

# Eternity's Child

Golden Lotus Series Book 1

Wren St Claire

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author@wrenstclaire.com

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This is a work of fiction, all interpretations of deceased persons are fictitious, all fictional characters are creations of the author's imagination and do not purport to resemble any real person, living or dead.

This book is dedicated to my husband, whose patience was severely tried in the writing of it.

## PROLOGUE

### Town of Nekheb - City of the Hawk, Egypt 2554 BC

Maati looked furtively up and down the street with fearful glances, her shoulder blades twitching; *they couldn't have followed her, could they?*

She turned back to the polished wooden door and stared grimly up at the polished brass doorknocker of Hathor's smiling face. Reaching up, she seized it a third time in her small fist and banged the knocker with as much force as she could muster. *Did she have the right house? Was there no one home? What was taking them so long to answer?*

She willed the door to open and her trembling fingers fidgeted with her satchel, as she shifted from one foot to the other.

It was early morning and there was no sign of life in the street of white-walled houses. So early, in fact, the mist hadn't lifted off the Nile yet, and Khepre had barely crested the horizon with the sun's great yellow disk, visible through the line of palm trees lining the riverbank beyond the end of the street.

The morning air was chilly, making her shiver in her thin, ragged gown. She had torn the hem at some point in that mad dash. The fabric was smeared with dust and a splatter of blood from the gash on her leg when she fell. She looked down at the jagged cut, it still stung. The wound had crusted over, no longer a bright red slash in the dark skin of her calf. She chewed a pink fingernail anxiously.

*She had run and run and hid until she thought she had lost them, but what if they had tailed her to this address? She swallowed the lump in her throat. If someone didn't answer the door soon...*

She grasped the knocker and bashed the door a fourth time, more in desperation than hope. With sudden force the door was wrenched open from the inside, pulling the knocker out of her hand and almost sending her tipping forward into the arms of the tousle-headed woman in the doorway.

"All right! For Goddess' sake, what do you want?" The woman squinted at her, with sleepy, bloodshot eyes, and blinked. "Child?"

Maati, her heart hammering with fright, righted herself with a scramble, grabbed at the doorjamb and blinked up at the woman dressed in a loose house robe, her brown fly-away hair tangled round her frowning face. Her eyes were smudged with kohl and looked puffy and red. Her generous bosom heaved with her quickened breathing as if she had run to answer the door. She squinted against the light and put up a hand to shield her eyes. She smelled of wine, stale sweat and a whiff of old perfume and sour milk.

Maati gaped up at her, her eyes wide. She swallowed and stammered. "I need to speak to Huti."

"I'm Huti," the woman said. Her eyes widened as she took in Maati's appearance and her gaze softened. "Sorry, child. I didn't mean to frighten you. Our Porter is out and your banging woke me. I've rather a head this morning. What can I do for you?"

"Mama sent me."

Huti stared at her face and said slowly, "What is her name?"

"Nefermaat. She said you were friends and I should find you—"

“My dear, come in!” Huti’s face broke into a smile, which softened her expression and made her much less frightening. Something tightly wound in Maati relaxed a little and she swallowed a sudden lump in her throat, blinking back tears of relief.

“I thought your face looked familiar. You are very much like her.” Huti swept her inside with an arm round her shoulders. Shutting the door with her rump, she hustled Maati through the Porter’s lodge and the anteroom with its Goddess niche and offering bed, to the main hall, which was strewn with couches and the remains of last night’s entertainment.

The air was a bit close with the smell of human sweat and incense, and a base note of musk and wine. Tables were strewn with platters, plates, cups and jugs, food remains and half-emptied goblets of wine. Maati looked around at the mess.

“Did you have a party last night?”

“In a manner of speaking,” said Huti with a vague wave at the debris. Just then a baby’s ear-splitting wail started up and Huti winced. “Hathor’s tits! Wait here, Page is overdue for a feed.”

Maati watched as wet patches appeared on Huti’s gown where her nipples leaked in response to the infant’s cry.

“That’s your baby?”

Huti nodded, scrubbing her face wearily with her hands and making the kohl smudge even farther.

