behind them. There looked to be around two hundred of them left.

He called something out in the Assyrian tongue that caused several of the prisoners to flinch, though others simply looked resigned. It wasn't a language Hantilis knew well, but he was able to catch words here and there. *Dawn* and *twilight* and *kill* were the ones he was most sure of.

There were people gathered on the walls to look out. Women and children, mostly, but a few older men as well. Most of the women were crying. Several screamed at the prince's words. Two or three appeared to faint. The old men appeared unmoved, however.

The prince called out a question to them. A number of the women were begging now. Four of the old men turned to one another to discuss something quietly, before one shouted back to the prince.

Itamun bowed his head for a moment, his eyes closed. As Hantilis watched, he wondered if anyone else could see the burden on the young prince's shoulders. Other men thirsted for battle, yet for all the skill the prince had at it he seemed to loathe it.

When Itamun raised his head again, he drew his sword and approached the nearest of the prisoners. The man threw himself forward, kicking and crawling across the ground, screaming something out over and over again. It wasn't a word Hantilis recognized, but by the desperate sobs from one of the women on the wall he could guess it was a name.

Two soldiers stepped forward to grab the Assyrian by his shoulders and force him to his knees again, holding him in place as he continued to struggle. Hantilis saw Itamun's lips move, but he was no longer speaking for the benefit of everyone assembled. The words were meant only for the man before him, too quiet to be heard from a distance.

When the sword came down, Hantilis turned away. Even from a distance the meaty thud of metal burying itself in a neck was unmistakable. He pushed his way through the Egyptian soldiers to find Itamun's tent again. In the relatively cool darkness, he lay on the bed and closed his eyes, taking several deep breaths.

He'd seen dozens of the Assyrians die in battle. He'd even killed them before himself. These were the people responsible for Yutis's death, so what did it matter if a few more of them were executed?

But it did matter. In the heat of battle he'd never had to hear the sobbing of a soon to be widow. His enemies were fighting back, not cowering on their knees. Seeing them like this made them too human. It made the idea of killing them revolting instead of exciting.

Hantilis had started to drift to sleep there on the bed when the sound of someone else entering the tent roused him. Pushing himself up on his elbows, he saw the prince stepping in. Blood decorated him, making him look like a bronze statue that presided over human sacrifices. His right arm was covered in dried blood nearly up to the elbow while his face and chest were splattered with a fine, fresh spray of it. None of it appeared to belong to him.

The prince stripped and filled a bowl with water from a pitcher before he began to bathe himself. Each stroke of his hand was slow, deliberate. Once he'd rinsed the bloody hand he began at his

forehead, rubbing his hands over his face, tracing his own features with the water, before dragging his fingers down over his throat. The bloody water ran in dirty pink rivulets down his body, following the contours of his muscles and crisscrossing with one another before trickling off his ankles and the edges of his feet, soaking into the reed mat he stood on. His hands stroked the water over every bit of his skin, smoothing away traces of the battle and execution. When he was done, he picked up the pitcher to pour the remainder of the water over his head, then took a piece of linen to begin drying himself.

"His widow's name is Leja," Itamun said quietly.

Hantilis frowned at that. "They shouldn't have let the women be up there to see that."

The prince shook his head slightly, tossing the used linen aside before he turned to climb onto his bed. The weariness Hantilis had seen moments before was gone as the other man crawled on top of him, slamming him back against the bed hard. Hantilis automatically brought his hands up to fight him off, but the prince placed a hand over his throat and shifted to straddle him, Itamun's weight leaning forward just enough to cut off his air. Something hard and cruel lurked in those blue-green eyes as Hantilis stared up into them.

"You were going to let me die."

The pressure on his throat eased, enough so he could speak again. "But you didn't."

"That really isn't the point, is it? You were going to stand there like a coward and let me die while you watched. You don't even have the balls to do it yourself."

The words felt as if Itamun had just slashed him with a knife. Hantilis winced, turning his face slightly to the side. "I didn't want

you to die."

"Lies! I saw you lower your bow."

"Wanting you to die and wanting my freedom are two different things."

Itamun's hand drew away abruptly. He climbed off of the bed again and stalked away. Pushing himself up, Hantilis watched in confusion as the prince gathered up the linen he'd been using before.

"You have no freedom now, Hantilis." The younger man's voice was cold as he spoke. There was a hardness there Hantilis had never heard before.

"That doesn't mean I don't still want it."

The prince glanced at him over his shoulder before picking up a knife to begin cutting the linen into stripes. "I've given you a lot of things you want, Han. That's the familiar form of your name, isn't it? Han." Hantilis didn't respond. "I've given you everything you wanted that was in my power to give you."

Rage boiled inside of him as Han's upper lip curled. "Now who's the liar?"

"Do you think I can defy the pharaoh? Do you think I would defy the pharaoh, for you? I've done what I can every step of the way to try to make you happy." Itamun set the knife down and gathered up his newly cut linen strips. "In your village during the battle, you told me to stop touching you. I did. When we were negotiating the terms of your surrender, you didn't want your village to starve or be enslaved, so I took you instead. Last night you wanted me to hit you, so I hit you. You wanted me to fuck you, so I fucked you."

With every sentence, the prince stepped closer to the bed purposefully until he was at the foot of it. He stopped there, his

head cocked slightly to the side, a dangerously sadistic smirk tugging at his lips. "And now you want me to be your villain and I promise, I will be that, too."

For the first time since the day they'd met, Han felt fear as he looked at the prince. He was young and he was pretty, but he was also a dangerous man. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to teach you."

Itamun had said that once before. The memory of the whipping made Han's cock harden almost instantly. He'd enjoyed submitting himself to Yutis, but it had been nothing like that. This was something far beyond what little games he and his partner had played together. Yutis had never caused him pain or truly tried to control his will. Yutis had never satisfied the growing hunger Han was just beginning to recognize.

"Strip," the prince ordered sharply.

Even as much as he wanted to experience whatever it was that the prince was offering, he couldn't give in so instantly. Han pushed himself up into a fully upright position on the bed. "And if I refuse?"

"Then I will tie you up and leave you like that all night long."

Han blinked, shocked by the threat. He'd expected to hear about something painful. As frustrating as that might be, it didn't sound like torture.

"Then I refuse."

Itamun grinned like a jackal stumbling upon an unexpected rabbit. The younger man dived forward, grabbing Han's arm and twisting it as he shoved him over onto his stomach. Han grunted, more in shock than from the pain of the joint lock. The younger man's knee was pressed against his spine, making it difficult for him to move as Itamun quickly, efficiently tied his wrists together

with a strip of linen.

He felt Itamun's weight shift as the prince leaned forward over him. His lips brushed against the back of Han's neck, making him shudder, before they moved to his ear. "I was hoping you'd say that," Itamun whispered, his breath tickling against the sensitive skin.

Han held himself still as he felt Itamun slowly moving down his body. The linen wasn't as strong as rope or leather. With enough effort he could have broken through it. He didn't, though. Itamun rolled up a strip of the linen to put between Han's knees, padding them so they didn't rub against one another, before he tied his legs together there. Then he moved lower, tying him again at the ankles.

A moment after Itamun was done with his legs he moved back up, releasing Han's hands. He had just enough time to be shocked before he felt himself being shoved over onto his back. The prince straddled him again and took his arms to retie them in front of his body.

"What are you doing?" Han asked.

Itamun glanced toward his face, raising one eyebrow slightly. "I haven't given you permission to speak."

Han fell silent, giving himself up to Itamun's will. There was a strange sort of peace in that. The guilt he'd felt from the start over the plan to use the prince, the rage and loss he felt over Yutis's death, his cowardice in laying down his bow that morning, all fell away. The prince wrapped the linen strips around his chest, securing his arms in place there. Each strip of the cloth was weak and he could have broken through them individually, but the more that were added, the less chance he had. It was a delicate trap, building upon itself.

When his arms and legs were immobilized, the prince moved off the bed to retrieve rope. A loop of rope went around Han's ankles, then attached to both bottom legs on the bed so that he couldn't even move his legs from side to side. The rope next went around his chest, threading through his bound arms and around his shoulders, before the prince tied it to the two upper legs of the bed. Han could breathe easily and move his head, but that was all he could do.

He tilted his head back to try to look at Itamun as the prince stood at the head of the bed. He wanted to ask more questions, but he remembered Itamun's admonishment, so stayed silent.

The prince walked around the bed, testing the ropes until he was apparently satisfied, then climbed back onto the bed again. His hands pushed Han's kilt upward, exposing him. Though the prince had barely touched him except to bind him to the bed, Han still found himself achingly aroused. The helplessness and that faint thrill of fear left him almost breathlessly excited.

"Last night you told me to just take, not ask. Do you remember that?" the prince asked in a soft voice, his fingers just barely teasing along the underside of Han's cock. That light touch made him shudder, straining against his bonds. "You may answer yes or no."

"Yes," Han bit out, struggling not to groan.

"Good." Itamun wrapped his hand around his shaft, though he didn't stroke. Had Han been able to move, he doubted he could have resisted thrusting into that touch. "Do you want me to take whatever I want?"

Han closed his eyes. If he answered "no" it would be a lie and they'd both know it. The truth was too complicated and uncomfortable to be answered with a simple "yes", though.

"Answer." The prince's voice grew harder and his hand squeezed around Han's cock, finally wresting that groan from him.

"Yes," Han choked out.

The prince's grip relaxed slightly. It stroked along his length slowly, once, then stopped. "So do you enjoy giving me control?"

"I don't know."

That answer was met with a soft chuckle. His eyes were still closed, but Han could feel as Itamun's weight shifted. The prince moved down his body and then there was the brush of his breath against Han's cock, making him gasp sharply. "Do you want me to not give you a choice?"

Han sighed explosively in relief, as if a huge weight had been lifted from his chest. It wasn't a question he had ever thought to ask himself, but hearing it from Itamun he knew it was just what he needed to hear. The relief he felt at hearing it put into words was nearly enough to bring tears to his eyes. "Yes," he whispered.

The reward for his answer this time was the warm embrace of Itamun's mouth as he wrapped his lips around Han's cock. He couldn't help but groan, struggling against his bonds, wanting to thrust up into the inviting heat, but his hips could barely rock up to Itamun. Those full, lush lips felt every bit as perfect as he'd known they would. The younger man sucked slowly, bobbing his head over his cock. The flat of his tongue dragged along the underside of Han's shaft, curling the tip to tease just under his head.

When the prince drew away again, Han whimpered, ready to beg if only he were allowed the words.

"Does that mean you'll do anything I tell you to?"

This was a trap. He wasn't sure what it was leading up to, but he realized that the prince had been guiding him down a groomed trail every step of the way. Han opened his eyes to look down at

Itamun. The sight of the prince looking up his body, his cheek resting against Han's cock, was enough to assuage his concerns. This had nothing to do with his captivity and everything to do with their shared bed. The hunger in the prince's eyes was obvious.

"Yes."

Those sensuous lips curled into a smile of utter satisfaction as Itamun slid up his body. He felt the nude prince's hard cock press against his as the younger man straddled him again, Itamun's hands resting on Han's shoulders.

"Then kiss me," the prince whispered, lowering his face.

Panic struck Han like a fist to the gut. He twisted his head to the side to avoid the kiss, struggling against his bonds. Kisses were for equals. Lovers. He'd bedded other men, kissed them and held them, but they hadn't been holding him captive. It was bad enough that he was fucking the prince, but tainting what Yutis and he had shared by committing that mockery of intimacy with Itamun was unforgivable.

"No, I won't."

Itamun drew back, frowning. Instead of the anger that Han had expected, there was only confusion on the younger man's face. The youth sat back on his heels, still straddling him, but made no further move to touch him.

"You won't let me kiss you?" the prince asked carefully.

Han shook his head.

Itamun stared at him, his brows knotted together. One hand came up to rub at the back of his neck, his expression unreadable. Abruptly, he slid off of the bed entirely, crossing the tent. Han raised his head as far as he could, catching sight of the prince just before he lowered himself to the pallet on the floor.

"Good night, Han."

Han rested his head back against the bed and stared up at the ceiling of the tent. He still ached for relief. Bound as he was, he couldn't even touch himself. The thought of spending the night like that was agonizing, but no matter how he tried he couldn't bring himself to beg Itamun to come back so Han could submit himself to a grotesque parody of intimacy. He would simply suffer through.

# CHAPTER 5

The night was no kinder to Itamun than it was to Han. Having to kill never sat well with him, but killing a man on his knees as his wife watched was a new horror. The Assyrian raiders could have spared the man, of course. He'd told them that a man would be executed each time the sun rose and set until they opened the gates. He'd promised that if only they surrendered no one else would die. It was better than staying within their walls until every last one of them had starved. Whether it was pride or distrust, he wasn't sure, but the elders had refused to surrender. His hand had been forced. He couldn't make empty threats.

No matter how he tried to justify it to himself, he couldn't stop seeing that woman's face and hearing her husband call out her name to his dying breath.

At dawn he rose and untied Han, though left him to continue sleeping, then stepped out, hoping this time it would be different. It wasn't. The elders continued to refuse to open the gates. The women continued to cry and beg. Another prisoner was executed.

Afterward, Itamun went to the tent of the captain of the troops, Meriatum. He was too exhausted and troubled to deal with Han's irrational behavior. He settled onto the reed mat on the floor and drank several cups of beer, hoping that they might wash away the tempest of thoughts and memories swirling around in his head. They didn't.

"I don't like what you're doing," Meriatum said, startling Itamun.

He looked to the captain, trying to figure out exactly what he meant. The drinking was hardly to excess and the tactics in the siege were standard. "What in Set's deserts does that mean?"

"This business with the Hittite. It has the men talking."

Itamun's eyes flicked to the side as he thought, trying to figure out where the captain would have heard anything of that. The scout had seen Han in his bed, as had one of the standard-bearers. It was entirely likely everyone was talking about it now, but it was hardly the sort of thing worthy of comment. Many men relieved their needs upon captives.

"There is no business with the Hittite."

The captain rose from his own chair to pace, clearly uncomfortable yet unable to stop himself from pursuing the discussion. Itamun wished desperately that he would let his discomfort win and shut up. "He sleeps in your tent, which is foolish enough, but I'm told you're treating him as though he were your...your woman."

Itamun snorted. "He is hardly my woman."

"You know exactly what I mean."

"And if I choose to take a captive to my bed? It only proves the dominance of Egypt."

"I think it could cloud your judgment where the Hittite is concerned."

That was why Meriatum had brought it up, then. It was insulting that the man thought Itamun could be led astray by someone he was bedding. As much as he desired Han, it was clear now that the man only wanted him for the most impersonal sex possible. Itamun had plenty of willing servants and slave boys at the palace. The idea that he could lose his judgment over a man who wouldn't even kiss him would have been laughable if it wasn't so insulting.

"What judgment do I need unclouded? He's a captive. He'll be held until Pharaoh tires of him and he's released."

"And what if the Hittite has plans of his own?"

"He can have all the plans he likes. They don't matter," Itamun snapped.

"And what if he's tricking you? Manipulating you into something?"

"Such as? Releasing him? That's hardly going to happen."

"I don't know what he could be doing. I don't trust him, though."

"Good. That makes two of us."

"You don't trust him either?" Meriatum sounded surprised.

"Of course I don't! How stupid do you think I am?"

"But you sleep with him. He could kill you in the night."

"He could have killed me the day we attacked his village. He didn't. Why would he now?" In fact, he'd never seen Han kill anyone. Even at the battle the day before, surrounded by the people

who had attacked his village and armed with his favored weapon, he'd never shot a single arrow. Of that, Itamun was certain. He had counted how many arrows Han had when they left the Hittite village. He still had the same number in his quiver.

"You just said you don't trust him."

"And I don't."

"Except with your life?"

Itamun was quiet for a long moment. If Meriatum had asked him that question before the battle, it would have been easy to answer. "That isn't the same at all."

"Then explain to me how it's different, your highness. Pharaoh will have my head if I return with news that you were slain in your sleep."

"He has honor. If he wished me harm, he wouldn't do it while I was asleep." No, Han would simply watch while someone else killed him. Itamun had been foolish to expect better from the man, yet he had. Even now the memory of looking into Han's eyes and seeing him put the bow down made his chest feel as though he'd been stabbed through the heart.

"How do you know that?"

"When we took his village you saw him throw down his knife. My back was to him and he could have killed me, easily."

Meriatum rolled his eyes and when he spoke scorn dripped from his words. "He was surrounded by enemies. That isn't honor. That's self-preservation. The act of a coward."

A coward. Yes, that did seem to describe Han far too well. The thought bothered Itamun more than the idea that he might not be able to trust Han. Danger, he could respect. A coward, he couldn't. "Perhaps you're right. Still..."

"This man isn't to be trusted, your highness. Killing you may

be too dangerous for him, perhaps he won't risk his own life, but he may have other plans."

Such as waiting for someone else to do it. Itamun was silent for a long moment, staring into his cup. What had Han ever done to win his trust? What had he done to show honor, instead of cowardice? When Itamun finally answered the captain, he spoke softly. "I've considered that."

"Then why is he still in your bed?"

"Because I'll learn more about what his plans are if I don't act paranoid every time we're alone."

