

The Exile

False Door Series Book 1

Wren St Claire

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author@wrenstclair.com

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Chapter 1

Cairo, July 20, 2009AD

Shoving the last of the big folio volumes into the shelf, Audrey emerged from the stacks to the sound of her desk phone ringing. Pelting down the narrow corridor between the compactus shelves on her right and the wall of the stack room, dodging boxes and piles of unsorted research papers and books, she reached her office and lunged for the phone.

“Papyrology Department, Audrey Delany speaking, how may I help you?”

“Ms Delany you are present today.” It was the Museum’s Director, Dr Jira El Badawi. It was a statement, not a question, but she answered it anyway.

“Yes Dr Jira, I was in the stack.”

“Well can you come up here please. I have found a replacement for Dr Alsayed.”

“You have? How wonderful! Is it Professor Burns from Berkley?”

“No Ms Delany. Professor Burns did not apply for the position.”

“Oh. I was sure he was going to.”

“Well, he did not. Are you going to come now Ms Delany or should I send him down?”

Before she could reply she heard a faint rumble on the other end and Dr Badawi added “Never mind Ms Delany he says he will come down to you. I will send Kamal with him so he doesn’t get lost.” She listened to a rapid exchange of Arabic in the background, and she gathered that her new boss was, like his predecessor, Egyptian. Trying not to feel deflated, she had so hoped Bruce Burns would apply for the job, she put the phone down, following the promise that Dr Alsayed’s replacement would be down shortly.

Which gave her exactly five minutes to clean the office up. Dr Alsayed’s old desk was covered in card files and registers. The office which she had shared briefly with the ill-fated Dr Alsayed, was small and crowded. The battered air conditioner in the only window, leaked constantly and she had to empty the bowl set to catch the drips twice a day. The ceiling fan whirred lazily above her head as she dashed about the small room, shoving registers and card files back onto shelves and into drawers, her sensible shoes making little noise on the wooden floorboards.

Why didn’t Dr Jira give me some warning about this? Typical that they not only didn’t include me in the interview process, but they also didn’t even have the courtesy to give me any notice, so I could make the place welcoming and...who am I kidding? This place needs more than five minutes to tidy it up. The truth was she had been here three months herself and hardly made a dent. Despite putting in huge hours. What she desperately needed was a computer and a scanner, among other things...*perhaps the new boss could persuade Dr Jira to put some money their way.* The papyrology department was the poor sister of the museum. She should

be grateful they had decided to replace Dr Alsayed instead of leaving her on her own to try to deal with the unholy mess.

It was so dispiriting really. She had been over the moon to get the Internship in the papyrology department, at last a position in her field. But the fact was, the leading papyrology departments in the world weren't in Egypt and looking at the mess this one was in she knew why.

"Salam wa aleikum," said a deep voice behind her and made her jump, almost dropping the armload of registers she was holding.

She turned and a man stood in the outer doorway of the office. Or rather he occupied the doorway, all of it. Her jaw dropped. He was tall and broad, not fat, just big. He had a longish nose and tawny eyes and a wide, full lipped mouth in a golden skinned face. He was obviously Egyptian, and not handsome in the classical sense, but she felt walloped by his presence. There was no other way to describe it. She felt short of breath. Perhaps it was his sheer size, which was certainly impressive, particularly in these cramped quarters; perhaps it was those eyes, which seemed to see right into her soul. And perhaps she had better get her head read, because he was looking at her with one eyebrow raised and she realised she had been standing like a stock.

"Wa aleikum ah salam," she said automatically, *and also peace be upon you*. She went on in Arabic, "Please come in, I was just trying to tidy up." She moved to the bookcase against the inner wall and deposited the registers. She turned and found he had come into the room which made it seem even smaller. She wasn't very tall and today she wasn't wearing heels and felt shorter than usual. He was well over six foot and as she had already noted, broad through the shoulders, and slim hiped like a footballer. *No! She was off men remember?*

She swallowed, her eyes raking over his body, which was dressed in a plain white shirt, too tight across the shoulders and a pair of dark blue slacks, again too tight across the - She raised her eyes hastily and blushed when they clashed with his. He looked so unlike any papyrologist she had ever met she blurted, "Are you lost?"

She had spoken in English without thinking and he responded in the same language. "Is this the papyrology department?"

"Yes."

"And you are Ms Audrey Delany?"

"Yes."

He smiled, showing perfect white teeth, and her heart did an odd flip flop. "Then I am not lost Ms Delany. My name is Djehuty El Netjer, but you can call me Djet if you like." He held out a big hand to her and she took it mesmerised. His touch was warm and dry, firm but not crushing.

She recovered her hand and waved at the other desk. "Oh, um, I'm sorry about the mess. Dr Jira didn't tell me you were coming until five minutes ago. Please won't you sit down, would you like a cup of tea? Or do you want me to show you around..." she ran down, looking at him looking around.

“Hmm?” he brought his gaze back to her. “Oh, don’t blame Jira, he didn’t know I was coming either.”

“He didn’t?”