“Have a seat, I won’t be long.” She turned to the stairs on the left that ascended to the upper story of the house and stopped with her foot on the bottom step as a tall girl appeared with the crying infant in her arms. Maati stared up at the girl astonished. She had never seen anyone with such pale skin. It was almost white, like milk. The girl was thin as rope, with straight black hair darker than Maati’s own tight curly frizz, and strange narrow dark eyes, tilted at the corners and black as midnight. The contrast with her skin was startling. She clutched the infant and came down the stairs toward Huti, who waited for her. The child continued to screech with piercing intensity.

“Thanks, Niki,” said Huti over the noise, taking the squalling bundle from the girl and arranging the infant in one arm while she pushed the house robe off one shoulder to reveal a large full breast and big dark nipple.

“Here you are, precious.” The baby latched on to the nipple and the noise mercifully ceased. Huti sighed, watching the little one suck with a softened expression, swaying gently on her feet.

Maati glanced at the tall thin girl, who eyed her calmly. She thought the girl was several years older than her. Fourteen at least, although her breasts were slight and her hips slim.

“What’s all the racket?” a male voice cut in harshly from above, and Maati jumped with nerves. A swarthy handsome man in need of a shave, appeared at the top of the stairs, scratching his hairy chest. He was naked, although the leaves of a conveniently placed pot plant hid most of his scrotum and penis from Maati’s view. She averted her eyes hastily and looked at the girl—Niki—to see what she made of this. Niki appeared unruffled.

Huti was pacing up and down, murmuring to the baby while it fed and ignoring the man, so Maati leaned over to Niki and whispered, “Who’s that?”

“Apepi,” said Niki softly. “He owns the house.” As Niki spoke, several girls and women in various states of undress appeared behind him, staring down at them.

“Oh.” Maati’s heart sank. *The man was scowling and looked bad-tempered, what if he threw her out? Who were all those women? What sort of house was this? And why had mama sent her here?*

The man came down the stairs with a slow swagger, his man parts swinging and Maati tried not to look. “Who’s this?” he asked before he reached the bottom and Maati looked desperately at Huti, who looked up from her baby.

“Pepi, she’s Nefermaat’s girl. You remember Nefermaat?” Huti looked round at Maati. “What’s your name, child?”

“Khamaat, but everyone calls me Maati.” Her voice sounded croaky and weak. Her legs shook as exhaustion washed through her in a wave. It had been a long time since she had slept or eaten. It felt like she had been running from those men forever. *Oh, Hathor, please don’t let them find me here...*

Apepi grunted and swaggered over to Maati, who shrank back as he reached out and seized her chin in his hand, inspecting her face. He smelled of beer and sweat, a distinctive musky sour male odor, that made her wrinkle her nose. She could feel the heat from his body and smell his breath; the tell-tale sweet, aromatic smell of Lotus wine, sent a cold wash of horror through her body. The familiar smell made her pulse race and her stomach heave. *She hated it!* She swallowed convulsively. His grip tightened to the point of pain and she shuddered, suppressing a whimper by sheer force of will. He bared his teeth in a smile that made her skin creep.

“What’s the matter, child, haven’t you seen a naked man before?” She determinedly kept her eyes up, away from his man parts and stared up at him defiantly. *If you showed fear they treated you worse. She’d learned that from the bullies who brought Mama the Lotus wine and made her pay for it with...* She swallowed, pushing away the thought and images in her head.

His eyes were a smoky brown, a spark of cruel laughter in their depths, made her flinch inwardly. He reminded her of *them*; she suppressed a shudder. He looked her up and down, with the same speculative look they had given her more than once. Mama would distract them then and tell Maati to go outside and play. She always did that when one of them came with the wine. Maati blinked as Apepi’s voice broke in on her memory.

“Strip!” he commanded and Maati stared at him stunned. *No!* She backed up but was stopped by a couch behind her knees. She looked round for help but Huti had wandered out of the room with the baby over her shoulder. He took a step toward her and grabbed at her gown. “I said strip!”