Meriatum shook his head. "I don't understand how you can bed your enemy."

"I said I don't trust him. I never said he was my enemy. There's a difference."

"What's the difference?"

"I hardly trust anyone, but it would be very exhausting to treat them all as my enemies."

"It might be safer."

"No. I'd be distracted with worry and might miss something."

"How can you sound so wise one moment and so foolishly young the next?"

"When have you ever thought I sounded wise?"

"When you're figuring out how to kill someone, you're the wisest man I know."

The captain meant it as a compliment, but after having executed two men in front of their wives Itamun had no desire to hear how good he was at killing. He drained his cup and got to his feet. There was little to be done for the day except to check weapons and rest. While he'd been considering tossing Han out of his tent so that he could sleep alone, the conversation with

Meriatum had left him feeling stubborn. If he threw Han out now, the captain would think it had something to do with what he'd said.

He was halfway back to his tent when he heard the shouts. His hand automatically drew his sword and he readied himself for an attack, but then the content of the shouts penetrated his brain.

"They've opened the gates! They've opened the gates!"

Every man in the camp was instantly on his feet, as prepared for battle as Itamun. He shouted for several men to accompany him as he moved toward the walls to get a look at what was happening.

When he got close enough to see, the sight shocked him. There wasn't a man in view. Instead, there was a small group of women standing there. As he came closer, the women prostrated themselves on the ground, touching their foreheads to the earth.

"Get up. What's going on here?" Itamun demanded.

One young woman climbed back to her feet. Her hair had been haphazardly hacked off and her face was stained with ashes. She had a motherly fullness to her figure that made him guess she had to be relatively close to giving birth.

"We tied up the elders and opened the gates. If you meant your word that no one else would be killed, then we surrender."

The woman's boldness surprised him. The prince raised an eyebrow as he looked the woman over appraisingly. "And what if I didn't keep my word?"

The woman flicked her eyes upward. Itamun followed her gaze, catching sight of a number of other women and young boys along the walls with bows. He doubted they had the strength or skill to shoot accurately for any distance, but he'd entered their range. Apparently they had decided if they were to die, they'd take as many Egyptians with them as they could. The bravery on display impressed him.

"What's your name, woman?"

"Leja."

He looked sharply at her face again. Her hair had been hacked off in mourning, her face covered in ashes, but it was the same woman. The widow of the first executed prisoner. Itamun felt a thrill of fear. Would she sacrifice the rest of her people for revenge against her husband's killer?

"You have my word that no one else will be killed, Leja."

The woman nodded, satisfied. "I assume you'll enslave us, then?"

"Prisoners of war are typically absorbed into the army." He looked over the women, frowning. "Male prisoners. Their women are treated like any other soldiers' wives. The unmarried women and elderly may be taken as household servants for the nobility. Children will either stay with their parents or be adopted by Egyptian families."

Leja smiled bitterly at that, giving him a small, almost mocking bow of her head. "Your mercy is appreciated."

\* \* \*

The next several days were spent sorting out the prisoners and looting the city. Itamun found it distasteful, but it paid the men and made them eager to serve the pharaoh, so he couldn't fault them for their pleasure in it. Thirteen Hittite slaves were found within the city during the course of it. Itamun had them released and gave them the papyrus with the map on it, to find the Hittite village.

To his surprise, they didn't leave immediately. Hours later when he went looking for Hantilis he stumbled upon the group of them near the fields, deep in discussion with his captive. He hung

back near a copse of sycamore trees growing alongside the irrigation ditch. It felt childish to eavesdrop, yet his curiosity was too strong to resist.

"No, Netai. I won't allow it. You need to get home," Hantilis was insisting to one if the men. He was short and a bit darker of skin than the other Hittites. He looked very young.

The one called Netai shook his head emphatically. "My family is long gone. You are my prince and I will serve you, even in the House of Ramesses."

The reference left Itamun puzzled, but it had a far different effect on Han. The Hittite sat heavily on a large stone beside the field, resting his head in his hands. "I'm no one's prince now," Han insisted.

"That's right. He isn't," another one of the men spoke. He was the oldest in the group, with a thick scar running down his left cheek and hair that was solid white. "You owe him nothing. Let's go."

Netai ignored the other man and walked closer to Han, kneeling at his feet as he looked up beseechingly. "Please. You're the closest thing I have to family left. I want to be sure you're safe. It's what my brother would have wanted."

"I imagine Yutis would have wanted to be alive," the older man snapped.

Han lifted his head, giving him a dark look. "Don't speak of him, Pesach. You have no right. If Netai truly wants to stay with me, that's up to Prince Itamununemwia to decide. The rest of you should go."

Pesach spat on the ground, but said nothing more. He made a gesture and the others followed him down the valley, save the younger one who remained sitting at Han's feet. Itamun waited a

few moments longer before finally stepping out into view.

"Did you know all of them?"

Han glanced up with a frown, then nodded slightly. "They were taken in raids against us."

"They were eager to speak to you."

That was met with a soft sound of disgust. "Wouldn't you be eager to hear what had happened to your family if you were forced from your home?"

"Yes, but I think I'd be eager enough to see them myself that I wouldn't waste half the day talking to someone about them. It's been hours since I gave them the map."

Han chuckled softly, shaking his head. "You have a point."

Itamun sat on the ground, leaning against another rock. It was hardly as comfortable as one of the finely carved chairs at the palace, but it wasn't completely awful. Particularly not when he was finally having a normal conversation with Han. His eyes flicked toward the youth, Netai. The boy looked to be a few years younger than Itamun himself.

"You're not going with the rest of them?" he asked.

The boy bowed his head, though the gesture didn't manage to hide his frown or the knot his brows had been twisted into. "No, your highness. I wish to stay with Hantilis."

Itamun nodded slightly, his mind going back to the conversation between the Hittites. "So why did they stay so long to speak to you?" he asked, turning to Han.

"Because I'm the reason they were enslaved."

Itamun waited patiently, but Han offered nothing more to that. "Why? Did you sell them?"

"No, but they had to leave Hatti because of me. They never would have been here to pay tribute to your pharaoh or be attacked

by the Assyrians if it hadn't been for me."

"Why? What did you do?"

Han looked to Itamun and their eyes met for a long moment. There was something new in the Hittite's face. Pain and weariness and guilt. "My mother is the eldest sister of our king. There were several younger male heirs so there had never been any question of her inheriting the throne, but I still had the claim. Several years ago there was a struggle between the nobility and my uncle. A number of them supported me as the next king. I was to depose him."

Itamun was silent. It explained a few things, such as how a man living in a tiny, isolated village spoke as if he had the education of a prince. "And then when you failed you had to flee for your lives?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you say anything before?"

Han smiled slightly, though it wasn't a pleasant smile. "I'd be worth more as an offering to my uncle than as a hostage against an impoverished village, wouldn't I?"

His thoughts hadn't gone in that direction yet, but as soon as Han said it Itamun knew his father's thoughts would. The man was a political tool. Something to be used for an advantage. Somehow, somewhere.

Feeling a bit sick to his stomach, Itamun rose to his feet and walked away without a word. The enigma of Hantilis made a bit more sense, but he still didn't understand how a man who had taken on a king could be the coward Meriatum saw.

## CHAPTER 6

The journey back to Egypt was worse than the one to the Assyrian city. There had been nearly seven hundred Assyrians taken prisoner, which slowed them down immensely. Making the new slow pace even worse, Itamun didn't invite Han to ride in his chariot. This time there was no teasing the prince throughout the day. When they made camp at night, Itamun ignored him. The first few nights after the women's surrender Han had crawled into Itamun's bed and waited to be touched, but nothing ever came. The prince simply rolled over and went to sleep. When it became clear that Itamun had no further use for him, Han had taken to sleeping on the ground.

The rejection stung, though he didn't quite know why. He told himself that he'd only been seducing Itamun in order to use him. If

he could have made the prince fall in love with him, he might have been able to use the pharaoh's son as a weapon against his uncle. Of course, he recognized that he'd done a bad job of it. The prince hadn't fallen in love with him because he'd given him nothing to love. There may have been the start of something, but when he'd nearly gotten the prince killed he'd surely destroyed any possibility of affection between them. Or at least it had destroyed any affection coming from the prince. Han found himself aching to be near Itamun again.

The fact that Yutis's little brother, Netai, was now tagging along only made things worse. He tried to smile for the youth, but he couldn't get over his concern for the boy. As a political prisoner, Han could expect a certain amount of protection. He wasn't sure what could be expected for Netai.

One day while walking Han noticed one of the prisoners was having difficulty. It was the woman whose husband had been the first executed. Han had since gathered that she was the one who had opened the gates as well.

"You need help?" Han asked the woman. He'd had little practice in the Assyrian dialect, but he hoped his intent came across.

The woman looked at him, then nodded slightly and reached out to grab onto his arm with surprising strength. "I can't walk like this."

She was much shorter than he was, but he ducked down to wrap an arm around her, helping to support her as they walked. It looked as though her back and possibly one of her hips was bothering her, which didn't surprise him. She had to be close to giving birth and shouldn't have been expected to walk at all.

"You're a Hittite. What are you doing with the Egyptians?"

Leja asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Han frowned at the question, but saw no reason not to answer. "I...prisoner. They attack village."

"Hmm." She pressed her lips tightly together, nodding slightly. "That village our men would attack? Are you how they found us?" "Yes."

"I hope your manhood rots off."

There was little force behind the words. It sounded as if she were simply remarking on the weather. It took him a moment before the actual meaning of what she said translated. When it did, he gave her a look of shock.

"Your men kill my family."

Leja shrugged slightly. "I suppose we're even then. Their commander killed my husband and I doubt my baby's going to survive this."

"You should not walk." It wasn't precisely what he meant. A healthy pregnant woman had no reason not to walk or even work in the fields, but there was a great difference between that and a forced march across Egypt.

The woman laughed bitterly. "Really? Oh, well. You'd better go tell the commander that. Maybe he'll carry me on his back."

"I will."

She looked shocked as he slipped his arm from around her. It was easy to spot where Itamun was and he jogged directly over to him. The prince gave him a sidelong glance, frowning slightly, then turned his eyes forward again.

"What do you want?" Itamun asked.

"That woman, Leja. She's too pregnant to be marching like this. She'll likely go into labor early. She and the baby might both die."

The prince drew his brows together, looking confused, then finally turned on the chariot to face Han. "How do you know that?"

"I've spent a lot of time around pregnant women and new mothers. Please, you can't do this to her."

The prince sighed and shot him a pained look before shaking his head slightly. "I didn't know," he said quietly. Jumping down from the chariot, he gestured for Han to lead the way.

Since he'd left her side, Leja had fallen a bit farther behind and was straggling at the very end of the prisoners, where the elderly and sickly had ended up. The prince was looking around uncomfortably as he walked alongside Han. Itamun opened his mouth as though he was going to say something, then shut it again with a frown.

When Leja saw that the prince himself had come to retrieve her, her eyes widened in shock. She looked from Itamun to Han in confusion.

"Put your arm around her and take one of her legs. We'll carry her back to the mess cart," Itamun told Han. He complied without a word, seeing the sense in that. The mess cart was closer than anything else she might be able to ride on. Itamun wrapped an arm around her back as well and took her other leg so that the two of them together formed a living chair for the woman. Leja made a small yip of shock when they lifted her off of her feet, but didn't resist, perhaps too surprised to do so.

Once they had set her in the cart, she shifted her weight to get comfortable, a hand resting on her belly. Her eyes darted from the prince to Han again, before settling on Han. "Thank you. I don't hope your manhood rots off," she told him primly.

Han felt just the faint hint of a grin as he nodded to the young

woman, then started to walk away to continue the march. Before he got far, a hand had settled onto his shoulder, getting his attention. Turning, he saw it was Itamun.

"Yes?"

"Is it...that easy for a pregnant woman to die?"

Why the prince would suddenly care so much about pregnancy eluded him. Han simply frowned as he nodded slightly. "They're not soldiers, your highness. A healthy woman can still do a great deal while pregnant, but she's still fragile. They can die even if you do everything right."

"But...how do you ensure they don't die, then?"

Han glanced toward the cart where Leja was sitting, but somewhat doubted that this had anything to do with the Assyrian woman. He turned back to Itamun again, shaking his head. "You pray and you hope. You can't control fate."

"I dislike things I can't control."

"You seem to be taking this rather personally."

The prince gave a small nod of acknowledgment. "My wife is pregnant."

Han looked at him sharply, eyes moving up and down the younger man. His upper lip curled slightly in disgust. "You have a pregnant wife at home so you go off to war and bed strange men?"

Itamun stiffened at that, his jaw clenching. "I had no choice. My father sent me. And our marriage isn't like that."

"Then what is it like?"

"We care for one another, but not as lovers. I have no desire for women. She takes no offense at me having male lovers."

"You desire women enough to get one pregnant."

Itamun glared at him. "We wanted children." Not waiting for a response, the prince quickened his stride to hurry back to his

chariot and leave Han alone amongst the prisoners.

Han watched him go, frowning. Itamun was a prince, he reminded himself. Whether he wanted women or not, a political marriage had likely been arranged for him. He was lucky to have a bride who didn't mind his desire for men, though. For all the effort to depose his uncle, Han had secretly been horrified at the idea of being king. His every movement would have been watched and remarked upon. Instead of one wife, he would have been expected to have several in order to ensure he had enough heirs and for all the political ties the marriages would have given him.

He couldn't help but envy Itamun. The younger man could have a family as well as a male lover. Now after all that he had lost, Han could have neither.

No, that wasn't true. Even if he couldn't be honest with anyone else, he knew he had to admit it to himself. Nothing was actually stopping him from taking another lover. Yutis likely wouldn't have blamed him for spending a year in mourning, then finding someone new to fill his bed and heart. The problem was that he had found someone that might very well fill both. But letting Itamun do that would have repercussions beyond slaking his thirst for the prince.

He'd known from the start that the man craved Han's submission, but worse than that was the fact that Han wanted to give it to him. He'd already told Itamun more about his exile than he should have and he knew if he gave himself to the prince he'd tell him more. He'd tell the prince every secret he had and give himself over to Itamun fully and completely and joyfully.

Would that be so bad? He wasn't sure.

As Han continued walking, lost in his own thoughts, he found himself drifting next to the mess cart again. Leja was leaning back

against a sack of grain, her eyes closed. One eye cracked open to glance at him like a sleepy cat before it closed again.

"For a prisoner you're on good terms with the Egyptian commander," she commented.

"No." Han shook his head at the question, frowning. "His wife..." He struggled for a moment, trying to dredge his memory for the Akkadian dialect the Assyrians used. Speaking in broken language was frustrating and left him feeling like an idiot. "His wife is pregnant."

"Ah. So he's feeling particularly sentimental about us." Leja shifted on the cart, grunting with the effort. "Typical of a man."

Han drew his brows together, shooting the woman a quizzical look. "Typical?"

"Yes, typical. Our men are the same way. You're just fine running around killing and raping, but the second your victims remind you of someone you love, suddenly you *care*."

"You...are bitter? About your men?"

Her lips pursed, nostrils flaring just a bit as she nodded. "I'm angry at them, because they could all still be in this world and we could all be home if they hadn't gone and drawn the attention of Egypt."

Han's stomach lurched. If he hadn't acted against his uncle, everyone he loved would still be at home. Yutis would be alive. His lover's two little girls would be as well. His losses should have left him hungrier for vengeance, but every chance he had to take it he'd faltered. That first battle with Itamun, he could have killed the prince several times. He hadn't. He could have actually made an effort to make the younger man love him, to use him and Egypt against his uncle. He hadn't. The only thing he'd been able to do was sit back passively and wait for someone else to kill Itamun.

"What...you think they should done?" He stumbled over the words, but he hoped his meaning came across. If she disapproved of the pursuits of war, what did she think her men should have been doing instead?

"Used a little of that rare sentimentality and stayed out of raiding entirely." She wrapped her arms around her belly with a heavy sigh. "They could have traded. They could have worried about raising the cattle. We had a good place. We were lucky. Now we have nothing." At that, her face crumpled and she seemed to cave in on herself, drawing her body around her belly protectively as she sobbed.

The outburst didn't startle or alarm Han. He'd been expecting some sort of breakdown from her eventually, considering all that she had been through. She was young, too. He guessed that it was her first pregnancy, and her first husband. Climbing up onto the cart next to her, Han wrapped an arm around her shoulders to hold her. His own throat closed up around unshed tears as she reawakened his own grief.

He stayed with her throughout the rest of that day's march. As much as he wanted to hate the Assyrian raiders for what they had done to him, it was difficult to do that when he was surrounded by their grief. Many of the prisoners cried throughout the day or sang songs of mourning. Others were silent, their faces blank as though they had simply vacated themselves.

It reminded him too strongly of his own march into exile. When they had been forced to flee his uncle's wrath, there had been a great deal of mourning. Families were ripped asunder. Husbands would never see their wives again. Children died in the journey. And it was all, every last death, every bit of suffering, his fault.

