

SEKHMET'S DAUGHTER

Golden Lotus Series Book 2

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This one is for my parents.

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CHAPTER ONE

Fortress of Buhen in Wawat (Ancient Nubia)

Just one more night in this lake of fire and he could go home. Home to Raia and a normal life. Just one more night. Djef reached for the beer jar and took another swallow. The air was close in his little mud-brick office above the gate tower, barely a whisper of cool air off the Nile. It was almost midnight but there was no relief from the heat at this time of year, even at night. It had broken many good men.

"Commander!"

The voice of his adjutant brought him reluctantly upright. "What?" It came out more a snarl than a question.

The young man's face blanched in the lamplight and Commander Djefatsen blinked the sweat from his eyes. "What is it, Tepi?" he asked wearily.

"The patrol is back, Commander."

He wiped his face and looked at the mixture of sweat and dust on his palm. "Good, send Neby up."

Tepi fidgeted. "Neby's not with them, Commander."

"Spit it out, Tepi, where is he?"

"Don't know," mumbled Tepi.

"What do you mean you don't know?" bellowed Djef.

Tepi straightened his spine and staring over his commander's shoulder, he said rapidly, "Khety says they lost more than half the patrol to an ambush two days ago. Khety and Hetep came ahead to report. The rest of the patrol is, is, bringing back the pieces."

Djef clenched his fists and tried to breathe. It didn't help. The air was hot and dry and he was sweating under his shirt. His skin itched. He began to swear softly and vilely under his breath.

"Precisely, sir," said Tepi.

Djef blinked salt from his eyes and said again, "Hekhen Khes!"

Tepi bit his lip, blinking hard.

"Have a drink." Djef shoved the beer jar at him.

Tepi took a swig and wiped his mouth.

"Fetch the new Scribe of Recruits." Djef turned back to his low desk, his stomach sour. He couldn't wait to get the dust of this place off his sandals. *Three years! Three frigging years in this asshole of the world. And now this, on his last watch...* he swallowed a lump in his throat and gritted his teeth. *Damn, Neby, why now?*

"But it's the middle of the night, sir!"

"So? Wake him up! The khes can start his tour of duty early." *He could wear this, the soft-handed lotus eater.*

"He's only just gone to bed, sir."

"You and I haven't gone to bed at all!" snarled Djef.

"Yes, sir," said Tepi saluting automatically and turning to go.

"Tepi."

"Yes, sir?" he turned back.

"Finish packing. We're leaving at first light even if the vile hekhen Wawat attack us. My hekhen successor can deal with it when he arrives!"

"Yes, sir!" Tepi's long thin face lit up with a smile for the first time in days. Djef's mouth twitched up on one side.

#

Far to the North. Beneath the Royal Lotus, in Kemet's Capital, Ineb Hedj

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Setka, the King's Steward, opened his eyes and smiled at the stone altar before him. He remained kneeling for a few moments, letting the shivers in his naked limbs subside and ensure his Ba was fully seated in his body again. When he felt fully integrated, he stood up and wiped his face on a cloth, then his chest, wiping away sweat and oil. The small square room was close with the scent of oil, incense and musky sweat. Shadows danced on the painted walls, making the figures sway and buck. His solar plexus jumped with the power swirling there. He turned back to the altar and bowed his head, but he knew the stone image of a rearing snake was an empty vessel now. The god Rerek had departed, having taken his fill of heka from Setka's offerings. The two bowls of wine mixed with blood, poppy and lotus.

An empty cup in the middle and the uneasy set of his stomach told him he had imbibed the potent brew, even though he couldn't remember doing so. His memory was a blank for the last—he glanced at the candle clock in the corner of the subterranean room—half an hour.

Shadows teased at him and a liquid heat gathered in his groin, making his phallus rise like Min. Setka grinned, sliding an oiled hand over his erect member. Each time he emerged stronger. It was dangerous, yes, but so exhilarating. The time was coming when...he flung his head back, closing his eyes, bearing his teeth as his hand slid the full length of his cock. Soon...