He smiled and moved over to the desk, sitting down in the chair gingerly as if afraid it wouldn’t take his weight. He leaned back in it after a bit and seemed to relax. “This will do.” His eyes snagged on hers and softened with a warmth that made her flush again.

“It - it will?” she stammered sparring for wind. *Who was this guy?*

“I think so. You do need help, don’t you?”

“You haven’t seen the half of it!” she said with relief. “You want to see the stack? It’s through here.” She went towards the inner door leading back into the stack room and he rose and followed her.

“What’s your speciality?” she asked.

He raised an eyebrow and she went on “Area of interest? Old Kingdom? Middle? Coptic? Hieratic? Medical? Spells? Mathematics? Literature? Wisdom Texts? Pyramid or Coffin Texts, Book of the Dead? Epigraphy?”

“Oh, all of them.” He said reaching round her to snag a volume off the shelf above her head. He opened it balancing the large volume easily in his palm, while his finger traced down the text on the page and his lips moved silently as he read. She peeked over his arm and her eyes bugged. He was reading the hieratic as she would read a shopping list in English.

“You’re fluent aren’t you.” It came out an accusation.

He looked up and cocked his head to one side in a way that reminded her irresistibly of a bird, not that there was anything bird like about him, he was too big. He began to read the text aloud, in Middle Egyptian. She closed her eyes and listened. His voice was deep, mellifluous, *where had that word come from? It fit though, his voice was beautiful and mesmerising.* And listening to it she understood every word. Not that she couldn’t read the text herself, if she sat down with it, *but to read it with such fluency, and such lyrical beauty of sound and diction.* She swayed slightly and clutched the shelf of the compactus to stop herself falling over.

She opened her eyes. “Wow! No wonder you got the job. Where did you study?”

“Iunu.”

“Heliopolis? I didn’t know they taught Egyptology there, I thought it was all business and technology?”

“Not when I was there,” he said cryptically and reshelved the book and followed her into the next aisle. “Where did you study?”

“Macquarie University, Sydney. I’m Australian. I did my research degree here at AUIC.” She added for clarification. “My mother was Egyptian.”

He nodded, following as she showed him shelf after shelf, finally getting to the papyrus itself, laid out in drawers carefully between acid free paper folders. “It’s criminal keeping them in this room without proper climate control.” She went on, warming to her theme. “But the museum can’t afford, or at least they won’t spend the money down here in the vault!” She

looked up at him hoping he would agree. *How could he not?* “We have been copying them as fast we can to preserve the content. But there is only so much I can do on my own. “

“How long have you been here Ms Delany?”

“Three months. Dr Alsayed died the week I started. Heart attack they said. No suspicious circumstances.”

“Well, we have some work to do don’t we Ms Delany?” He smiled, which made his eyes go a deep toffee colour.

She grinned. “Yes, we do. Do you think –“ she hesitated, not wanting to put too much pressure on his first day. “Do you think we can get some funding to do the job properly?”

He was looking at a fragmented papyrus and rubbing his chin gently. “Technology, you mean, Ms Delany?” He pronounced the word oddly, with a sort of reverence.

She grinned even wider and said in a rush. “Climate controlled storage, computers, a scanner all of that, yes. You think Dr Jira will cough up the dough?”

He looked momentarily confused and then as if he was mentally translating, “Colloquialism for supply the money?”

She nodded. *This guy was weird but he caught on quickly.*

“We will see what we can do, Ms Delany.” And she couldn’t shake the feeling that he was using the royal we. She sighed satisfactorily. *This was going to be fun. Djet was much better than old Alsayed, even if he was a little strange.*

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Seated at his desk, Djehuty played with the key Audrey had given him as she explained how to lock up and set the alarm. She had bolted at 5:00 o’clock with an apology, saying that she had a ‘date’. He searched the index in his brain for the translation and realised that she was going to keep company with a man. He felt a twinge of disappointment, quickly suppressed. He leaned back in the chair with a sigh, letting his shoulders relax. His stomach rumbled loudly, audible even over the gurgle of the air conditioner and the whirr of the overhead fan. He had to eat again; this body demanded regular feeding. Food and the opportunity to get out of these constricting clothes! Ra’s breath, some things about the future were wonderful, such as technology: he loved television and the internet for instance, but the clothes sucked! He smiled at the colloquialism. It hadn’t taken him long to work out the local languages but adjusting to other things was proving more difficult. And the incessant need to eat - his stomach growled again and he stood up with another sigh.