By the time that they made camp, he felt as drained as if it had been his own village on the march into servitude. Thoughts of revenge were far from his mind, but the need for comfort was at the forefront. Vengeance against his uncle would only lead to greater suffering and new deaths. Perhaps Leja was right and it was just the fickle sentimentality of men, but he'd lost all desire to cause anyone else pain. There was something else he'd far prefer.

That night when Itamun entered his tent, Han was waiting for him on his knees, his hands resting on his thighs. He bent down to rest his forehead against the floor at the prince's feet, feeling a rush of relief in the submission.

Part of him wanted to be beaten and abused. The whipping the night Itamun had taken him had been glorious. The rush of pain had taken him to heights of pleasure he'd never known and every blow had lessened the guilt he carried by a fraction of a measure. But if the prince didn't desire to beat him, he'd have to accept that.

"What are you doing?" Han couldn't see Itamun's face, but his voice sounded wary.

"I'm ready to accept your will, my prince."

# CHAPTER 7

Han's sudden submission didn't just confuse Itamun. It alarmed him. The man had tried to get him killed and now here he was, on his knees. He circled around the Hittite, looking him over as he thought. This wasn't the submission of a household slave. It wasn't that Han feared him and so was giving into his will. It was an active choice. Submission as a gift. An intimacy.

"You'll accept anything I demand, hmm? Does that mean you'll let me kiss you now?"

"If that is what you want."

"Then stand up and kiss me."

His captive rose to his feet and stepped forward. Some of Itamun's alarm lessened as he saw the stiffness in Han's shoulders and the slight hesitation at leaning forward. He hadn't suddenly

turned into another person, then. He'd relaxed his stubbornness on this, but it wasn't gone entirely.

Rather than make it easy for Han and initiate it himself, Itamun loosely clasped his own hands behind his back as he upturned his face for the kiss, closing his eyes. Moments dragged on as he waited, before he finally felt Han's lips brush against his. It was a brief, soft kiss, like the whisper of a warm breeze across bare skin. Before Han could pull away, Itamun wrapped his arms around him and drew him closer. One hand buried in the dark, silken hair of the Hittite as Itamun deepened the kiss. His lips parted against Han's as his tongue forced entry into the other man's mouth. It wasn't simply exploration, but plunder.

His cock hardened as he felt Han give in to the kiss and respond. The hand that wasn't in the Hittite's hair slid down to grip the other man's ass, squeezing it through his kilt and tugging his body closer to Itamun's. Like always, touching Han awakened a raw hunger that Itamun had never experienced with anyone else.

Itamun pushed Han toward the bed with his body, then broke the kiss before he shoved the other man down onto the mattress. After climbing on top of him, Itamun peppered Han's cheeks and throat with kisses while his hands rubbed over his captive's chest, then started tugging at the jerkin Han still wore.

"Undress yourself," he ordered huskily. Drawing back farther, Itamun kneeled on the edge of the bed to watch as Han pulled off the jerkin, then his kilt. His body was just as mouthwatering as it had been before, his cock jutting out as a straight, thick temptation.

"Now undress me," said Itamun.

Han moved down the bed, his hands going to Itamun's belt. Itamun forced himself to hold still while Han undressed him, wanting to savor this rather than hurry it along by helping. The

other man didn't tease as he pulled off Itamun's tunic, then the short kilt and shenti he wore under it, but the fact that Han was doing this at all was more than enough excitement for him.

When he was done, Han leaned into Itamun's body, his eyes closed, his head ducked down to rest his cheek against Itamun's shoulder. Itamun drew him closer as he leaned forward and nuzzled at the other man's ear, breathing against it. One of his hands slid down to rub and squeeze Han's ass again. "You forgot something," Itamun whispered.

Han's eyelids fluttered open and he straightened up slightly. "What—"

Itamun pulled himself free from his captive to climb off the bed and stand at the foot of it, gesturing to his sandals. He couldn't help but smirk. Things had moved so quickly since he'd stepped into his tent and he'd been so eager for the Hittite that he'd forgotten he was still wearing them.

Han looked him over, then nodded once before sliding off the bed, back to his knees. He bowed at the waist, keeping his body low as he carefully undid the sandals. Itamun watched him through narrowed eyes, feeling his hunger grow for the other man by the moment. There was something unspeakably enticing about seeing Han on his knees, particularly now that he knew the man's true station. The fact that he was nude and bent over, giving an impossibly arousing view of his ass from above, only made it worse.

Once he had removed Itamun's sandals, Han started to rise, but Itamun had been expecting that. His hand shot out, burying itself in Han's hair again, stopping him where he was before pushing him back to his knees.

"Don't move," he ordered.

"Yes, my prince."

Itamun's hand stayed in Han's hair as he guided the other man's head forward. He watched as Han closed his eyes, nuzzling against his cock. His lips were parted and he brushed them against Itamun's shaft, making the younger man groan.

"Do you want to suck my cock?"

"Yes, more than anything. Let me? Please?"

"You may."

Han wrapped a hand around Itamun's shaft, guiding his cock to his lips. At first his lips just brushed against the head, making Itamun hiss softly. Then his tongue darted out, tracing over it. He dragged the tip along the ridge of it and down the slit, his breath chilling the warm, damp trail left behind. Just when Itamun thought he'd have to demand more, Han wrapped his lips around his shaft and sucked. Those soft lips slid up and down his length slowly, as if Han was savoring every moment. Itamun watched him through narrowed eyes, feeling his heart flutter with hope. Would this change things, or would it simply be more of the same?

The other man's hands slipped around Itamun's body to grip his ass and tug him closer as Han eased him deeper into his mouth. In spite of his desire to watch, Itamun's eyes snapped shut as he felt that heat moving down his shaft. Han's lips inched down his shaft until he'd swallowed him down completely, and Itamun had to bite his bottom lip to fight back a whimper. None of his lovers had been able to take that much of him before. The tight, inviting heat of Han's mouth, the squeeze of his throat as Han swallowed around him, were all nearly enough to make him come then and there.

As if sensing that, the Hittite drew back, sucking strongly now as his tongue dragged and stroked along the underside of Itamun's

shaft. The gentle pull and tug had Itamun groaning, his hips rocking to the other man's lips. Han drew back until just Itamun's head was between his lips, his tongue teasing at the slit again. Shudders ran down Itamun's spine and he growled in frustration. Fingers curling into a tight fist in Han's hair, he pulled the other man forward to force his cock deeper into his mouth. His eyes opened again to watch that unspeakably enticing sight of his cock disappearing between Han's lips.

If he had been expecting defiance or complaint, he would have been disappointed. What he got instead was far better than he could have hoped for. Han's eyes fluttered shut as he moaned, the vibrations traveling up Itamun's cock. Rather than resisting, the show of dominance only seemed to encourage him. Han's lips worked over the prince's length quickly as he bobbed his head, his hands kneading Itamun's ass, tugging him in closer each time he swallowed him down.

Itamun wanted it to last longer. He could have happily fucked Han's mouth all night long. The other man finally giving himself over completely was too much for his self-control, though. The tension had been mounting since he'd walked into his tent and seen Han on his knees.

"I'm close," he warned breathlessly.

Han moaned in acknowledgment and slid him deeply into his mouth again, swallowing around him. The squeeze of the other man's throat around his head was just too much for him. With a groan, he thrust forward as his cock jerked, pumping himself down Han's throat. The Hittite's hands tightened on his ass, squeezing as they pulled him closer and he hungrily suckled, swallowing every drop Itamun had to give him.

As the waves of pleasure started to recede, Itamun pulled away,

nearly stumbling on his way to collapse against the edge of the bed, panting. Han's eyes opened again, locked on him as the other man crawled forward and rested his cheek against his knee. He hadn't given him permission to stand up, Itamun remembered dimly.

"What's brought this on?" Itamun asked when he could speak again.

"I want you. I'm ready to admit that."

Itamun pursed his lips, eyes narrowing slightly. "And why now?"

The openness in Han's face was instantly gone, as if someone had shuttered a window. His eyes darted to the side as his forehead creased. Was he thinking of how best to answer, or how best to lie?

"All of this is my fault. If I hadn't let my father's ambitions push me toward the throne my people would never have been here. They'd be alive. You'd never have come out here, never attacked the Assyrians. Every death, every person enslaved, is all my fault."

Itamun was quiet for a moment, before snorting in laughter, earning him a sharp glare from Han.

"It isn't funny. It's the truth," the Hittite insisted.

"No, it isn't. Your people chose to support you for a reason and it wasn't so you could grovel on your knees in front of me. That's what this is about, I assume? You want to be punished for all your wrongdoing?"

Han muttered something.

"What was that?"

"I...I'd like it if you hurt me again, but it's not punishment."

"Then what is it?"

"Comfort."

That one word stirred something inside of Itamun. He'd often

heard it said that the heart was the center of emotion, but he'd always considered it a metaphor or some spiritual observation. In that moment he finally understood exactly what was meant, as his heart squeezed painfully and his throat closed.

Reaching down, he grasped Han's arms, tugging. The other man climbed up onto the bed at his prompting, stretching out beside him. Itamun slipped his arms around his captive and drew him closer, pillowing his head against Itamun's shoulder as he combed his fingers through his hair slowly.

"Speak to me first," Itamun begged quietly. "Let me know you. What you think and what you feel."

Han stiffened slightly at that, shaking his head. "I can't." His voice was muffled against Itamun's shoulder.

"Why? Why do you want me and then push me away?"

It took so long for Han to answer, Itamun had started to wonder if he'd fallen asleep. Finally, Han picked his head up to look at him, bracing himself on one elbow. "I lived with a man before. His name was Yutis and he had supported me against my uncle. He was just a wealthy merchant's son, but it didn't matter. We loved each other as deeply as any two men can and then he was killed fighting off the raiders. One of them was struggling with him. Yutis had lost his sword, but he hadn't given up. The raider had a knife. I...I was across the village. I had my bow, but I was terrified I might hit Yutis if I shot at the raider when they were rolling around on the ground. I started running instead. The raider gained the upper hand before I got to him and slit his throat."

Han paused for a moment, clearing his throat. His eyes glistened in the low lamplight of the tent. Had he cried, Itamun couldn't have possibly held it against him, yet he appeared to be fighting it back.

"I killed the raider, but it was too late. I couldn't do anything to save him. I'd failed him over and over again and he'd *trusted* me. He followed me into Egypt. I couldn't even keep him safe."

"I'm sorry," Itamun whispered as he slid his hand into Han's hair again. "I've lost men I cared for in battle, but none that I...cared for that way. I can't imagine."

"His daughters were killed as well."

That made Itamun frown as a sinking feeling settled into his stomach. This had been far more than the loss of a lover. More of a loss than he would want to imagine even if he could. "What happened?"

Han shook his head slightly as he settled in against Itamun once more, turning his head to resist his cheek on the prince's chest. "They hid in a hut with a number of other children during the raid. I don't know if it was an accident or purposeful, but the hut burned."

"By the gods, Han. I don't know what to say."

"Their mother died on the journey. She had been a concubine, but Yutis cared for her. I have no desire for women, but she was...as much a part of our household as either of us, even so."

"I'm sorry. No man should have to lose as much as you have."

Han shook his head slightly and tightened his arms around Itamun, nearly clinging now. Itamun continued to stroke his hand through the other man's hair as he thought. Comfort, Han had said. That's how he'd described being hurt. It seemed bizarre, but was it any stranger than Itamun's own pleasure in causing that pain?

He was about to ask Han about his desires to be hurt, then paused as something occurred to him. "You never really answered my question. What does Yutis's death have to do with you pushing me away?"

"I can't let myself love anyone else. Certainly not you. It would be an insult to his memory."

Love? Itamun blinked.

"Are you...saying that you love me?"

Han's response was instantaneous and vehement. "No!" Pushing himself up, Han turned his face away, a muscle flexing in his jaw. "But to act tender together or like we care...it's grotesque. It's a lie, mocking everything I've lost."

But I do care. The words were bitten back before Itamun could make an utter fool of himself. He wouldn't call it love, but he couldn't deny that he had affection for the other man. Han's betrayal on the battlefield wouldn't have mattered from an untrustworthy foreigner, but it had been the most agonizing moment of his life. He'd looked into the eyes of someone he cared for expecting help and received nothing.

"Then what is it you want from me?"

"Nothing. Forget it. Just forget all of this."

Han climbed off of the bed to walk across the tent. At the far end he stopped, keeping his back to Itamun as he bowed his head. The light of the lamps flickered across his skin, giving a golden cast to his body. The dancing light sliding over those taut muscles made Itamun long that it was his fingers touching Han instead.

"You've forgotten your place again."

The Hittite's head moved slightly, as if he was going to look over his shoulder at Itamun but stopped himself before turning all the way. "What do you mean?"

"You said you were ready to accept my will." Itamun sat up on the bed, drawing one knee up to rest an arm on it casually. "Anything I demanded, remember?"

Finally, Han turned to face him, rolling his eyes. "I was hoping

you'd fuck me. Not make me talk about my feelings."

"That isn't how it works. You give yourself to my will, I decide what I'm going to do about that. You're mine."

He could actually watch the shudder wrack Han's body as the other man closed his eyes, his cock stiffening. Itamun didn't bother to fight the triumphant smirk at the reaction he'd won from Han.

"Now get down on your hands and knees and crawl back here."
"And if I refuse?"

Itamun sprang to his feet, crossing the tent in quick strides. His fingers gripped Han's chin to force the other man to look at him as he brought his face in close. Near enough their breath mingled and he could make out each individual eyelash framing Han's eyes.

"I can't demand you care about me, but I will demand obedience. You will cease your defiance or I will make you wish I was only beating you with my belt."

The challenge in Han's eyes was unmistakable. His jaw clenched again, nostrils flaring slightly. No, regardless of what Meriatum thought, this man was no coward. The barely restrained violence in him might as well have been tattooed across his skin. But if it came to a physical confrontation, Itamun was prepared. Not because he wanted to force his will on Han or humiliate the man, but because he could see the aching pits of despair behind his eyes. This wasn't what Itamun wanted, but what Han needed.

"I could have killed you the day we met," Han spat.

"Only because I chose not to kill you first. Now get on your knees."

Han glared, but lowered himself to his knees, eyes never leaving Itamun's face.

Itamun stepped back to give him more room. "Forward. Onto your hands."

For a moment he thought he'd finally pushed Han too far. His hands curled into fists and cold hatred flashed in his eyes. The moment passed, though. Slowly, as if it physically pained him, Han leaned forward to lay his hands on the floor as well, his head bowed.

Itamun nodded in satisfaction before crossing back to his bed again. He sat on the edge of the bed with his belt draped across his knees, waiting. "Now crawl to me."

## **CHAPTER 8**

Han closed his eyes as he struggled with himself. Part of him thrilled at Itamun fully taking control like this. Part of him even thrilled at the humiliation of being forced to crawl. His pride rebelled, however. Even if it was exactly what he had asked for it was difficult to accept. The loss of control meant he might not get the things that he wanted, but would he have enjoyed them nearly as much if he'd had to demand them?

"Now, Han. I'm getting impatient."

His right hand raised from the reed mats on the tent floor, feeling as though it weighed as much as two grown men. He slid his left knee forward as he laid the hand down before him heavily. The humiliation of crawling to the other man like a dog felt like chains of iron on him, locking him in place. Han struggled against

his own pride, alternating between seething in outrage that he had been reduced to this and near ecstasy at Itamun giving him no choice.

When he finally reached the end of the bed, he felt Itamun's hand slide into his hair, tugging his head back to force him to look up at the prince.

"Do you want me to hurt you?"

Han closed his eyes, exhaling a bit shakily. "Please."

"Get to your feet, then put your hands on the bed."

He understood and complied instantly. The bed was a lowslung wooden frame supporting the bedding and barely came up to his knees so that he had to lean over quite a bit, nearly folding himself in half. It left his ass raised, exposed without a shred of modesty.

Itamun slid off of the bed, setting his belt down for the moment, and retrieved the ropes. A flash of alarm struck Han in the gut as he remembered the last time his captor had used the ropes. He'd been tied up, teased, and left to suffer alone for the rest of the night. The expertise that the prince had with the ropes was obvious as he bound Han's wrists together, then attached both ends of the rope to legs on the bed frame, so that he couldn't pull away from the bed.

That done, the prince picked up his belt, then circled around behind Han. Automatically, Han tensed in anticipation of pain, his body shuddering with arousal. One of his feet was nearly kicked out from underneath him as Itamun pushed it off to the side with one of his own feet, then did the same to the other, leaving Han's legs spread and his body balanced precariously.

Han turned slightly to look at Itamun over his shoulder, alarmed. The position would be difficult to hold for very long.

Already, he could feel a burn in the muscles of his thighs from having to support himself so awkwardly.

"Beg me for it," Itamun ordered.

The relief at finally being able to voice what he wanted left Han light-headed. "Please hurt me, your highness. Please."

In answer, the leather belt cracked across his ass, making him cry out as his knees involuntarily buckled under him and he almost sank to the floor. Trembling, he pushed himself back up again with difficulty. He'd been told to be on his feet and he intended to follow the order.

Another blow met him as soon as he had straightened up, but he was more prepared for it this time. Every stroke of the leather against his skin left him shaking, swaying forward slightly on his hands. The rope prevented him from moving his arms, but he curled his hands into fists, gripping the covers on the bed tightly. The pain was exquisite, but it left him hungering for other things. His cock twitched slightly as the beating continued, pre-come collecting at his head. He felt empty and starved for Itamun's cock to fill him again.