#

Toshka, downstream of Buhen in Wawat

Minkhaf, erstwhile Vizier of Egypt and brother of the current King, sat up sweating and shivering in the heat. His pulse thumped making his head ache, and his stomach roil. He reached for the water jar beside the bed and sloshed the room-temperature liquid into a plain earthenware cup, gulping it down.

He wiped his forehead with his arm and sucked in hot dry air in between swallows of lukewarm, musty water. His nerve endings jangled still as images, vile images, chased themselves round his head and his heart stuttered double-time in his chest.

He shuddered. *How much longer could he do this? How much longer until his Ba refused to come back or was trapped and couldn't?* His Ka fluttered along with his pulse, and he sank weakly back into the pillows, sweat rapidly drying on his skin in the hot dry air. The relentless heat only different in degree from the flaming nightmare of his Ba-sending.

His belly heaved with his desperate breaths for air as he tried to make sense of the fragmented images and swirling thoughts he was left with after the Ba-sending. *Setka*. He closed his eyes swallowing, chasing down the elusive insight. He opened his eyes suddenly staring blindly at the ceiling. A shiver ran through his body. *Setka!*

He dozed fitfully, his body exhausted and finally roused himself, just before dawn, to drink more water, and staggered into the bathroom to sluice water from the jars over his sweaty body. Dressed in a kilt, it was too hot for aught else, his feet shoved into sandals, he stomped down the narrow stairs to the garrison room below and sent his orderly with another message to the Garrison Commander at Buhen. He had to get word to Nejem, Setka needed watching.

#

Fortress of Buhen, Wawat (Ancient Nubia)

Tepi woke Djef in the gritty predawn hour with the words, "Commander, the rest of the patrol is coming in, in pieces."

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Djef groaned and sat up rubbing his face, he had fallen asleep a bare hour or two earlier and was still in his kilt, though he'd put off the rest of his uniform. What he wouldn't give for a bath, but there was no time. He blinked at Tepi, whom he guessed hadn't slept at all. Still the lad was young, he could take a sleepless night or two with no appreciable effect. Djef's body ached. He clambered to his feet and scrabbled around for his sandals and shirt in the gray light.

Despite his rant of the night before about leaving his replacement with the mess of the decimated patrol, he had no intention of leaving the boy with it. Neby and the other men who had lost their lives were his men, his responsibility. He would stay and see them buried at least. They hadn't the facilities to provide proper burials, but he could do the decent thing and see that the prayers were said for their departed Ka's.

Tepi's words proved accurate, literally. The survivors of the patrol brought their comrades back in pieces. They took most of the morning to bring in the grisly deposits. Tepi under Djef's instructions oversaw the digging of suitable graves. The bodies were already spoiling in the heat.

By mid-afternoon the deed was done, and in the worst of the day's heat, the men all trooped down to the water's edge to bathe and soak among the bulrushes, wet cloths, on their heads against the cruel rays of the sun. Djef wallowed in the water with Tepi and the men and ran through the last of his tasks in his head. They should be able to leave in the morning. The desire to leave was a hard lump of determination under his ribs.

A shout from the fort gate above their heads made Djef groan. "What now?" he muttered under his breath.

A soldier, one of the new troop sent to replace Djef and his men, came down the external stairs of the fortress gate and made his way towards the water. Djef watched him coming with a sick sort of dread, various scenarios playing through his head. He had never been one to borrow trouble in the past. But something about this place had got into his heart and turned it sour. His solar plexus fluttered with the sensation of something not right.

The soldier reached him and said, sweating and breathless, "There's a messenger from the Governor at Toshka for you, Commander."

Djef stood up, water sluicing down his naked body. He dipped the wet cloth on his head in the water, rung it out loosely and slapped it on his head again before following the soldier back up the bank to the fort entrance. He grabbed his kilt, shirt and sandals on the way. Tepi followed behind as he toed on his sandals and tied his kilt. He didn't bother with his shirt. The messenger could have him bare-chested, heh it, it was his last day!