She gulped, batting at him with a whimper and trying to dodge his hands, but he jerked her roughly toward him and pulled her gown down over her shoulders until it fell round her feet. “Turn!” His hands on her arms forced her to turn around. He grunted as she twisted out of his grip and lunged for her dress; her heart thumping wildly. *She had to leave, get out of here.* Her fingers missed the gown and he wrenched her back around. “Where did you get that mark?”

Furious with shame and fear she jerked out of his grasp. “It’s a birth m-mark!” She knew what he was looking at. The mark on her left buttock, she had always had it, a dark rough patch of semicircular skin hollow in the middle, with a line underneath, like

an upside-down ring. She turned again and grabbed up her dress, pulling it back over her head with jerky, angry movements. She edged towards the door. *She had to get out of here. But what if they were out there?* She stopped undecided, chewing her lip.

Huti wandered back in with the child over her shoulder. Maati glanced at Niki, but the girl was watching the man, like a scorpion watches a snake. Maati shivered. This was a mad house. She had to get out of here, *but where would she go? Oh Mama I miss you!* Maati was shaking so much her legs were going to give out any moment. *Why had Mama sent her to these people?*

“Mark my words, Huti, this one will be even more beautiful than her mother, when she begins to bud. Men like dark-skinned exotic beauties.” He laughed and Maati’s heart thumped hard, she felt sick. “Ebony to Niki’s ivory, a nice contrast you’ll make.” He glanced at Niki and back, he smiled, Maati shivered again, despite the heat. Maati shuffled back, wiping her trembling hands on her gown. Niki interposed herself between him and Maati and he looked suddenly uncomfortable.

“What?”

Niki didn’t reply, but she didn’t move either. Finally he shrugged and turned to Huti. “What is she doing here?”

Huti continued to pat the baby’s back, swaying on her feet. “I don’t know. Where is your mother, child?”

Pain in her chest and throat took her breath away. The true bleakness of her life came crashing in on her and Maati sat down abruptly on the couch behind her as her knees gave out. Tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks. *She should never have come here, but where else could she go? If she went out there, those men might find her; she had nothing and no one, fatherless and now motherless...it was too much.* She covered her face with her hands and sobbed. “She’s dead!”

## CHAPTER 1

### Twelve years later.

Maati woke to the low murmured voices of the other girls' chatter, and the burning sensation of last night's abuse between her thighs. The comfort of the pillow under her cheek and the softness of the mattress, made it tempting to sink into oblivion again, but Teta's acerbic tone and Percia's appreciative giggle pulled her out of her doze. She rolled over, blinking in the midmorning light streaming through the high window bar near the ceiling. The shaft of light showed dust motes in the air and cut a swathe across the seven tousled mattresses laid out side by side across the length of the long narrow room. Hers was second from the outer wall where the window was.

"Pepi's been in a foul mood all week," remarked Teta.

"Client numbers are down," said Meri.

Maati propped herself up on one elbow, wincing slightly and surveyed her sleeping companions, with an affectionate smile. Percia, two mattresses over, was sitting up cross-legged, the cat, Miu, a speckled ginger, sprawled in her lap and her plump hands busy with repairing a ripped hem of one of her dresses. Her loose house robe hung open exposing her generous cleavage, her usually happy expression disturbed by the chewing of her lower lip as she tried to unpick a stitch with her bone needle.

Tall, regal Teta, leaned against the doorjamb, her arms crossed, surveying the room. Her aristocratic features always made her look a little disapproving. "You're awake, sleepy head," she said, waving off a fly that tried to land on her glossy brown hair.

Maati smothered a yawn with her hand. "Getting there."

Meri straightened from tying on her ankle strap sandals and shook her long red mane off her face. "I think Maati earned her keep and then some last night," she said, shaking out her narrow-skirted dress.

Maati rubbed her face with a groan. "Don't remind me. I'm so sore!"

"He treat you rough?" asked Teta with a frown.

Maati shook her head, *no point in complaining, what was done was done.*

"You sure?" pressed Teta.