"Will you...will you fuck me again? Please?" Han panted. "No."

That cold answer coupled with a hard blow crossing several other welts tore a whimper from his throat. His legs shook as he fought to stay in position. Itamun gave him no pause for breath. The blows from the makeshift whip came one after another, covering his ass and thighs until he couldn't feel the difference between where the welts were and where they weren't. It was all just a solid, sharp pain behind him.

One hard blow struck him where his ass and upper thighs met and he broke. Crumpling to his knees, his fists on the bed relaxed

as he bowed his head, resting it against the edge of the bed. There was no room for thought. He wasn't even sure he could have heard or responded to another order had the prince given one.

Half-expecting to be whipped worse for collapsing, he was surprised when he heard the thud of the belt falling on the mat. Han's eyes were closed and he doubted he could move his head to look behind him, but he felt when Itamun dropped to his knees and molded around his back. The prince was peppering the back of his neck with soft kisses, nuzzling there. Han made a soft sound, barely enough to be called a sigh. A moment later Itamun's arm was around him and his hand had closed around Han's cock. Groaning, Han automatically thrust into the touch, surprised that he was being rewarded instead of punished.

That warm, welcoming hand quickly stroked along his length, wasting little time. There had been no order to hold still, so Han let himself rock to Itamun's touch. The prince nuzzled his way up to his ear, breathing there a moment before gently scraping Han's earlobe between his teeth.

"That's it," the prince whispered, the brush of his breath making Han shudder. "I want you to come for me now."

How could he resist? He'd been hungering for release since Itamun had first walked into the tent. Then the whipping had put him painfully on edge. More importantly, his master had ordered him to come. And with that thought, that mental naming of their relationship, Han thrust forward into the prince's waiting hand, crying out in what sounded even to his own ears like a mixture of agony and ecstasy. Sharp teeth dug into the back of his neck as he shuddered and spilled his seed, making his cry trail off into a strained groan. The orgasm seemed to be endless, as if time had stopped. Every feeling, every thought he had, was no longer his

alone, but a gift to his master and subject to his will. Instead of horrifying him, it made him want to weep with joy.

Time passed, but he wasn't sure of how long it had been. He was only dimly aware when Itamun untied his wrists. Han didn't move, resting his head against the foot of the bed, his eyes closed, still lost in that unspeakable peace the prince had given him.

"Can you move?" a soft voice murmured against his ear. The prince's hands were stroking over his back, massaging him lightly as he nuzzled.

Han moaned softly, managing to just barely nod.

The prince slid an arm around him, pulling Han up to his feet with that surprising strength of his. Together they climbed up on the bed and Itamun's gentle hands guided Han to lay on his stomach. His master's hands continued to move over his back, smoothing across his skin as if he were stroking a beloved pet. The thought made Han smile faintly.

"Did I hurt you too badly?" Itamun asked.

Han shook his head slightly with a groan. "No. I hurt, but it's not a bad pain."

"I was unaware there was such a thing as *good* pain until I met you." The prince sounded amused.

"Yutis would occasionally be very dominating when we made love, but he didn't hurt me much. I don't think I realized how much I enjoyed the pain until you gave it to me."

Finally, Itamun stretched out beside him, turned on his side so Han could see the small smile there. One of the prince's arms stayed across Han's back, holding him loosely. It was a deliciously comforting touch. "I'm honored, then."

"You should be," Han murmured sleepily, smiling back before he reached out to stroke the prince's cheek with the back of his

hand. "You have such unusually colored eyes."

One brow raised slightly in response to that and Itamun's lips curled with a wry smirk. "I'm surprised you didn't comment on them before."

"I didn't want to compliment you before."

"Unusual is a compliment?" Itamun teased.

"I meant it as one. They're...memorable."

The prince shifted and stretched a bit before settling back down against Han's side. The soft nuzzling from Itamun at his throat made Han sigh and his eyes slipped closed. "My mother was taken from some northern people. She doesn't remember much because she was a child. She has eyes of an even brighter shade. It's not unheard of for our people to occasionally have blue eyes, but hers are unusual like you said. Beautiful. When Pharaoh saw her he had to have her."

"And is she happy with that?"

"She has six sons who've all survived past infancy and she lives in the palace. I'd assume she is."

They were both silent for a few moments. Han couldn't guess where the prince's thoughts were, but his own were marveling over what had happened. It wasn't what he had pictured or what he had thought he wanted, yet it had ultimately been perfect. How could the prince know exactly what to give him when they barely knew one another? He'd never met anyone who could satisfy desires he didn't even know he had. But hadn't he done the same for Itamun, by identifying the prince's need to dominate?

As the rush from the whipping and orgasm faded, Han found himself worrying. Yes, Itamun could satisfy him, but only in bed. Only with violence. There was nothing else between them but this. He was a fool to submit himself to the prince for nothing more

than pain and sex.

Han opened his eyes to see the prince's own eyes were closed, his face relaxed. Was he asleep, or just resting? "What will happen to me when we get back to the palace?" Han asked softly.

The prince's dark brows drew together into a knot as he frowned, before pulling his eyes open with some apparent effort. "I can't say. That's up to Pharaoh. My guess would be that you'll be kept at the palace for at least the next year as a hostage against your people. Such hostages are usually treated well, though. Unless you annoy him, you'll likely be treated like a royal guest."

"And what if he knows who I really am?"

The prince flopped over onto his back with a heavy sigh. "It's hard to say. He doesn't know that, though."

"What if he found out?"

Itamun shot Han an annoyed look. "How would he?"

Part of him felt wrong putting voice to the thought. It was uncharitable, particularly after he had said he wanted to give himself fully to the prince. But how much of that had simply been his desire for sex talking? He'd be a fool to trust someone simply because he fucked well.

"You could tell him."

"I would only tell him if he asked me."

Han nodded triumphantly. "So you *would* tell him." That confirmation was almost comforting. He was right not to trust the prince. No matter how much he wanted to belong to Itamun, he couldn't. The man would be the death of him, perhaps literally.

"Only if he asked! I can't lie to him."

"Of course. Just like you can't refuse his orders. How many people have you killed for him?"

The prince's face clouded in anger, his sea-colored eyes

growing dark. "He is my king. I follow orders. Would you have me drag my household out into the desert to die instead?"

That made Han flinch. He pushed himself upright carefully, not wanting to continue this fight while lying on his belly in the prince's bed. "How many people would you condemn to death on his orders? Your wife? Your unborn child? Perhaps your mother?"

"And how many people died because of your defiance? Your lover? His children? You never did mention what happened to your mother. Did she survive exile?"

"Yes, act like I'm unreasonable because I don't want to die."

"Only a coward would betray his king. A man should remain loyal."

Han scoffed as he slid off the bed. His legs felt somewhat unsteady under him, but he was able to stand, regardless of the pain. "Don't lecture me on manhood, Itamun. You may count as one, but you're still a child in every important way. A true man only gives his loyalty to those who deserve it."

The prince sat upright. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to sleep on the floor. If that meets with your approval."

"Han, I wouldn't tell him unless he made me. I sincerely doubt he's going to ask me if you're nobility."

Ignoring him, Han stretched out on the floor. He had to lie curled on his side because of the pain, but he doubted he'd be getting any sleep regardless. The peace he'd felt earlier was gone, replaced with a far less pleasant feeling of helplessness.

\* \* \*

It was not the sound of a lamb, though it could have been

mistaken for one at first. Eliana was well acquainted with the cries from the flock and for a moment the sound had simply been more bleating to tune out. When she realized the sound came from a human though, the young shepherdess looked up sharply, turning in the direction of the pained whimpers.

An old man was hobbling along, leaning heavily on a walking staff. He was deeply burned by the sun and looked as if he was nearly dead, yet somehow he continued to push himself forward.

Eliana nudged the sheep out of her way so she could go to the man's side, one arm automatically locking around the old man's waist to steer him toward the well. He wasn't a heavy man, so it was little different from wrestling with the sheep. "Where did you come from?" she asked in hushed awe.

"Egypt," the old man choked out.

Once they reached the well, Eliana released the old man to draw out some water. She handed the bucket to the old man, who proceeded to gulp it down. She bit her lip, frowning in concern. Drinking that quickly wouldn't do him much good, yet she doubted he'd listen to her.

"You don't look like an Egyptian," she pointed out.

The old man shook his head and finally paused in his drinking. "My name is Pesach. I seek the king."

Automatically, Eliana glanced in the direction of the capital city, Hattusa. It wasn't often fellow Hittites came from the direction of Egypt. No one had ever come wandering alone. There was that delegation her father was outfitting to go into Egypt, but that was different. Diplomats and demands and that sort of thing. The sound of retching drew her attention back to Pesach. As she'd guessed, gulping the water down had turned his stomach and he was vomiting it back up again. This man all alone could be no

diplomat.

"You'll need to speak to my father. He has horses and can get you there quickly, but I don't know that the king would...wish to see you."

The old man coughed and spat, then took another drink from the bucket. Slower this time. Once he'd swallowed, he looked up at her. There was a mad gleam in his eyes that made Eliana back up a step, glancing to her father's tent. Those diplomats were coming out now, regarding the strange old man curiously.

"I know where his nephew is. He'll see me," insisted Pesach.

"Oh do you?" the one called Tudhaliya asked. He had a pure white beard that was styled down to a point, but his face was largely unlined. It made it difficult to guess his age accurately. The delegation stopping for food and water had given her father all sorts of disturbing ideas about marrying her off. Luckily the diplomats all seemed utterly disinterested.

The old man looked up at the delegate curiously, frowning a bit. Tudhaliya's upper lip curled slightly as he closed the distance between them, his eyes giving the filthy traveler a quick once over. "Tell me everything you know," Tudhaliya demanded.

## CHAPTER 9

Every morning that they set out, Itamun offered Han a spot on his chariot, but the stubborn Hittite chose to march instead. Itamun spent most of the following days in troubled silence, speaking only to give orders or to answer questions.

It had seemed, at least briefly, as though they'd reached some sort of understanding between them. Then Han's paranoia had burst to the forefront and ruined everything. He'd wanted to spend the night making love to the other man rather than lying in bed alone, angry and frustrated.

The landscape was beginning to look more familiar. Every day brought the Nile's delta closer, but there was more to see than just that. The mountains they passed were all visible from the highest room in the palace and even if they looked a bit different from this

angle Itamun recognized them. Soon enough they'd be traveling through the rich, green farmland along the banks of the river instead of through the oppressively barren desert.

That thought should have encouraged him and it did, to a degree. He wanted to see Ashaki and his child, after all, but a vague sense of foreboding continued to haunt him. Whether it was concern for his wife and child or something else was difficult to tell. The ambitions of the priests could still be moving against him and that continued to trouble him. Away from the palace, he'd been able to put the temple of Hathor largely out of his mind, but once he was there again things could be far different.

At the back of his mind was also the thought that he might never be able to touch Han again once they'd returned. Hostages were typically treated well, meaning that he'd most likely have his own bed in the palace. There'd be little excuse to be alone with him again. As a son of the pharaoh, he could still order Han to service him, but the thought didn't appeal. There was a difference between that and the games the two of them played together.

That night after they made camp, Itamun ate dinner with Meriatum in the captain's tent as he had done since taking the Hittite captive.

"The weather's been good for travel. I think we can make it to the palace by tomorrow afternoon if we start early."

Itamun glanced up at the captain's observation, nodding slightly. "I suppose so."

"What do you plan to do with that second Hittite?"

Though he'd admired the loyalty of the boy Netai, he'd also largely ignored him. He was a commoner as near as Itamun could tell and a Hittite. There was no reason to even acknowledge him, yet he had let the boy accompany them. He'd have to do something

about him.

"I'm not sure yet. He seems very loyal to Hantilis."

"Might be best to keep them separated, then. Perhaps the captive could stay in the palace and the other Hittite could be a servant in your home?"

The suggestion made Itamun frown. His first impulse was to argue against it, but he fought that off and let the idea sink into his mind instead. He turned it this way and that, considering, as a plan began to form. Finally, he nodded. "I may do that."

"Just make sure he doesn't become a pawn of those priests. You don't want to end up like your father-in-law."

Itamun snorted. "That's all I need. No, I'll deal with the temple. I've been far too lenient with them for far too long."

There was the hint of a smile as Meriatum nodded. "Good, I'm glad to hear it."

When he was done eating, Itamun took his leave of the captain. It was growing dark outside, but there was still enough daylight left that he could find his way through the camp. He picked his way slowly through as a plan began to form in his mind. Outside his tent, the younger Hittite was curled up with some blankets that Itamun recognized at a glance. They were the ones he'd provided for Han to sleep with on the floor of the tent. Apparently Han had decided the boy had greater use of them.

Crouching next to Netai, Itamun shook his shoulder. With a jerk and a snort the boy sat upright, then stared at him with wide eyes. Itamun smiled slightly, raising a finger to his lips to shush the boy.

"I want to ask you a few questions," Itamun explained quietly.

"Yes, your highness?"

"I thought I'd heard you speaking about Yutis one day. Was he

your brother?" The young man nodded. "And your loyalty to Han runs very deeply?"

"He's like brother and king both to me."

"And would you take his place as Egypt's captive?"

Netai rubbed a hand over his face and yawned hugely, then looked at Itamun once more, his eyes squinting slightly in concentration. "Does that mean you'll let him go?"

Itamun hesitated, eyes flicking toward the tent. If Han knew of the switch, what would he do? He might leave or he might be enraged that the boy was now captive instead. The odds of him wanting to stay with Itamun of his own free will seemed to be fairly poor. At least just yet. "Eventually, yes. Say nothing of this conversation to him, though. I'm sure he'd forbid you to take his place."

The boy glanced toward the tent, lips pursed in a small frown, then nodded slightly. "Yes, your highness."

As Itamun rose to his feet, there was a low keening from across the camp. The boy shifted uneasily on his makeshift bed, his hands twisting the blankets between them. "What's that?"

"It sounds like Leja's voice, one of the Assyrians," Itamun explained with a frown.

"Oh. Do you think she's having her baby?"

"Possibly."

Leaving the boy to sleep, Itamun slipped into his tent. Han was already lying on his side on the floor, his back to him. His shoulders shifted and rose with each breath, just a touch too fast to be mistaken for the breath of sleep. Itamun watched him for a long moment, then crossed the tent to kneel next to him.

"Han, get up. This is ridiculous."

He watched as Han's breath stilled. The moments stretched out

painfully before the other man finally shifted over to look at him. There was a wariness in his eyes that felt like a knife to Itamun's heart.

"What is it?"

Itamun took a deep breath. Briefly, he wondered if what he was doing was a mistake. It did have the potential to backfire in horrible, lethal ways, but the thought of never touching Han again was too painful a prospect to face. "Pharaoh will never know your history because he'll never meet you. I'll send you to my house as soon as we arrive. He has over a hundred children and thousands of things far more important than your village to worry about. I swear to you, I will do everything in my power to keep you safe."

Han's face didn't change at all for a moment. Then, a faint frown tugged at one corner of his mouth, a worry-wrinkle forming between his brows. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I want you to trust me and I want you with me."

"I don't trust you."

"Will you at least give me a chance to win your trust?"

The other man's dark eyes turned away, staring unfocused at something Itamun couldn't see. The flickering lamplight of the tent danced across Han's face as his expression remained still, perhaps thoughtful. Itamun wondered if he was thinking about Yutis, about Han's insistence that he couldn't mock their love by caring for Itamun. Outside, there was another moan of pain from Leja. Unexpectedly, Itamun found himself flinching at the sound and Han's eyes refocused on him. The thoughtful look was gone, replaced with something soft and warm. The Hittite's arm slid around Itamun's shoulders, drawing him closer.

"You shouldn't be so worried about your wife. She's young and healthy, isn't she?" Han asked softly.

The offer of comfort suddenly made Itamun aware of how badly he needed it. Leaning in against Han, he rested his head on the other man's shoulder and closed his eyes, tension melting from his body gratefully. "She is, but...I'm not there with her and I have enemies."

"Political rivals? Are you that close to the throne?"

Itamun shook his head slightly. "I was to oversee the temple of Hathor in my father's capital. Since the new head priest Ramose took control they've been growing too powerful, though. They haven't openly defied me yet, but they've done their best to make me look foolish and draw support to them. Someone killed my favorite mare before I left for this campaign. I could never prove who did it, but I think it was the priests."

Han was quiet for a moment before he climbed to his feet, tugging Itamun up with him. Wordlessly, Itamun followed him to the bed and lay down beside him. Arms corded with muscle slid around him, pulling him in closer against Han's chest and Itamun melted into the embrace. The other man had never said he'd trust Itamun, but the change in his demeanor seemed to be promising at the very least.

"You worry they'll do more, then? Like hurt your wife?"

"Or our child or, I suppose, me. My wife's father was murdered shortly after our wedding, but it was never proven who had done it. I've always had my suspicions. There was an incident long ago in another city where the priests killed the sons of the pharaoh's overseer. Because of the influence they had over the peasants, there wasn't much done about it. They were left to their own devices."