He locked the door, entered the code into the little square keypad on the wall and walked up the stairs with the slow gait of a tired man. He didn’t look old by human standards, but on the inside, he felt older than the - he smiled at the simile that presented itself - The Pyramids of course. Because he was. And his Heka was low, which was making him feel both ancient and irritable. His mind was foggy, a sure sign he needed not only to eat but to replenish his Ka. He passed the security guards at the front door, flashing his pass, given to him earlier by Dr Jira; and passed out into the museum grounds and from there through the second lot of security guards and tourists still hanging about. It was summer and the museum was open extended hours. Out in the street he grimaced at the hot, smoggy smell that choked the air, and the noise

of congested traffic. A technology he definitely didn't like: the automobile. He turned and made his way unerringly towards the riverbank. The Nile, the lifeblood of this land and the one thing that still felt a little bit like the Kemet he once knew. This Cairo was a cancerous blight on the land, burying the once beautiful capitals of Iunu and Menfer beneath its hideous mantle. Choked with pollution, cars, people, and hideous unfinished multi-story buildings. If he wasn't desperate, he wouldn't be here. But he needed money to feed himself and the boy. He had almost run out of items to trade and this job at least used his skills, rather than carting bricks like a village peasant.

Djehuty passed under a massive overpass and crossed the crazy three lane highway beneath, weaving between tooting cars like a dancer. None of them touched him as he moved at a steady pace through them. He reached the other side and moved on towards the riverbank, barely aware of the pool of rage that simmered below the surface of his consciousness. He had spent too many fruitless hours raging against his circumstances and he was wise enough now to realise it was a waste of precious heka, and he had reached the sorry state where hoarding heka to sustain his failing Ka had become a necessity. How long did he have? He didn't know. An unaccustomed fear curled about his heart and he pushed it away. Such thoughts did him no more good than futile rage.

He reached the riverbank and walked a little way until he came to an old-fashioned papyrus boat moored to a stake in the bank. A boy in a grubby pale grey gallabiyah was dozing on the deck. Djet unlooped the rope from the stake and leapt from the bank to the deck in one easy movement and the boy came awake with a cry of surprise and scrambled to his feet. Medhi acknowledged him with a smile of greeting and reached for the tiller as Djet, with expert balance, used a pole to push the craft away from the bank.

Once they were out in the current, he left Medhi to navigate and stripping off the too tight shirt and slacks, he stood a moment revealed in the slanting light of the late afternoon sun, gloriously naked, the slight breeze a blessing on his sweaty skin; then he wrapped a plain white linen square around his hips and tied it in front. *Ah that was better!*

He walked carefully to the bow of the small craft and sat cross-legged, scribe fashion, his hands resting on his knees and watched the passage of the boat through the dark muddy waters. Breathing quietly, he emptied his mind and ignored the clamour of his stomach for food. He sat absorbing heka from the surface of the water and from the movement of the boat. It was a poor source, but any food was good to a starving man and he was starving, physically and spiritually.

This modern world was a wasteland for the Ka. They understood nothing of the unseen world of the Ka, his heart ached for their ignorance. They knew so much and so little, but in their hubris, they thought they were superior. He breathed deeply sitting up. The hollow weak feeling in his solar plexus had abated somewhat. It would do for now; *I can get another dose overnight when the stars came out.* Now for food for this body. That would supply additional heka, as well as satisfy the physical need for fuel.

The dank muddy smell of the water competed with the smell of diesel from other craft zipping noisily across the water between the main bank and El Jezeira Island, creating a wake that made the little papyrus skiff rock alarmingly. Ra was setting and the sky turning orange and grey. The temperature was still high, but not so scorchingly hot as during the day.

The boy produced food from an icebox - now that was technology he liked! He smiled as the lad laid out grilled fish on palm leaves, dates, cheese, and bread. Finally, he pulled out bottles of cold water and orange juice. Djet had formed a passion for oranges, the round juicy fruit, that resembled Ra at midday, was nectar on his tongue. There were some compensations to this damned exile and the sheer selection of modern foods was one of them. They fell on the food, both starving and Djet watched the boy stuffing fish into his mouth with delight, while he chattered about his adventures in the market where he had bargained for and bought the food.

His name was Mohammed like half the boys in modern Egypt, but Djet called him Medi. His round face, dark eyes and curly brown hair could belong to any street urchin from the Kemet he remembered. He estimated his age at about 10, the boy himself said he didn't know.

He owed Medhi his mortal life. If it hadn't been for him, this fragile body would have died in those first few desperate months when he arrived, confused, and disoriented, powerless and raging in this alien place and time. He suppressed a shudder, not wanting to dwell on that period. A sojourn in the demon infested reaches of the Duat could not have been worse. But he had, with Medi's help, adapted, once he realised and accepted that he couldn't go back.

They had hung out in the desertscape of Saqqara initially, where he had emerged from the tomb. But eventually the need to understand more about this future Kemet he had arrived in, had prompted him to come to the great, sprawling, ugly Capital, Cairo. But all of that had taken time and that was something he was now fast running out of. He could feel it in the decline in his heka and the blunting of his senses. With every passing day he became more human and more mortal. Certain death was staring him in the face.

They finished their meal and Medhi tidied up while Djet stretched out full length on his back. It was dark now and the stars were coming out, studding Nut's belly with bright pinpoints of light. He stared at the velvet blue, so dark it was almost black and tried to absorb more heka. But his heart was heavy with homesickness and it was difficult to find the peaceful state in which to channel the precious power. His thoughts roamed over the events that led to his exile and how much of it was his fault. It all started with Hathor meddling with his library.