Maati sat up, pushing the sheet off her body. "Yes, see, no bruises!" She forced a smile and Teta grunted, changing the subject to Maati's relief. *It would be embarrassing to dwell on what couldn't be mended and she didn't like to be the center of attention.*

"The client numbers always drop this time of year when the levies kick in. Is it worse this year?" asked Teta.

Maati crawled across her mattress to her wicker chest. They each had one at the foot of their mattresses. She lifted the lid, searching for her house gown, her head thumping unpleasantly. She hadn't drunk much last night, yet she felt terrible. She swallowed the sick feeling in her stomach. He had made her share his wine. She was sure it had lotus in it.

"Apepi seems to think so," replied Meri. "He was muttering last night to Huti about the strain supporting the King's building works is placing on the farmers. He says we will all starve to death paying for the King's afterlife."

Percia looked up from her sewing, her pretty round face going oval as her mouth dropped open in shock. "Isn't that blasphemy, Meri?"

Meri shrugged. "Pepi said it. I gather it's not an uncommon sentiment among men in the streets."



“The priests say working on the King’s tomb will bring favor in the afterlife,” said Niki appearing behind Teta in the doorway.

Maati pulled her house robe over her head and sat back on her heels watching Niki’s dark eyes meet Meri’s blue gaze, *what were those two communicating about?* They often did it. Maati suppressed a flicker of distrust. *They were her friends. Nothing to worry about.* Teta snorted with cynical venom. “The priests are full of it.”

Niki slid past Teta and picked her way across the mattresses to her own, the one closest to the outside wall. “Teta, have a care, the Goddess may hear you.”

Teta’s face went crimson and for a moment Maati thought she was going to lash out. Teta’s temper was legendary. Maati winced internally, remembering some of her more spectacular outbursts. But this time she appeared to swallow whatever she had on her mind and looked away, biting her cheek. She turned and walked out of the room, leaving an awkward silence behind her.

Niki looked up from her chest, her expression guarded, but Maati thought she saw a flicker of concern in her long narrow eyes. Niki was the strangest one. Maati had known her the longest, yet some days she didn’t know her at all. Everything went in with Niki and very little came out.

Meri stood up and said, “I’m going shopping, who wants to come?”

“Me!” said Percia, bouncing up and dislodging the cat who moved with an indignant meow. Percia hated conflict even more than Maati did, she would be cringing from that exchange. Maati sighed. Percia’s life was so simple, *be nice to everybody and the world would be fine.* Except it wasn’t like that at all. And Percia of all people should know that. Yet she maintained this persistent sweet outlook on life, no matter how many bad things the Goddess threw at her. *How did she do it? Where did that sweet disposition come from?* Maati wished she had half of it.

Percia kneed over to her chest and scrambled through it looking for a dress. Dropping her house robe, she flung a gown over her head, covering her generous curves and pulling her gown into place, pinning the straps. “Where is Freta? She wanted some more colors for her paint pallet.”

“She was downstairs with Page, last I saw her,” said Niki.

“I’ll go find her,” said Percia, combing her short, light brown curls with her fingers and shoving her feet into her sandals. She was out the door a moment later. The cat circled and curled up on her mattress, going back to sleep again.

“Nik, do you want to come?” asked Meri.

“No, take the girls, they will enjoy a day out.”

“Maati?” Meri raised an eyebrow.

“No, thanks. I’m going to find some breakfast,” said Maati, knotting her robe round her waist. She hoped food would settle her stomach. She felt edgy and uncomfortable after last night. I was all too reminiscent of things she had tried to forget. Things that had happened to her mother, that she had buried in the back of her head. She suppressed a shudder.

Meri nodded and headed out the door.

“Do you think Percia went to find Teta?” asked Maati getting to her feet.

“Probably, but Teta will blow her off,” said Niki shutting the lid of her chest and slipping an amulet over her head to settle on her flat chest. Niki had not filled out over the years. She was still as thin as a pole, as tall as Teta, but slender and straight as a

reed. She wore her hair short these days, in the fashionable cap-shape that clung to her head. And her skin was still as pale as milk. She didn't brown up like the locals in the sun, but instead went red and blistered painfully. It made it hard for her to be outdoors in the heat of the day and when she was, she would invariably carry a sunshade. Not a problem Maati had to worry about, with her dusky skin.