Han frowned as he brought one hand up to comb his fingers through Itamun's hair slowly. Itamun closed his eyes in pleasure,

sighing.

"Don't your people believe you're the son of a god?" Han asked.

The question made Itamun bristle slightly, but he pushed that reaction aside. A Hittite wouldn't view the pharaoh in the same way as an Egyptian would. "Yes."

"Then your will should be more important than that of the priests. They should be afraid of defying you."

"They're not."

"Obviously you'll need to give them something to fear."

Itamun shifted to look up at Han's face as he thought that over. The suggestion was similar to what Meriatum had suggested, treating his struggle with the priests like any other battle. He hated causing pain to others, but if a little more ruthlessness could solve his problems it might be worth it.

Before Itamun could say anything more, Han was leaning in to brush his lips against the prince's. Liquid fire seemed to crawl down Itamun's body and settle in his cock as that kiss brought him to life. One hand shifted to grip Han's upper arm, squeezing it as Itamun hungrily pressed into the kiss. His lips parted against Han's a breath before the other man's tongue slipped inside to plunder. The arm that had been wrapped around Itamun tightened, pushing him over onto his back in the same movement that brought Han's weight on top of his body. It wasn't a position Itamun had found himself in since the first time they'd been together in the midst of battle. This was very different from that time, though.

Turning his head to the side to break the kiss, Itamun took a deep breath and licked his lips. "What are you doing?"

Instead of stopping, Han began kissing down the side of his neck; Itamun's eyes fluttered shut as he inhaled deeply and arched

his body up to press against the other man. No one had ever done that before, largely because he was never passive enough to give them a chance to do much other than suck his cock.

"If you want me to trust you, you have to trust me, too," Han murmured as his hands started working on Itamun's belt.

Itamun went still as concern mingled with his desire. He hadn't said to stop and so Han finished opening his belt and slid it away before pulling off his own jerkin and kilt. When Han's callused hand settled on Itamun's thigh and began to slide upward, Itamun gave a small jerk and started to draw away.

"What are you going to do?" Itamun demanded.

Han's dark eyes turned up toward his, twinkling with faint amusement. "I like giving you control, but I don't always want you to have it. I'm still a man."

Oh. The prospect of giving up control of the bed to Han was somewhat intriguing, but his interest was largely drowned out by a sudden flair of anger. Itamununemwia was a son of the pharaoh. He submitted to no one. "Other men are fine being passive to a prince," he bit out through his teeth.

"Other men have different tastes. By the gods, I love to have you fuck me and use me, but I'm of royal blood myself. Maybe I want to remind us both that if I'm a slave to you, it's by my choice."

That hand on his thigh slid upward, moving under his kilt to grip his ass before Han abruptly jerked Itamun forward to press his lower body between Itamun's thighs, making the younger man gasp softly. Itamun's hands came up to press to Han's chest as his captive settled on top of him and began that gentle onslaught on his throat again. The feel of the other man's throbbing arousal against his own thigh and that pleasant weight on his body chased away

his protests before he could remember what they had been. Han's lips stroked along his throat, his tongue flicking against the skin and leaving a cool, damp trail behind. A sudden press of teeth over his pulse made Itamun hiss sharply. His hand went to Han's shoulders, blunt nails digging into the flesh as he writhed up against the other man.

One of those forgotten protests managed to struggle back to the forefront of his mind. "I've never...given myself to someone," Itamun gasped out.

Han paused, drawing back slightly to rest his weight on one arm as their eyes met. "Do you not want me like this?"

"I don't know. How can I truly master you if I've let you fuck me?"

To Itamun's annoyance, the question made Han chuckle before he lowered himself again to start nuzzling along Itamun's throat. "You've already mastered me, my prince. Against all my best efforts, I can't resist you. I want to give myself up to your will and your whip. That won't change if I put my cock inside you."

One of Itamun's hands slid up to stroke through Han's hair as he thought. The other man turned his head, nuzzling at his palm and pressing kisses to it. "Then why do you want this?" Itamun asked.

"I want to know I'm more than just some new toy for you. I want to know that you'd trust me with your body as I'm trusting you with my life."

The fingers in Han's hair tightened, tugging his face down toward Itamun's to catch him in a kiss. Every instinct in Itamun was to take control of the kiss and take what he wanted from the other man, but he forced himself to resist. Instead he let his lips part under Han's. When the other man's tongue slipped into his

mouth, he let it explore and claim him, wresting soft moans from his throat. It was an affront to the gods that it had taken so long to win Han's kisses, because such skill needed to be shared and appreciated. Every caress of his lips and stroke of his tongue stole Itamun's breath, leaving him gasping and trembling with tension when Han finally broke the kiss to tug the tunic upward.

Releasing Han's hair and shoulder, Itamun raised his arms to help pull the tunic off. His kilt and shenti went next. It left him nude and vulnerable under the other man, but he had little time to dwell on that before Han was kissing him again. Hands were sliding over his skin, exploring every ridge and dip and line. Itamun's own hands went to Han's back, sliding over it, then down to his ass before moving back up his stomach and chest. The desperate need in their touches was as if they had never touched one another before and never would again. Without the linen of his tunic between them, the next time Itamun arched up against Han's body he felt their cocks slide against one another and the warm, welcoming weight of the other man's heavy balls brushing against his.

Han's lips left his, making Itamun groan softly in frustration. The Hittite turned at the waist, stretching out to pluck the oil from where it sat on a trunk near the bed. The reminder of what he was going to let Han do made Itamun stiffen.

Perhaps Han felt the change in Itamun's body, as he glanced at him with a small frown before settling in close once again. "I'll be gentle," Han breathed, his lips brushing against Itamun's throat.

"I'm not afraid of pain."

"Of course not." He could feel Han's lips curl into a smile against his throat. He wanted to be annoyed with him, but picturing that smile made all the tension melt in his body.

A moment later he felt Han's fingers, slick with oil, wrapping around his cock. Itamun thrust upward with a groan and was rewarded with those rough, warm fingers tightening around him. They gently squeezed as they worked up and down his length and Han's thumb rubbed just below his head. Itamun's fingers dug into the other man's back as he gasped with pleasure, raising his hips to the touch.

It almost seemed as if that was what Han had been waiting for. When Itamun raised his hips, the other man caught his leg behind the knee, pulling it upward to keep Itamun's hips off the bed. That wonderful slick hand left his cock, making Itamun whimper softly. His voice cut off as if severed with a knife when Han's fingers pressed between his cheeks. They made no move to enter him yet, just rubbing back and forth slowly, teasing him with a touch as light as the brush of a feather. Itamun kept waiting for the pressure to increase and for Han to move on, to fuck him, but it never came. That touch remained the same soft torment until he thought he was going to go mad from it.

"Please," Itamun finally choked out.

"Please what?"

"Do something already."

Han raised his face from Itamun's throat to look down at him, chuckling. Itamun felt his own lips curling into a grin before he leaned up to catch the other man in a fresh kiss. In that same moment one of Han's fingers finally pressed forward into him, making him groan. It was slow at first, frustratingly slow. He could feel the pressure of it and then Han gently rocking his finger back and forth, rubbing it against the tight internal muscles until they began to relax and he could work his finger in deeper. When Han's finger was fully buried inside of him, he began to slowly draw it

out again and Itamun's hands spasmodically clutched at him.

He had known other men enjoyed being fucked, but hadn't given much thought to what it felt like. Obviously there was some pleasure in it, but he hadn't expected just one finger to set every nerve in his body on fire.

Han stilled and broke the kiss, nuzzling his cheek. "Did I hurt you?" he whispered.

Itamun shook his head, swallowing several times before he could speak again. "No, I like it. Keep going."

That single finger worked in and out of him slowly before drawing out entirely, leaving Itamun aware of a hungry emptiness within himself he'd never known before. Before he could form a protest, Han was pressing two fingers into him. This time he was more aware of the tightness, even after he'd relaxed to allow the passage. That only served to put him further on edge, his hips slowly rocking to every thrust of Han's hand. The addition of a third finger had him writhing, biting his lip to keep from crying out his ecstasy to the entire camp. His hands clawed at Han's back as he thrust up to the other man, fucking himself on his fingers.

"Are you ready?" Han's lips were trailing over his cheek, his voice breathless.

Itamun nodded quickly, his arms tightening around Han as he buried his face in the other man's throat. He deeply inhaled the scent of him, then let the breath out in a soft groan. "Yes. Please, fuck me."

Those fingers drew out of him, but before he could mourn their loss he felt the head of Han's cock pressed to his tight entrance. Itamun trembled in anticipation, his breath frozen. Slowly the pressure increased, Han's hips rocking slightly as he worked himself inside. Itamun tossed his head back against the bed and

shifted his body, drawing his other leg up to lock his ankles behind Han's back. As he flexed his legs he pushed himself down Han's shaft, forcing the other man's cock deeper into his ass. Finally feeling Han inside of him made Itamun groan again, no longer concerned about being overheard.

Han hissed against his ear through clenched teeth, his body rigid and shuddering as he slowly worked deeper into Itamun's body. He rolled and rocked forward, then drew back before pushing just a bit deeper. It was maddening, frustrating, and absolutely perfect.

After what seemed like a lifetime, he felt Han's hips flush with his ass and his cock fully sheathed inside him. The other man drew back again slowly until only his head remained inside Itamun, then suddenly thrust forward. Itamun bit on Han's shoulder to muffle his cry as he jerked under him. Before he'd had a moment to catch his breath, Han was thrusting again and then again. He couldn't have possibly asked him to slow down, though. Itamun could only clutch at Han and rock up to each thrust, groaning quietly as his body undulated in pleasure.

"Oh gods, Itamun. You feel so perfect," Han breathed against his ear.

Those simple words made Itamun's heart stop. It was the first time Han had actually used his name. More than that, it was the first time a lover had ever used his name during sex. All the others had been slaves and servants. Eager to please their prince, but very conscious of the difference between their stations. Even when Han was on his knees before Itamun, there was a mutuality between them that couldn't be denied. It had nothing to do with Han's rank either, as Itamun had sensed it long before knowing he was of royal birth.

"So do you, Han," Itamun whispered, his arms tightening around the other man again.

Every thrust was a unique, exquisite experience. He wanted to cherish every moment and make it last forever, but even as he thought that, he could feel himself being pushed closer to the edge. Itamun fought with himself to hold back as long as possible before his hand finally moved between them to wrap around his cock. His shaft still slick from Han's earlier touch, Itamun's fingers glided quickly along his length.

"Harder," Itamun begged through a tight throat.

There was no need to say it a second time. Han was instantly driving into him with a new urgency, the sound of flesh striking flesh filling the air. Every thrust was hard and deep, pushing Itamun to his absolute limits. His body rocked between Han and the bed, raising up to meet each thrust eagerly. His orgasm hit him out of nowhere, crashing into his body like an unexpected ocean wave. Itamun bit on Han's shoulder until he felt the skin give, his hips thrusting into his hand as his cock twitched and his come painted Han's stomach. The pleasure of his release coupled with the tight feel of his ass clenching around Han's cock was nearly too much for him. It bordered on painful it was so complete, so right. Half a breath behind his climax, he felt Han's hot seed flood his body and send fresh shudders down his spine. Han kept pumping into him almost frantically as they both came, groaning Itamun's name in his ear over and over again.

As they both came down from the heights of ecstasy, Itamun collapsed back against the bed. His eyes were closed and his head turned to the side, dark brown curls plastered to his forehead with sweat. Han's touch on his cheek turned his face back toward the other man and Itamun found himself pulled into a shaky kiss as

Han rocked into him a few more times before relaxing against his body. After a moment, Han broke the kiss to rest his head against Itamun's shoulder. Itamun brought his hand up to sleepily stroke the other man's cheek.

"I want to trust you," Han murmured.

Itamun was quiet for a moment before leaning down to press a gentle kiss to Han's forehead. "I'll prove to you that you can."

# CHAPTER 10

"Good morning, Netai."

The youth looked up when Han greeted him, offering a small smile. Han had expected to find him just outside Itamun's tent in the morning, but he had moved across the camp at some point in the night. The boy continued walking to close the distance between them, then offered the folded blankets he had borrowed.

"Good morning. Leja had her baby in the night. It's a girl and they both seem to be well."

"Excellent. I know that...the prince had been concerned about her health. I think he took her difficulties as an omen about his own wife."

The boy grew silent as they both worked on breaking down the camp. There were attendants to do a great deal of the work, but

even with how tired he was Han was happy to help. The sooner they broke camp, the farther they could get during the day. The farther they could get, the sooner he'd be in Itamun's home.

"Are you familiar with Leja from your time with the Assyrians?" Han asked while they coiled up rope together.

Netai nodded quickly. "Yes, I was her husband's slave. She always treated me well, so I hope nothing bad happens to her. Or the baby." The boy paused a moment. "She's naming her Kushi."

"Maybe the prince will find somewhere for her that'll make for an easy life. He's a kind man." Just after Itamun had taken him captive, Han never would have guessed he'd say such a thing about the man. He could see from the beginning that he was young and easily manipulated, but he hadn't been looking for virtues. Only weaknesses.

It took him a moment before he realized that Netai had stopped working. Glancing at the boy, Han raised a brow slightly. "What is it?"

"Do you love the prince very much?"

The question made Han blink, taking half a step back as he stared at Netai. "What makes you ask that?"

The boy was blushing now, staring down at his hands as he twisted the rope between them. "I overheard the two of you last night. I'm just trying to figure something out."

Han grew quiet as he considered Netai's question. What he felt for Itamun was quite different from what he'd felt for Yutis, but was it any less intense? It was a difficult question for him and certainly not one he felt ready to answer. "I don't know yet. I guess I'm still figuring it out myself."

"Do you think he loves you?"

The boy's intense interest in Han's intimate matters made him

frown, but he didn't rebuke him. In many ways Netai was like a little brother to him because of Han's partnership with Yutis. That the boy might be concerned when Han was moving on seemed natural enough.

"I'm not sure. I know his loyalty isn't something he gives lightly, but he offered it to me all the same." And his body, something he had never given to anyone. I've done what I can every step of the way to try to make you happy. That was what Itamun had said to him after Han had nearly cost him his life. As bizarre as it sounded, it truly was what Itamun had been doing. "I guess he does." Han's voice sounded stunned and a bit distant to his own ears.

Netai nodded, apparently satisfied with that, and continued coiling up the rope. "Then I hope you're happy together."

\* \* \*

That day Han hardly spent a moment away from Itamun's side until they reached the pharaoh's capital—the House of Ramesses. Han said nothing of his realization about Itamun's feelings, simply watching him and offering slightly uncertain smiles every time their eyes met in the chariot. As soon as they reached the city they were split into two groups. Leja, her child and Han were to be escorted to Itamun's personal residence by his guards. The other prisoners and Itamun went to the palace.

The fact that Netai accompanied Itamun troubled Han, but the boy had no obligation to stay with him. If he wished to see the splendors of the palace, he should take the opportunity while he could.

The prince's home appeared humble only because they passed

by the palace on their way to it. A wall surrounded the villa on all sides. Over the top of the wall, just hints of the building behind it could be seen. Trees grew up above the wall, hinting at the garden courtyards. The guards led them to the main gate between two brilliantly red columns. Through the gate a path lined with fruit trees led the way first toward a small religious shrine, then turned in toward another courtyard and the house itself.

A plump young woman with skin dark enough to hint at some Nubian ancestry was walking down the steps from the house, cradling a swaddled baby in her arms. Her hair was black as night and straight as bone, though Han knew enough about Egyptian customs to guess that it was likely a wig. Itamun was one of the few Egyptians Han had met who didn't shave his head or wear a wig, though his hair was such a pleasure to play with that Han was grateful for that. The young woman was quite pretty and dressed richly with gold bands around her wrists and a collar glittering with stones around her neck. The look on her face was one of alarm, however.

"Where is Itamun?" she demanded of the guards in Egyptian.

One of the guards stepped forward, inclining his head slightly in respect. "He's taken his plunder and a Hittite captive to Pharaoh, my lady."

Hearing Netai referred to that way gave Han a start, but the other Egyptians likely didn't know that Netai was with them of his own free will. They probably assumed he was another captive.

The woman closed her eyes, sighing with what looked like relief, then cradled the baby closer to her for a moment before looking toward Han and the small cart he'd been pulling with Leja in it. "And who are you?"

Leja looked blank, obviously not understanding the language.

Han thought a silent prayer that the woman would approve of him, as she was clearly Itamun's wife.

"My name is Hantilis. I'm also a Hittite, though I've been living in Egypt for two years. Prince Itamununemwia sent me here along with Leja, an Assyrian prisoner of war." He gave a small gesture to Leja and her child.

The dark Egyptian woman continued to stare at Leja, her head tilted thoughtfully to the side. "Does she speak Egyptian?"

"I'm afraid she only speaks her own tongue."

"Well, she can learn. Come on." The woman gestured to Leja, encouraging her to climb out of the cart. Han immediately went to her side to assist her, putting an arm around her for support. "I'm Ashaki, Itamununemwia's wife. Let's get you inside and fed before I figure out what he wants me to do with you."

Once they were in the cool shade of the interior, Ashaki had the servants bring them beer and food, which Han gratefully partook in. He wanted to ask questions about the baby, but resisted. It was only Itamun's duty to his father that had stopped him at the palace first. He deserved to learn about his child before Han did.

Instead, Ashaki had a number of questions for him. Once she had shooed the servants out, she sat in a chair near Han and looked him over. "You're no servant, are you?"

"I don't know what the prince expects of me."

"Oh, I think we both know exactly what the prince expects of you."

Han hesitated, looking at the young woman for a moment. She was younger than Itamun himself by the look of her, but seemed shrewd. He could see why the prince admired her, even if he couldn't bring himself to love her. Itamun had implied their marriage was purely political and that Ashaki didn't care if he had

male lovers. He hoped that the younger man was right.

"I don't know if he expects me to serve him, but I am his lover."

She nodded once. "And are you here because you enjoy being his lover or because you think bedding a prince will give you power?"

Had Han been a superstitious man, he might have feared she was gifted with some sort of second sight. It was as if she had looked into his soul and found that dark conversation he'd had with his father so long ago. But no, it wasn't anything that mysterious. It was simply an obvious assumption. Even if the prince was young and inexperienced in the ways of love that didn't mean there wouldn't be other people looking out for him. It was a flaw in his father's plan Han should have recognized from the start. It made him wonder if his father had truly thought the plan would work, or if it had simply been an attempt to keep Han from doing something stupid and getting himself killed.

"I don't care about power," Han stated firmly. "I care about your husband and want to be with him. I don't want to use him or come between the two of you."

Ashaki shook her head slightly, the hint of a wry smile dancing across her lips for a moment. "I've little worry about anyone coming between us. So long as he remains my friend, that's all that I need. I consider myself lucky to not have a husband who imposes his desires on me."

Having no interest in women, he'd never paid much attention to their libidos. Still, that struck Han as odd. "Surely you want your husband to bed you?"

That faint smile suddenly turned broad as she shook her head once again. "No more than he wants to bed me. We've known each

other since we were children and, as I said, are lucky. I begged my father for the match."

Han continued to stare at her for a moment as he tried to make sense of that. When it all fell into place, he felt his face flush with embarrassment over how dense he had been. There was also a twinge of guilt for his lack of confidence in Itamun. Obviously the man was familiar with his wife and knew what was acceptable and what wasn't in his marriage.

"I see. Then you aren't troubled that he's invited me into your home?"

"So long as you don't hurt him or betray him. He's never had a lover here before. He always kept it entirely out of sight. You must be special to him, which means you could hurt him." Ashaki's eyes hardened slightly, hinting at some unspoken threat.

"I won't."

"Good. Now that that's settled we can see about getting everything else taken care of." The young woman carefully climbed out of her chair, then looked to where Leja was nursing her daughter. "Leja? Come," she gestured to the Assyrian, who glanced up a bit warily, then looked to Han.

"It's all right. She wants you come with her," Han explained in Leja's tongue.

Leja still didn't look entirely at ease as she readjusted her dress and put Kushi up on her shoulder, patting the little girl's back. She said nothing, though, as Han helped her up to follow Ashaki.

"You speak the Assyrian dialect?" Itamun's wife asked, glancing toward Han. He nodded. "Good. Stay with us and translate."

Ashaki led the way upstairs, to what Han assumed had to be the living quarters for the house's master and his wife. The corridors

were lined with artwork cut directly into the walls and often painted bright colors. He kept finding himself distracted by it, trying to decipher the meaning in the images. Much of it appeared to be scenes of goddesses and religious devotion.

"It looks like a temple up here," Han commented as he glanced toward Ashaki, who smiled.

"Itamun has had quite a bit of priestly training, much of it under my father before he died."

His troubles with the priests of Hathor made more sense in that light. The head priest Ramose likely viewed him as a potential rival for power. The son of the pharaoh would be well placed to simply take the temple over if he ever chose to, though he had apparently never made that decision. Han wondered if the Egyptian king had sent Itamun off to make war specifically to prepare him for taking control of the temple.

Ashaki led them into a sunny room with far different images on its walls. These ones involved children playing, lush gardens and animals. A statue of a cow-headed goddess was set near one wall, flanked by a statue of a grotesque, tiny man. Ashaki paused, turning to Leja. "This is the nursery. Will you and your baby be comfortable here?"

Han translated and Leja frowned, then nodded slightly. "Am I to be your child's nurse?"

"I haven't decided yet. I haven't trusted anyone else with Ameni."

After Han had repeated Ashaki's words in the Assyrian dialect, he turned to the Egyptian woman. "I should warn you; Itamun killed Leja's husband. She might seek revenge."

That made Ashaki frown slightly as her eyes remained on Leja. "Would you trade your child for wealth or freedom?"

When Leja heard the words in her own language she looked shocked. "No! Kushi is the only thing I have to live for."

"Would you trade her for vengeance?"

Leja shot Han a dirty look. He glanced away, pretending to be momentarily fascinated by one of the statues. While Netai had a favorable view of the woman, Han was still unsure if he trusted her. Particularly around Itamun's helpless child.

"No, never. I wouldn't do anything to risk her."

"Then you can stay here in the nursery. Can you cook?"

"Yes, I did all of my own cooking before. We only had a youth for a slave and my husband's mother wouldn't do anything."

Ashaki sat in a low chair in the nursery, gesturing to a bed for Leja to lie down. The Assyrian woman lowered herself onto the bed gratefully, closing her eyes for a moment. Han continued to stand, feeling increasingly separate from the conversation even as he translated every word.

"Is your husband's mother still alive? Do you want her working in the same household?"

Leja wrinkled her nose, shaking her head. "No! She's at the palace with the prince and I'm happy to have her nowhere near me."

Itamun's wife laughed softly at that. "I'm lucky Itamun's mother likes me. I don't see her very often either, which probably helps."

"The old bat seemed to like me well enough in the early days, but then she decided I couldn't do anything right and just started complaining about everything."

After a while, Han started tuning the particulars of their discussion out and simply translated automatically. It was good practice in both languages, but it was obvious the women didn't

care about speaking to him at all and simply wanted to talk to one another. As the evening wore on and he began to feel like little more than a piece of furniture, his concern over Netai grew. Would he be staying in Itamun's villa as well?

When night fell, Han was directed to Itamun's room to sleep. It was as richly decorated as the rest of the living quarters, though Itamun's personal touch was more obvious. Papyrus was rolled up and stored in shelves covering an entire wall, making Han's head spin as he tried to imagine how much was written there for just one man's library. The prince's apparent religious expertise and his fluency in multiple languages were all no doubt helped by a collection like that. Han had always considered himself well-educated, but seeing such evidence of Itamun's thirst for knowledge gave him a new perspective. No wonder he'd seemed so disgusted with violence, regardless of his skill. He was more scholar than soldier.

But the day had been long. He'd traveled from the desert into the city and from the edges of the city to Itamun's villa. Translating for the women had been taxing in its own way as well. His exhaustion led him away from the shelves of foreign writing to the bed. It was more sumptuous than anything Han had touched in years. As soon as he had stripped and lay down, he was fast asleep.

It felt like it had been only moments when Han felt lips against his, but the daylight bleeding through his eyelids said otherwise. With a soft, sleepy moan he brought a hand up to cup Itamun's cheek as he leaned up into the kiss. The other man had already slid under the blankets with him and stripped, as Han realized when he felt warm skin slide against his own.

"When did you get here?" Han murmured.

"A little before sunrise," was the whispered response. Itamun

gave him another gentle kiss, then moved down to start peppering his throat with kisses. "I had to see Ashaki and the baby first. Have you seen him? He's beautiful."

The awed pride in Itamun's voice made Han smile. One arm slipped around the prince, tugging him closer. "I didn't look too closely. I thought you should get that honor first."

"I appreciate that." Itamun's teeth snapped at Han's throat, making him hiss and arch up underneath him. "And I especially appreciate finding you naked in my bed."

"Mmm. I live to serve, my prince." Shifting under him, Han slid his hands down Itamun's sleekly muscled back to grip his ass. His hands tugged the other man closer so when he raised up in response to the next bite their cocks rubbed together.

That bite grew a bit harder as Itamun groaned, sending shudders of pained pleasure down Han's spine. When the prince released him he whimpered and opened his mouth to beg to be hurt again. Before he could speak, Itamun had cut him off.

"Your village owes no tribute."

Han blinked, then pulled back against the bed so he could look into Itamun's eyes. "What do you mean?"

"The Assyrians I captured with your assistance are your tribute. The pharaoh is quite pleased with your generosity."

"I didn't ask you to do that."

"I know. I needed to do this, though. I needed you and Netai to have a choice. I couldn't have you with me just because you had no alternative."

What did Netai have to do with it? Han drew his brows together, frowning. "That isn't why I'm with you. You've never forced me to do anything."

Itamun shrugged slightly. "I know, but I want you to be free so

that it really means something when you give yourself to me. The submission of a lover is far preferable to that of a captive."

A lover. Han had used that word to refer to himself earlier, though he'd never used it with Itamun. He was still unsure if he could love Itamun, or if he could forgive himself if he did. Closing his eyes for a moment, he forced those thoughts away where they could be safely ignored.

"Did Netai come back with you?"

"Yes, he'll be sharing the nursery with Leja and the children for now. We'll need to find an apprenticeship for him soon, though."

An apprenticeship meant that he'd be learning a trade, not simply be used for labor. That bit of thoughtfulness on Itamun's part touched Han. All of this had been so much more than he could have expected. Yet he still couldn't give his heart to the prince. The thought made him feel oddly guilty.

Finally, Han spoke again. "Thank you." It didn't seem to be enough. In fact, he knew it wasn't enough.

Itamun didn't seem to sense Han's inner turmoil. Instead Itamun simply kissed him again and pressed Han's body back into the bed with his own weight. A morning spent making love wouldn't solve anything, but it worked well for keeping unwanted worries at bay.

# CHAPTER 11

"He looks just like you."

Itamun glanced up from his son's face to meet Ashaki's eyes with his own, grinning wryly. "I see plenty of you in him, too. I just can't get over how miraculous it is. We made a little person."

His wife laughed softly as she circled around behind where he sat on the ground, cradling the baby in his arms. After their midday meal Itamun had taken the baby out into the shade of the garden to marvel at him. As he'd done so many times before, he said a silent prayer of thanks that he wasn't one of his father's older sons. No need for dozens or more heirs or more than one wife. What he had in his villa was perfect. Well, almost.

"We?" she asked teasingly. Tucking the skirt of her dress under her knees, she lowered herself carefully to sit behind him. One

hand rested on Itamun's shoulder as she leaned over to smile down at Ameni. "I think I did all of the hard work."

Turning his head slightly, he offered his wife a warm look. "Yes, you did and I'm eternally grateful to you for it."

"He was born less than a moon cycle ago, but he's already grown so much." The pride in her voice was obvious and Itamun couldn't fault her at all for it, not while holding the object of that pride.

"He does seem to be strong and healthy. I was terrified that something might happen to the two of you while I was gone. I felt so guilty not being here."

"You shouldn't have." Ashaki squeezed his shoulder before rising to her feet again. "Pharaoh called and you answered."

"I know. I just..." he trailed off, frowning. "It was hard, Ashaki. I don't know how other men can spend their lives at war. It was so much different from just training, so much worse. There wasn't much room for anything positive unless you were capable of enjoying bloodshed."

"What about Hantilis? That's something positive, isn't it?"

Automatically, Itamun's eyes flicked toward the house. He'd left Han after they had eaten, as the other man wanted to bathe using the little room Itamun had set aside for that purpose. Apparently Hatti didn't have special rooms created specifically for bathing, not even for nobility. Han had scoffed and called it extravagant idiocy, but that hadn't stopped him from wanting to try it.

"Not for most of the journey. It took so much effort to try to win him over and I'm still not sure I've done it."

"He told me he cares for you," Ashaki pointed out.

"Did he?" Itamun's eyes turned back to his wife with some

surprise. "He never told me that."

"Did you tell him you care for him?"

Ameni started to fuss a bit, drawing Itamun's attention to the baby for a moment. Itamun shifted him onto his shoulder a bit awkwardly, patting at his back. Despite the fact that the goddess Hathor was associated with fertility, studying the goddess's lore had given him no preparation for parenthood. It would take some time before he was used to it, but he cherished the chance.

"No, I didn't. I almost did once, but he didn't trust me and I would have felt foolish saying anything."

"So does he trust you now?"

"I really don't know."

Ashaki laughed softly and reached out to ruffle Itamun's hair affectionately. "Men! You're so ridiculous. I don't know how you can want to waste your time on them."

Itamun snorted softly at that, giving his head a shake to dislodge her hand. "We're not ridiculous and I've heard plenty of complaints about women as well."

"Maybe it's just a grand joke by the gods to make people utterly impossible to one another," she suggested as she smiled down at him. "You should talk to him about how you feel. You obviously care deeply for him if you brought him into our home. I want you happy, Itamun."

"What about your happiness?"

His wife pursed her lips in thought as she looked up toward the fruit trees, giving her richly ornamented wig a small adjustment. "I'm happy here with my closest friend and my son. If you mean happiness with a lover, I suppose I'll find that eventually."

Itamun climbed to his feet, tightening his hold on the baby just a bit as he did as the paranoid fear he might drop Ameni came to

mind. "I hope so. You deserve it."

Her hand went back to his shoulder as she smiled warmly at him again, then pressed a kiss to his cheek. "So do you."

"Am I interrupting something?" The gently accented Egyptian caught Itamun's attention and he turned his head. Han had joined them in the garden. He was still a bit damp from bathing and wore an Egyptian styled tunic. One of the servants must have attacked him with kohl, as his eyes were now lined with it and he looked faintly embarrassed. Whether it was from having his face painted or interrupting the platonic moment between husband and wife Itamun wasn't sure.

"No, I was just going inside," Ashaki told Han graciously before she pulled away to walk back toward the house.

Itamun watched her go, then turned his attention back to Han. "Would you like me to show you around the city today? The delta here is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen in my life."

Han raised a brow slightly. "How many places have you seen in your life?"

"I've been all over Egypt."

"Which is nothing but dirt except for the delta, isn't it?"

Itamun rolled his eyes a bit before he gave his head a small shake and cuddled the baby closer. They'd arrived in the evening the night before and Han hadn't had much of a chance to look around, as Itamun had been concerned about getting Leja to the villa to rest as soon as possible. He'd show the Hittite what Egypt had to offer soon enough.

Once Itamun had left Ameni with Ashaki and gathered up his personal guard, he led Han out into the city. The villa was relatively near the river, but the crowd of other buildings near it blocked most of the view. The House of Ramesses had grown a

great deal since his father had moved his capital. His court itself was immense, as was the number of his children, but it was more than that. Temples had sprung up like grain on fertile soil. Merchants had set up permanent homes so they could serve the wealthy. Peasants worked the fields along the banks of the Nile to feed those in the region. Soldiers and their families lived nearby, along with servants and craftsmen. Dozens of scribes worked in the city as well, to keep records and make written pleas to the gods and write letters to distant family. There were the city guards to keep the peace and lawyers for settling legal matters.

Not all of the people were Egyptians, either. Peoples from all over the continent and to the east would end up in the House of Ramesses. Many were hired mercenaries or professional soldiers, but there were foreign merchants as well. In some cases their ancestors had been prisoners of war and their families had lived in Egypt for generations.

There were a few slaves as well, but they were far rarer than they were among many other nations. Because of the incredible fertility of the Nile the farmers had a great deal of free time. They sowed their fields and they harvested them, but for the majority of the year were a massive work force available for whatever was needed. With so much cheap labor available it simply would have been a waste of resources to keep a large number of slaves. Those that were kept in slavery were typically prisoners of war or occasionally criminals. For some bondage would last their entire lives, but it was relatively common for wealthy Egyptian families who had no heirs to adopt young slaves as their own children.

But Han had come from his own great empire. As they walked through the streets Itamun could see that he was interested, but not terribly impressed with the marvels of the capital. Itamun

considered for a moment, then changed directions. The marketplace was near the river to make it easy for goods to be delivered by ship. As they made their way through the throng Han looked around idly, his eyes briefly resting on this or that.

"This way," Itamun said, before turning them down what appeared to simply be another street.

Once they'd rounded the corner he heard the sudden intake of breath from Han, making Itamun grin. The street led to a wooden dock where goods were unloaded. Along the near bank were lush fields and the little huts of farmers. Trees swayed gently in the breeze, casting cool shade on what should have been scorched desert. Here in the delta the river had slowed and spread out, growing more and more shallow as deposits of sediment were dumped along the river bottom. When the next flood came that sediment would be washed out, much of it ending up on the fields. The dock would have to be moved to accommodate the alterations in the delta, as it never stayed quite the same year after year. Many of the homes of the farmers would be washed away as well. Yet despite those difficulties, it was worth it for what the river gave.