"Percia can't help herself, can she?" said Maati, with a mix of envy, affection and exasperation.

"No, and neither can Teta." Niki stood up and put a hand on Maati's arm. "Who was he?" she asked, watching Maati's face like a spider watching a fly. Maati didn't want to think about the broad shouldered and ruggedly handsome man who had smiled while he hurt her and played with her last night, like a cat with a mouse.

Maati swallowed. "I don't know." She paused, frowning. *Niki had this habit of seeing more than most, what was she getting at?*

"You've never seen him before?"

"I don't think so," said Maati slowly. *Did Niki plant that thought or was it there all along?* She shook her head. "No. He just reminded me of something I wish I could forget." *Mama...those men. She hadn't thought about them in years. Mama yes, all the time, but not those men who hurt her, smashed her mother's skull* – She swallowed, suppressing a shudder and shoving the images back into the box she kept them in, slamming the lid firmly.

With tightly clenched fists, she forced a smile and made herself meet Niki's gaze. Niki stared at her hard and then with a little grunt preceded her out of the room. Maati looked at her straight slender back and shook her head. Niki had done nothing to alleviate her queasy stomach.

#

The melodic ripple of Page's harp teased Maati as she dozed uneasily on the couch in the lesser hall. The clink of playing pieces was the only other sound in the lazy afternoon. Teta and Niki, this morning's clash seemingly forgotten, worked their way toward the center of the Mehen board, along the curl of the great serpent's body, from head to tail, moving backward and forward on the play of the casting sticks. The first to reach the tail would win.

Curled of incense, from the Goddess-offering Niki had placed before the Goddess Ka statue, wafted about the room on the cross breeze from the propped open front door and the rear courtyard beyond the great hall. It was a faint relief from the afternoon heat.

She could see Babi, their big black porter, hunched over on his low stool in the vestibule, practicing his juggling with three leather balls. Meri and the girls weren't back from shopping yet and Huti was lying down with a headache upstairs. They had not seen Apepi all morning, which probably accounted for the general feeling of unaccustomed peace about the place. Yet Maati still felt edgy and tired.

It had been a long night. It was rare a client could afford to book for a whole night, especially a soldier, *where had he got that kind of wealth?* She shifted on the couch restlessly, she was still sore. No bruises where you could see them, but he had used her roughly, and repeatedly and grinned while he did it. That made it worse. She blinked,

surreptitiously wiped her cheeks, hoping the others wouldn't notice, it would be embarrassing to make a fuss. They all had bad clients sometimes. She swallowed the ache in her throat, settling her cheek on the pillow.

The air was heavy with the afternoon heat. Sweat dried on her skin as soon as it surfaced. Her body felt heavy. Her gaze ran over the pattern on the dado line of the wall but her mind kept wandering, back to him. He had been from the ship just in from the new capital. Her pulse thumped uncomfortably as a shiver of panic licked at her. *Please, Goddess, don't bring him back tonight. Could she feign a headache if he did come back? Even if she did, Apepi wouldn't let her off, especially with numbers down. Unless she could convince Huti to talk him round? No Apepi wouldn't let her off, even if Huti did talk to him.*

She sighed and rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling painted with vine leaves and bunches of red grapes. *Funny how they called it the New Capital. Inbu Hedj, Wall of White. They lived in the Old Capital Nekhen. Were the walls really white? Would she ever see them? The place where she was born? Where her father came from?*

Page's playing was heartbreakingly beautiful. She turned her head and watched as Page's long slender fingers plucked the strings over her small harp, extracting the most heavenly sounds from them. Incredible to think the child was almost a woman. It seem like yesterday she was a babe at Huti's breast. *How could such beautiful music want to make you cry?* Page's clever hands coaxed plaintive sounds from the strings that made Maati's heart ache with things she didn't want to think about.