There the river looked nearly black, shimmering like a slice of obsidian in the sunlight. The graceful ships of Egypt sailed up and down the Nile, carrying news and goods. Across the river was the truly spectacular view, however. There, no temples or villas or law offices blocked the view. It was nothing but thick and glorious farmland. The amazing fertility of the river's sediment deposited year after year coupled with ready water and the searing heat of the desert had created something that defied the imagination. In what should have been the deadest of deserts was the most remarkable farmland that Itamun had ever seen. Even more remarkable was what could be seen in the distance. All across the delta, lining each

thread of the river as it spread out to reach the sea, was more green, but in the far distance the hills of the desert could be seen. It was so abrupt it was as if a knife had bisected the landscape. One moment there was life and growth. The next, nothing but sand.

"By the gods," breathed Han as he stepped past Itamun, looking out across the river.

"Our gods are generous," Itamun agreed. "As I said, it's one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen."

Han shot him a look, raising a brow. "You're implying there are places that rival this?"

"Other places along the Nile, yes."

"I'd wondered how you were able to keep such a lush garden," Han confessed, making Itamun grin again.

"There's a channel to carry water from the river into the garden. During the flood season we're close enough for the courtyards to flood. It's the flooding that does it. Pour water alone on the desert and all you'll get is wet sand."

Han nodded absently, still gazing out across the delta. Itamun had taken it somewhat for granted when he was younger, only grasping the awe inspiring wonder of the yearly cycle as he grew older. Having traveled far from the Nile, he could now look upon it with new eyes. It was utterly miraculous.

Stepping closer to Han, Itamun laid a hand on the other man's arm cautiously. Han turned his head to look at him, then offered a small smile. "I'm sorry for doubting you."

"Oh, I'm not. Your arrogance made it so much more fun to show this to you." Itamun smirked.

Han's eyes flicked toward the guards briefly. When he next spoke it was in his native tongue, Nesili. "Can I show you affection in public or does it offend your people?"

Itamun blinked at that before answering in the same language. Had Ashaki been right that Han actually cared for him? "Assuming your affection doesn't involve anything overtly sexual, I doubt it would offend. Men can embrace one another here."

Closing the remaining distance between them, Han rested his forehead against Itamun's briefly, giving his arm a squeeze. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For showing me this. For everything."

Itamun wasn't sure how to respond to that, particularly in public. He was quiet for a moment before offering Han a small smile, then pulling away reluctantly. "Why don't we head back now? I can show you everything else at the villa, too."

Wanting Han to see more of the city, Itamun took a different route back toward his home. While they walked, he couldn't help but dwell on what Ashaki had said. He kept trying to puzzle some sense out of Han's behavior and figure out where the other man stood. Simply asking him would have been easy enough, but he'd seen how defensive Han got when pushed to talk about his feelings. Itamun doubted that it would work well.

"So what happens to me now?"

Itamun glanced up, looking at Han curiously. "What do you mean?"

"You said I'm no longer a captive. You didn't want me to be forced to be here. Does that mean that I can leave any time?"

Itamun stopped walking and just stood there for a moment as the blood drained from his face. The prisoners he'd taken from the Assyrian town had been by all rights his. As had a percentage of all of the plunder taken. Perhaps it had been foolishness on his part. Perhaps Meriatum was right and he was horribly naive. He'd given

it all to his father as Han's tribute in order to keep him and Netai safe. Somehow he'd simply assumed the other man would want to stay after that.

"If that's what you want, yes," Itamun murmured when he was able to breathe again. Turning away, he continued walking, moving a bit faster now.

"I'm sorry," Han was saying behind him.

Itamun strove to ignore him and keep his composure, but it was difficult. Fighting with the Hittite in public would hardly be seemly.

"I just had to know."

"Why? Do you want to leave?" Itamun asked tightly.

"I don't know. I suppose I just need the option."

"I gave the option to you so if you stayed it wouldn't be by force."

"I know. I appreciate that."

Itamun spared a glance over his shoulder at the other man. "You need to make some sort of decision eventually, Han. I won't put up with you trying to have it both ways forever."

Han narrowed his eyes slightly, his posture shifting slightly. He looked defensive now. "What do you mean by that?"

Itamun turned away and took a deep breath. His eyes rolled up to the sky for a moment and he thought a silent prayer that for once this wouldn't be a fight. Not in public. Not when he had so much to lose. When he spoke again, he chose his words carefully, keeping his tone even. "I mean if you want to be with me, then be with me. If you don't...then you should leave and spare us both further pain."

Han said nothing in response and Itamun couldn't bring himself to look at the other man. He kept walking, barely paying

attention to his surroundings. When he realized that they were passing the temple of Hathor he glanced up, then made a small gesture toward it. He had meant to show Han the city, hadn't he? "This is the temple I oversee."

There were steps leading up into an outer sanctuary with columns to uphold the roof rather than walls, leaving it open to the air and visitors. The temple's steps had two cow statues on either side of them, symbolizing Hathor's sacred animal. A statue of the goddess herself in all her glory could be seen in the outer sanctuary, with small offerings from supplicants laid at her feet. The priests could be seen going about their daily activities, immediately recognizable by the one-shouldered pardilades they wore draped across their torsos and their bald heads. While the grand majority of Egyptians shaved their heads, anyone with enough wealth to have the clothing of the priests would have owned a wig. Several of the priests noticed that Itamun was passing and paused what they were doing to bow their heads in respect. The head priest Ramose flanked by three others within the outer sanctuary could be seen raising their chins just a bit. A minor gesture of insolence, but one that Itamun knew was purposeful.

"It's beautiful," Han said softly.

Itamun said nothing in reply and continued to walk. The temple was close to the main entrance to the villa, so they were home soon enough. At least, Itamun was home. He still wasn't sure how Han felt about it.

Once he had dismissed his guards he started for the house, his thoughts on going to his room and reading to block out the rest of the world. As Itamun climbed the steps into the house he felt a hand on his arm and turned to look at Han curiously. The other man's eyes looked troubled, his face faintly pained.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," Han said. "This is just difficult for me."

Itamun pursed his lips, nodding slightly. "I know, but waiting for you to make up your mind isn't easy for me either."

Han's grip on his arm loosened, releasing him. Itamun turned away again to seek out brief, precious solitude.

# CHAPTER 12

"If the palace sends you to give me a message, you give it to *me* and not the priests!" Itamun turned on his heel sharply to go to the stairs. "Netai! Prepare yourself to be seen at the palace. I need you to come with me right away."

Han stood frozen in the doorway and looked from the messenger to the prince with some concern. He'd been out in the garden when he heard Itamun begin yelling and had immediately run up to the house, worried that something had happened to Ameni or Kushi. Things had settled into a fairly dependable routine in the past several days since he'd come to live in Itamun's villa. Far too comfortable for unexplained yelling to pass without alarm.

"What's going on?" Han demanded.

Itamun turned to look at him with a frown before pointing accusingly at the messenger. "This fool was sent days ago to inform me a delegation from your king is coming. He told Ramose instead, so of course I'm only learning of this now when they've arrived."

Han felt his heart stop. Itamun had promised to keep him safe, yet they couldn't have foreseen this. With Hatti and Egypt having little to do with one another except war, it had never occurred to him that anyone from his homeland might actually arrive at the palace.

Netai came down the stairs so quickly he almost fell into Itamun. The clothes he wore were in the Egyptian style and suited him well, but what he had to do with any of this left Han lost.

"Why are you taking Netai?"

Itamun frowned before turning his face away. "He's the captive from his village and my father wishes to have him there for the meeting."

"But-"

Before Han could say more, Itamun had raised a hand, silencing him. "The village headman had no living children so I took him instead."

Itamun's promise to keep Han safe came back to him suddenly. Now he understood Netai's curiosity about their relationship the morning after that promise had been made. They'd made the agreement for Netai to be presented as the captive and had kept it from Han the entire time! The pharaoh likely didn't even know that Han existed, let alone who he was.

Han slipped into his native language, choosing his words carefully in case the messenger knew any Nesili. "Itamun, if the king has sent a delegation looking for his nephew that means they

have reason to be looking. They may know something."

The prince's eyes narrowed slightly as his chin rose in defiance. "They know nothing. Their word is worth nothing. They don't have the blood of the gods in their veins."

Before Han could figure out how to argue further without accidentally revealing himself, Itamun was dragging Netai out. Han started to follow, then stopped himself. If there were people from Hatti in the city, his uncle likely chose ones who would know him on sight. Leaving the villa could be dangerous for Han. Worse, Itamun could be accused of treason for having hidden Han from the pharaoh.

Stepping back inside, Han leaned against the wall beside the stairwell. His own life was largely worthless, but Itamun had so much to lose. How could he have ever expected the other man to put it all on the line for him?

\* \* \*

The fact that Itamun's father wanted Netai there implied that something was known of Hantilis's whereabouts. There was only one minor advantage Itamun had. While the pharaoh had expressed disappointment over Itamun's inability to exert some sort of control over the temple of Hathor, his loyalty was unquestionable.

When the delegation from Hatti was brought before the pharaoh, there were quiet gasps and appreciative observations made on the exotic Hittites among the courtiers. Though their features seemed somewhat sharper and their skin paler than Egyptians, Itamun no longer found them at all exotic. Even if he had, his nervousness over what was to come would have distracted him.

Gifts were exchanged and speeches made. Though neither side had been able to decisively defeat the other in the last great battle between Egypt and Hatti, Egypt incorporated a number of lessons from the foreigners and Hatti had been weakened by civil war. The Hittite delegates knew their lives were forfeit if they insulted the pharaoh. The fear of their nation wasn't great enough to protect them, even if it meant war.

Itamun stood off to the side of the dais where his father's chair sat. It was difficult not to fidget as he waited through the diplomatic tedium. Instead, he kept sneaking looks back at Netai and offering the boy encouraging smiles.

After what seemed like ages, the delegates finally got around to the reason they had come.

An older man by the name of Tudhaliya with a long white beard that came to a fine point clasped his hands together and bowed as he spoke. "Oh he of the sedge and bee, we've received word that our king's nephew has fled to Egypt after attempting to take the throne from his uncle. This wretched traitor must be brought to justice before he acts against Hatti once more."

The pharaoh listened seriously before turning his attention toward Itamun and giving him a small gesture. "My son, do you know anything of this?"

Itamun took a deep breath before stepping forward. "I brought a Hittite youth here from a village that settled on our borders, but I doubt he's the man you speak of." Stepping aside, he urged Netai forward where he could be seen.

Tudhaliya eyed the boy, then shook his head slightly. "No, he's far too young. This is a royal person. As much of a coward as he is, he has a noble bearing to him."

A voice spoke up from the back of the room. "There was one

other Hittite we brought."

All heads turned toward the doors as Meriatum and Hantilis made their way through. Han's arm was bent behind his back in a joint lock and a long, slender dagger pressed to the underside of his jaw as the captain pushed him up toward the delegates. Angry determination burned in Han's eyes until they met with Itamun's. Itamun felt his heart sinking in horror as all his lover could do was give him a sorrowful look.

The bearded man looked him over, then waved a hand irritably as he frowned. "Yes, some crazed old man told us Hantilis was here, but we're looking for Urhi-Teshub."

Han ceased his struggles against Meriatum as he stared at the delegate in shock. "Tudhaliya? My uncle's been deposed?"

"Yes, Hattusili defeated him, but the fool continued to try to retake the throne until he had to escape to Egypt."

The pharaoh cleared his throat and the room fell silent as attention was drawn back to him. "My son has been busy for the majority of the past year defending our borders. He and these Hittites apparently have no knowledge of Urhi-Teshub. When we received word that you were coming, I had my advisers seek any knowledge they could find on the man's whereabouts, yet they found nothing. Either he is well hidden or you have been misled."

Tudhaliya bristled. "My king will not believe that."

"Let him believe what he likes." With that the pharaoh dismissed the delegation and turned his attention to Hantilis. "You're a nephew of this deposed king?"

Meriatum finally released Han as the Hittite prostrated himself at the king's feet. "Yes, Pharaoh."

"And where does your loyalty now lie?"

Itamun saw as Han hesitated. The other man raised his head

slightly, glancing in Itamun's direction. "With Egypt, Pharaoh."

The pharaoh nodded slightly, satisfied, then moved on to the rest of his court affairs.

Itamun itched to rush to Han's side, but forced himself to wait until the other man came to him instead. Clasping their hands together, Itamun looked Han over carefully for any sign he was injured. There was nothing, not even a nick from the blade at his neck.

"I thought I was going to lose you," Itamun whispered.

"I never would have come with Meriatum if I hadn't thought this whole thing was going to turn on you like a crocodile by the tail."

Itamun glanced toward the captain, then back at Han. "You mean that was all for show? He wasn't forcing you to come?"

"He'd planned on it, but since he had no intention of implicating you I came willingly."

That stilled the majority of murderous impulses he was feeling at the moment toward Meriatum, but it still didn't entirely set Itamun's mind at ease. The prospect of a life without Han was horrifying. Somehow the man had sneaked into the center of the world. The thought made Itamun's lips purse in a frown. "I don't want you to die for me."

Han smirked, his hands squeezing Itamun's. "Likewise."

Out of the corner of his eye Itamun saw the captain approaching and released Han's hands. The teasing look on his lover's face shifted to consternation, but he said nothing. Meriatum inclined his head slightly in greeting.

"Your highness, I'll accept any punishment you inflict on me, but you must know I did this out of concern and love. You're like a son to me and I worried you might be throwing your life away for

this man."

Itamun's eyes flicked toward Han, then back to the captain. "Did you know who he was?"

"No, but I had guessed there was something more to him. He has courtly speech, even in Egyptian."

Itamun nodded slightly, accepting that. "In the future, I suggest the both of you have a little more faith in me. I'd learned from the messenger that the former king had been deposed. I wanted to be sure of where that left Hantilis before exposing him."

Han gave a small jerk as he looked sharply at Itamun, his eyes narrowing. Itamun avoided the look, his stomach twisting in a brief flash of guilt.

"You knew and you didn't tell me?" Han demanded.

"I didn't have time to argue with you, thanks to Ramose keeping the first message from me."

"I had a right to argue about it. This is my family and my life."

"I was trying to protect you."

"I don't need your protection, Itamun."

"Maybe you didn't need it, but I wasn't sure. That's what you do for people you care about; you protect them." The sudden pain that flooded Han's eyes confused Itamun for a moment. It was only a moment, though. Then he remembered what he had done and swore at himself under his breath. "Han, I didn't mean it like that."

"No, I know exactly what you meant. I'm a coward who sits back and lets his lovers die."

The words made Itamun wince and he shifted uneasily as his eyes flicked away from Han's angry face. Meriatum had slipped away, likely embarrassed at being witness to the quarrel. Netai had moved over toward the Hittite delegation and was speaking to one of the young servants accompanying the diplomats.

"Han, I don't think that."

"Well, maybe I do."

Itamun turned back to Han with a sigh as the other man began walking away. "You shouldn't think that," he insisted, but Han ignored him and continued out of the room.

Itamun hesitated. His father had requested his presence, after all. He assumed that it was only for the Hittite delegation, but he had to be sure before offending the pharaoh. Han was beneath notice, but Itamun knew he wasn't. Even if everyone was very studiously pretending to ignore what had just transpired, he was sure every detail of the fight would be spread across the city by morning.

The sun had already set before the pharaoh dismissed the court. Like an arrow loosed from the bow, Itamun was out the doorway. Netai would be able to find his way back to the villa, so he didn't bother waiting to find the boy. His guards were another matter. It was foolish to go anywhere in the city without them, but he'd have to stop to send a servant to fetch them and he didn't want to waste any more time. There had already been enough time between Han and him wasted on petty things like this.

Nearly back to the villa, Itamun began to feel as though he was being watched. He glanced around uneasily, noting that he had just passed the temple of Hathor. He quickened his pace, his hand settling on the hilt of the knife he kept at his belt.

Seconds after he walked through the gate onto his property something heavy slammed into his back and bore him to the ground. He hit the stone path with a grunt as the air was forced out of his lungs and a layer of skin scraped from his cheek. Instinct took over where conscious thought failed. His fingers closed around the knife and jerked it free. Twisting his wrist, he shoved

the blade back into the soft belly of the man on his back and drew it upward. That one groaned as hot blood dripped onto Itamun's back, but before Itamun could scramble free and see what was happening there were hands grabbing him to drag him upward.

"Ramose." Itamun stared in shock into the black eyes of the head priest, glittering in the light of the full moon. He wasn't a large man, but he'd brought his other conspirators with him. The one dying on the ground had two more brethren who now held Itamun's arms immobile.

The head priest's mouth twisted into a malicious smile as he stepped forward. Itamun barely registered that Ramose held a knife before he stopped struggling to free his arms. Instead, Itamun used his captors' strength to hold him up by them as he brought both feet up to slam them into the head priest's chest and knock him back. As his feet came down again, he wrenched with all his strength toward one of the men holding him. In the same motion, he used the back of his head as a battering ram on the man's face. There was a satisfying crunch as that one's head struck the stone wall. The man's hand's loosened, freeing Itamun's arm. Itamun had dropped his knife in the struggle, but snatched one from the belt of the dazed one and immediately lunged for the priest holding his other arm.

The man let go, backing up, but drew a knife of his own. Ramose had already recovered from the blow to the chest and was advancing. Itamun's eyes flicked between two of them and it seemed as though the entire world had slowed down. Every beat of his hammering heart seemed to take five times as long.