*Thoughts of the father she had never known.* As a child, it had been her favorite fantasy to pretend he was someone great, and kind and wonderful, who would love her and make her special. Who would take her away from her horrible life and make everything marvelous and happy. She blinked her eyes and swallowed. *Why was she feeling so melancholy today? Today she couldn't find comfort in the old daydream. She didn't believe it anymore.*

She must have dozed off, for the scrape of the front door opening wider and a sandalled footstep jerked her awake and she watched Apepi wander in. He was wearing a kilt and shirt; one of his better ones, so he had been somewhere important; he had even shaved. His jowly face was set in a grim expression that made Maati's heart skip a beat and then thump hard. His eyes slid over her to Page on her stool in the corner of the room.

"Page, come with me."

Page looked up blinking as if coming out of a trance. Page had just turned twelve. Her body on the cusp of budding womanhood, still slender and straight, like a child. Maati sat up slowly looking from Apepi to Page and back, a cold shiver running down her spine. *What did he want with Page? She was too young to work, her khesemen—monthly bleeding—hadn't started yet.* Niki had helped Maati hide hers from him until she was fourteen. Maati still shivered remembering his reaction when he found out.

Niki glanced up, her eyes darting from Maati to Page and Apepi, she appeared about to speak when Apepi went on, "Come and play for me, child, I'm tired."

Maati let go of the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. He often asked Page to play for him. *What had made her so suspicious all of a sudden? She really was in an odd mood today.*

Page rose with her harp. “Yes, Pepi.” The girl followed him into the main part of the house and upstairs. Maati settled back onto the couch cushions.

“Nik, it’s your move,” prompted Teta.

Niki started as if dragged out of a trance and looked back at the Mehen board. Her dark eyes looked stranger than usual.

“What is it, Niki?” asked Maati sitting up, her skin prickling.

“I don’t know—” Niki touched the amulet round her neck. “I—”

A nerve-shredding shriek brought Maati to her feet, her heart hammering and her skin goose bumping with terror. For a frozen moment the three of them stared at each other in horror. Babi lumbered into the room, his big frame taking up a lot of the available space.

“What was that?” he asked, his fists bunching by his sides, his muscular chest and huge arms tensing.

“I don’t know,” said Maati huskily.

“Page!” whispered Niki.

On the word, all four of them headed for the stairs. Teta ran up the stairs two at a time and Babi lumbered up after her, Niki and Maati following.

Maati reached the second floor as hysterical sobs broke out and more shrieks and curses. Maati recognized Huti’s voice.

Apepi’s bellow cut her off momentarily, “Shut up!”

Sounds of a scuffle broke out. The noises were coming from Apepi’s room to the right of the top of the stairs. They all hesitated outside the reed matting curtain across the doorway. Apepi and Huti often fought, it wasn’t their business to intervene, yet this sounded worse than one of their usual fights.

The curtain bulged outwards and then lifted on one side and Page fell through the gap, her hands held out in front of her. Blood and tears trickled down her pale cheeks and her eyes were squeezed shut as she stumbled toward them whimpering. Maati caught her as she tripped over something and sagged into Maati’s arms.

Maati stared over her head in horror as Babi lifted the curtain and Teta barged into the room beyond. Apepi was standing in the middle of the room, his face red, and Huti was screaming at him, her hand held a wickedly sharp stone knife.

As Maati watched, Huti slashed the knife toward Apepi’s face; he brought up one hand to knock the blade aside and smashed his other fist into her face. She went down sideways, her head hitting the large stone water jar in the corner of the room with a sickening crack and she crumpled beside it. Apepi stared down at her, his face suddenly pale as before it had been red.

Teta snatched up the knife and launched herself at him with a curse; Babi let go of the curtain and lunged at her. The curtain fell and Maati lost sight of the action going forward in the room. Teta’s screams and curses distributed between Apepi and Babi indicated that Babi was preventing her from attacking Apepi.

Maati turned her attention back to Page, who had slumped in her arms. Maati eased down onto the floor with Page in her arms as Niki bent over her. Page’s head lolled back on her neck, the bloody tear streaks on her cheeks dripped onto Maati’s arm. Maati moved her arm to prop Page’s head up.

“Goddess, what happened? Is she dead?” gulped Maati.