Itamun put his back against the wall, creeping back toward the corner so that no one else could sneak up on him. "You're going to be executed for this."

"No one will know it was us."

"I have a full household. Guards and servants will be out here any moment," Itamun warned.

"Your guards are at the palace still and who says anyone in the house will survive?" Itamun's heart fell into his stomach at Ramose's words. "I hear you displeased the Hittite delegates by telling them their quarry wasn't here. It'll be easy enough to push suspicion onto them."

There was nothing to be done but attempt to wound them enough that they'd be incapable of killing the others when they were done with him. Itamun lowered himself into a half crouch, knife at the ready as he prepared. If his own life was over, then so be it. All that mattered was protecting his family. Ashaki, Ameni, and Han.

### **CHAPTER 13**

As soon as he had left the palace, Han had known it was a mistake. It would have been preferable to be miserable at Itamun's side than unhappy all alone. The palace guards would have been fools to let a single foreigner with no one to speak for him back inside, though, so he didn't bother trying to go back. He'd simply gone home again.

Upstairs, he checked on Ashaki and the baby. Itamun's wife was sitting in the nursery with Ameni, chatting with Leja. The language barrier was becoming less of a difficulty with every day as the women attempted to communicate with one another. The grief that had haunted Leja when Han had met her was fading in the warmth of friendship.

His own grief had lessened the closer he'd grown to Itamun,

but his guilt had not.

Han stretched out on Itamun's bed and closed his eyes. Despite the time that he had spent there, it remained Itamun's bed alone in his mind. The man seemed willing, maybe even eager, to have him stay and be a part of the household. Even so, Han couldn't quite accept it.

His eyes snapped open again, finding that the room had grown dark. He must have fallen asleep, but what had awoken him? There were no kisses from Itamun this time, no warm body next to his. Han pushed himself up slowly, looking around as he tried to identify what had drawn him out of sleep. As the sleep faded from his mind he was able to identify it. There were sounds of a fight outside.

Climbing off the bed, Han scooped up his bow and quiver automatically as he crossed the room to look out the window onto the courtyards below. There was just enough light from the moon to illuminate the figures below. Itamun was backed into the corner where two sides of the courtyard wall met, fending off two attackers. His body was streaked with blood that looked black in the dim light.

Han froze, horrified. Jumping from the window could break his legs, but taking the stairs and running out there would take too long. He knew that all too well. In the dark, as far away as he was, and in the midst of a struggle he had no idea if he could make the shot or not, but it was the only way.

Nocking an arrow, he drew back the string as he sighted on the back of one of the men. The seconds dragged on agonizingly as he waited to be sure, to know that his arrow would fly true. There was no surety, though. No guarantee of success. He saw Itamun stumble back against the wall as he fought them off and Han let the

arrow fly, unable to wait any longer.

The arrow buried itself in the shorter attacker's shoulder. Not an immediately fatal blow, but it made him scream and stagger. The other attacker paused for a split second, giving Itamun the chance to recover. Itamun stabbed him in the throat, then kicked the shorter man in the jaw. Only once he had the shorter man on his back on the ground with a foot on his throat did Itamun finally look up.

Their eyes met, but Han was too far away to read Itamun's expression clearly.

"What was that screaming?" Ashaki was saying in the other room. A moment later Han heard her gasp of horror. She must have looked outside.

"He's all right," Han called back. At least, he hoped he was. Itamun was standing, but he was also covered in blood from head to toe.

Leaving his bow and quiver behind, Han snatched up Itamun's sword from where it hung on the wall before rushing outside. It had looked like all of the attackers were incapacitated, but he didn't want to risk being unarmed out there. Behind him, he could hear Ashaki and Leja following. The other servants were coming from their quarters on the other side of the villa, likely having heard the scream.

As he came into the courtyard, Han kicked the body of a man on the path to ensure he was dead. Another man was crumpled against the wall, though he appeared to be alive. Simply unconscious. Their one-shouldered pardilades finally made the connection in Han's mind. Priests.

"Ramose?" he asked, looking to Itamun.

The prince gestured with his chin down at the man he had

pinned under his foot. "This one. Someone go inform the city guard that these men attempted to kill me."

One of the servants holding a lantern took off into the city at that. Han watched him go, then crossed the courtyard to Itamun's side. It was difficult to tell what blood was his own and what was from his attackers. There was a visible wound on his cheek and a few slices on his arms. Itamun swayed a bit on his feet, his throat moving as he swallowed hard. Han moved closer to him to slip an arm around his side, giving Itamun something to lean against as Han pointed his sword down at the head priest.

"Don't move," he warned the man.

A commotion at the gate drew Han's attention back up. Raising his head, he saw as Itamun's personal guards and Netai came in. They all looked appropriately appalled.

"These men tried to kill Prince Itamununemwia," Han informed the guards. "Two of them are still alive. Keep them until the authorities arrive." His arm tightened around Itamun's waist, gently tugging him away from Ramose. "Come, my prince. You need tending."

Itamun turned his face toward Han's, his eyes a bit glazed. Whether it was from injury or exhaustion, Han wasn't sure. That uncertainty worried him. Finally, the prince nodded a bit and then let himself be led away.

"Bring up everything for bathing to the prince's quarters," Han told the servants.

Once he had helped Itamun upstairs, he drew back the screen blocking off the bathing alcove from the rest of the quarters. The alcove was much smaller than the rest of the room, possibly a quarter of the size of the nursery. The floor was simple stone, sloping to one side where it opened to a pipe. The water from

bathing would collect on the floor before being carried through the pipe out into the garden. Han lit several lamps to give the room light so he could see what he was doing, then went to Itamun's side.

"Where are you injured?" he asked, gently touching the prince's unmarked cheek.

"It's just little things," Itamun assured him. "I hit my head on the ground and then into the head of one of the priests. That's probably the worst."

Han frowned, unsure if he believed Itamun's assessment or not. Before he questioned him further, the servants arrived with pitchers of water, fresh linens, a bowl of cleansing cream and a jar of scented oil.

"Set it down and go," Han told them.

The servants glanced at one another, then at Itamun. The prince gave them a small nod before they slipped out again silently.

"Come on." Han stripped off his own clothing before he gently removed Itamun's. With the blood on him it was still difficult to tell where he was injured and where he wasn't, but the bathing would help that.

Once Itamun had stepped into the alcove, Han raised the first pitcher of water to begin pouring it over his head. His master sighed with what sounded like relief. Bringing his hands up, Itamun ran them through his short curls before he began smoothing the water over his bare skin. As more of the blood was washed away he seemed to come back to himself more.

"Use the cleansing cream," Itamun said once the first pitcher had been emptied.

Unperturbed with the order, Han took a handful of the cream. It was a white concoction, thicker than oil, and smelled faintly of

myrrh and cinnamon. Starting at Itamun's hair, he combed it through Itamun's curls with his fingers, then gently traced over the features of his face. As Han bathed Itamun, the prince closed his eyes and tipped his head back softly. Han's touch moved down, gently but firmly working over every part of the prince's body. He found three cuts on Itamun's left arm and two on his right. Luckily, each was shallow.

As his hands worked lower over his chest and stomach, he could see the effect he was having on Itamun. Han's slick fingers delicately traced over the thickening arousal, making the prince inhale sharply and open his eyes.

"Not yet," he warned.

Han couldn't help but smile at that tone, which assured him Itamun would be fine. "Yes, my prince."

Kneeling down, Han continued washing the other man. His hands now worked down Itamun's muscular thighs and calves, then his feet. Just between the two of them like this, it didn't feel like being a servant. It felt more like the beautiful purity in worship. He took his time not to tease, but because there was such pleasure in serving his master thoroughly.

"You saved my life."

Han glanced up toward Itamun's face. The view was all the more beautiful when his sight had to pass the slick perfection of the prince's body first. "You could have called for help."

"Someone else might have been hurt."

"If you had been killed, several someones would have been."

Itamun didn't respond, so Han moved behind him to begin cleaning the back of his body. As his hands slid over the other man's taut ass, he couldn't resist the urge to gently squeeze the muscles before letting one finger slide back and forth between his

cheeks. The motion won a groan from Itamun.

"There's no blood there," the prince said, voice husky with arousal.

"There could be. It could have dripped."

That made Itamun chuckle as he leaned back into Han. Han slid one arm around the prince, cradling him by the waist as he nuzzled along the side his neck. His questing hand stayed at the prince's ass as his finger teased at the tight opening there.

"Your priests are so powerful here. Will you be safe now that they've been caught?"

"By the gods, you're going to ask me questions while doing that?" Itamun pulled away from him, turning around to face Han. "Unless there are other conspirators, I should be safe. I'm a potential heir to the throne. Attacking me is equivalent to attacking Egypt. They'll be punished, and well."

Han nodded, relieved to hear that. One attempt on his life was bad enough, but if the head priest was set free it would have been a guarantee that there would be more attempts.

Stepping back from Itamun, Han picked up another pitcher to begin rinsing the prince off. It took a third pitcher of water to get them both entirely clean and then he picked up the linen to dry Itamun and himself.

After he was dry, the prince stepped out of the alcove into the main part of his room and spread his arms at his sides. "The oil, now," he ordered.

Without comment, Han fetched the jar of oil and began rubbing it into Itamun's skin. The sensuous smoothness as his fingers glided over the prince's body was nearly too distracting for him to continue. It was painful not to touch more, to press against him, to beg to be fucked. He bit the tip of his tongue and tried to focus on

his work, rather than his desires.

"I don't think you're a coward," Itamun pointed out. "I wondered once, after you almost let me die, but I stopped thinking that a long time ago."

Han's hands stilled. "I'd guessed. I saw myself as a coward, though. When I almost let you die, I was thinking about Yutis."

"Did you want revenge?"

"I told myself I wanted my freedom, but I think what I really wanted was to punish myself. Deny myself the one thing that had given me pleasure since he'd died, because I did think I was a coward and that I didn't deserve to be happy."

"I hope you don't think that anymore."

Han was quiet for a long moment as he thought that over. "I don't know," he admitted. "I still failed Yutis."

At that, Itamun pulled away from him, turning to grab him by the arms and look seriously into Han's eyes. "People die, Han. A wise man once told me that you can't control fate."

He'd told the prince that when he was worrying about the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth. It was a memorable conversation for what it had led to later. Han frowned and glanced away with a sigh. "That's different. Some things are completely beyond your control but this—"

"Is the same. An archer can't make every shot. Bad things happen. Some of my best soldiers have died, Han. I know what I'm talking about."

Han ducked his head as he thought that over, trying to find some counterargument. There wasn't one. He knew as well as Itamun that men died in battle. He knew his own skill and what he had a chance of hitting and what he didn't. There had been no chance of saving Yutis. There'd been too many other things going

on. Even as difficult as hitting the head priest has been, it had still been a clear shot.

"Han." Itamun's voice made him glance up before the prince cupped his cheeks and guided him in for a soft, brief kiss. "You deserve to be happy. If you can't be happy with me I won't keep you."

That thought made Han wince as he shook his head. "No, I..." He trailed off for a moment, then took a deep breath. "I want to be with you. You do make me happy, happier than I've ever been. I've just been an idiot."

The smile that spread across Itamun's face made Han's heart do backflips. It was a slow curl to his lips and a lightness in his eyes that somehow combined the delight of a boy and the carnal promises of a man. Then Itamun's lips were on his. It wasn't soft like the first kiss. There was a hungry desperation to it that Han gave himself up to willingly. The other man's mouth devoured his, his tongue forcing its way past Han's lips to plunder and take. After everything he'd been though, Han had expected Itamun to be more passive or at least a bit worn down. If anything, he was more demanding than usual.

The other man roughly pushed him back toward the bed, to Han's shock. He gasped as the backs of his knees hit the edge of the bed. Before he'd had a moment to recover, Itamun was pushing him down. One of the prince's hands curled in Han's hair, tugging his head back a bit as Itamun's weight pinned him to the bed. The soft whimper Han made into the kiss grew more desperate as Itamun abandoned his lips, moving down to attack his throat instead. The sharp press of teeth against his throat made Han groan, arching up under the other man, rolling his hips against the prince.

"Please." Han gasped.

The prince chuckled, releasing his throat to kiss at Han's ear instead. "Begging so soon? I'm impressed."

"I was ready to beg as soon as I started bathing you."

"You wanted to take advantage of a wounded man? Tsk."

Before Han could respond, Itamun had released his hair. Then the prince pushed Han over to force him onto his stomach, molding himself to Han's back. Itamun's lips graced Han's shoulders, his throbbing cock a hot temptation against Han's ass. Han hissed softly through his teeth as he writhed between the bed and Itamun's body, trying to work his ass back against the prince's cock. One of Itamun's hands moved down, gripping Han's hip and forcing it into stillness.

"Do you want me inside you?" Itamun whispered.

"Yes."

"Now you can beg."

Han took a deep, shuddering breath. "Please, master. Please fuck me. I need you inside of me."

Itamun pulled away from him. Han started to turn to see what he was doing, catching a glimpse of Itamun grabbing the jar of oil before he was back against him again. Han felt the prince's lips caressing his shoulders again, then the press of the other man's slick fingers against his ass. Itamun pushed them into him to thrust twice before they were pulled away and Han felt the prince's oil-covered cock nudging against him.

Itamun had always been patient about preparing him before, but there was no patience this time. The prince thrust into him, making Han cry out in shock. His body knew what to expect and accepted the sudden invasion, but it wasn't without some resistance. It felt tighter than usual, just a faint edge of discomfort

at being filled without warning.

"Are you all right?" Itamun asked quietly, nuzzling at his ear.

Han thought that over for half a second before he shifted under the prince, rolling his hips back to him to take him in deeper. Itamun hissed sharply through his teeth, automatically thrusting forward. His thick shaft worked into Han's body, sending shudders down his spine and making him arch slightly as he gasped again.

"Yes, oh gods. Keep going," Han breathed.

Another thrust, another cry from Han, and Itamun was buried fully within him. The prince's hand went back to Han's hair, tugging his head back a bit as he started to pound into him. Itamun's other hand found Han's wrists, pinning them together on the bed. The prince leaned his weight on Han's wrists, using them to support himself as he fucked him mercilessly. There was little Han could do except rock his body back to meet each savage thrust.

It was almost agonizingly perfect, as it always was with Itamun. The other man gave him exactly what he wanted, using him and dominating him and making Han feel like the center of his world. Feelings he'd struggled to keep locked away welled inside of him, clenching around Han's heart like a fist. As Itamun leaned over him, the prince's lips brushed against his cheek and Han automatically turned to catch the kiss. Itamun's hand in his hair loosened, the other man's fingers combing through it affectionately as Han gave himself up to the demands of Itamun's mouth. Han's lips parted, letting Itamun claim him hungrily.

When Itamun drew back to gasp for breath, Han whimpered, leaning into his lover's body. "I love you," Han whispered.

Itamun stilled for a moment, making Han open his eyes in concern. Then the prince's lips were brushing over his again. This

time the touch was as delicate as the brush of a butterfly's wing. "I love you, too," Itamun breathed against his lips.

They began to move together again, finding a new rhythm through some unspoken communication. It wasn't as rough as before, but there was a new intensity to it. Itamun's lips were gliding along the side of Han's throat, punctuating kisses with soft scrapes of teeth and brief flickers of tongue. The prince's hand loosened to release one of Han's wrists and Han instantly wrapped his fingers around his own cock to stroke in time to Itamun's thrusts.

Just as Han thought he couldn't stand it any longer and needed something more, something harder, another one of those little kisses at his throat ended with Itamun's teeth digging into his skin. The sudden pain made him gasp sharply before the breath came out in a low groan. Han's hips thrust down into his own grip. Everything came together in that moment as his cock twitched in his hand and all his thoughts and feelings narrowed down to the ecstasy of release. Their bodies kept moving together almost frantically, the both of them shuddering with pleasure as they came. Nothing had ever felt so complete or so right for Han as the feel of Itamun filling him with his hot seed.

Even when the moment had passed they kept moving together for a few extra heartbeats, unwilling to let it end so soon. Finally the two of them collapsed into a trembling, sweat slicked heap. Itamun's arms wrapped tightly around Han, stopping him from pulling away even though Han had no intention of doing so.

"Will you stay forever?" Itamun whispered against his shoulder before kissing there softly.

Han was quiet for a moment, then shifted enough so that he could sleepily look at Itamun and offer his lover a lopsided smile.

"Through this life and the next."

"You don't have to. You're not a captive any longer, or a traitor in your own kingdom. You could go home."

The tone of Itamun's voice made Han frown. He sounded uncertain, doubtful. Bringing his hands up, Han gently unwrapped Itamun's arms from around him so he could turn over and completely face the other man. One hand went to the prince's cheek, affectionately cradling it as he looked deeply into those soulful eyes.

Ducking down, Han brushed a soft, brief kiss against Itamun's lips. Without pulling away, he whispered into the other man's mouth, "I am home."

#### C. D. LEAVITT

C. D. Leavitt wrote her first book at the age of six and turned living vicariously through fictional people into a lifelong hobby. Since then she has fallen deeply in love multiple times with characters she created and hopes to see them all go to good homes in the hearts of readers.

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