He strode into the fort, it was dark after the glare outside and his eyes took a few moments to adjust as he followed the soldier to the reception hall. This plain square room, with plain square pillars separating the cool tiled floor from the unadorned ceiling, held a plain wooden bench and table. The messenger was sprawled on the bench drinking from a large beaker; he was covered in dust and sweat.

He glanced up when the commander came into the room and then snapped to his feet when Tepi barked over Djef's shoulder, "Commander's in the room, soldier!"

"Commander." The messenger held his arm out, palm raised, in salute. Djef could see he was trembling with fatigue.

"At ease, soldier, what is it?"

The messenger's shoulders relaxed and he dropped his hand. "I have a message from the Governor at Toshka, Commander."

"Yes, I gathered that, what is it?"

"You are returning to the Capital soon?"

"Tomorrow if I have my way, yes," responded Djef grimly. He was about to snap the man's head off if he didn't get to the point.

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"The Governor says, you're to take these reports." He produced a folded and sealed sheet of papyrus. "One for the King and this other you are to deliver it to a man by the title and name of Chief of Police, Nejem."

Djef nodded accepting the papyrus. "Very well, rest and eat. I will give you a report to take back to the Governor before you leave."

Djef turned away, wondering why he had felt such disquiet. He was to play courier for the Governor. Nothing unusual in that.

He stomped upstairs to his hot box of an office to compose a report for the Governor. He should have done it earlier, really. Goddess, he was tired. He settled at his desk, the heat had already dried and warmed his water-cooled skin. He would be sweating again soon. He picked up his stylus and began to compose sentences. Thoughts of Raia and what she would say when he came in the door after so long away, teased at him, but he resolutely pushed them aside in order to focus on his report. A few more hours and he would be shut of this place. He couldn't wait.

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CHAPTER TWO

Six weeks later, Inbu Hedj, Capital of Kemet

"What do you think, are these ripe enough?" Teta held out a pair of pomegranates and then realized that Freta wasn't beside her. Looking round from the waterfront fruit-stall in exasperation, she spotted Freta, two stalls over, fingering a bolt of blue fabric. Teta put down the fruit and walked over to the younger girl. Freta's usual grim expression, which was encouraged by a pair of uncompromising dark eyebrows, had softened to a wistful longing as she smoothed the beautiful fabric.

"You can't afford that you know," said Teta with brutal practicality.

Freta sighed. "I know." She looked down, shielding her dark eyes, showing the kohl and malachite on her lids.

"Come on, we need to finish the shopping," said Teta, hitching the basket on her arm and leading the way to the fish stall. "Do you think we should serve plaice or snapper for supper tonight?"

Freta followed on dragging feet and shrugged her thin shoulders. "I don't care," she said sullenly. Teta bit back a sharp retort. This was typical Freta, the girl was in a perpetual bad mood. Niki would probably have bought the cloth for her, but then Niki spoiled Freta, why she favored her, Teta couldn't fathom. *What Freta needed was a good slap!*

It was early morning, the mist just lifting off the river and the sun sending a shining golden path across the water, heralding the heat to come. They were down at the quay markets and the bustle of arrivals and departures was all around them, with crews loading and unloading goods and passengers.

Teta ordered plaice and the stall owner wrapped it in palm leaves for her. She paid with a copper deben bracelet and turned away, stashing the fish in her basket.

"Lady Teta!" A rumbling voice made her look up, and up, into the scarred brown face of Nefer, General of the Palace Guard. The man was a walking mountain and the uniform of the Palace Kentyshai or Bodyguard, suited his muscular physique: short, tight, old-style kilt with leather apron, leather cummerbund over his metal sequined singlet and leather vambraces on his arms.

She grinned up at him. "Lord Nefer, what are you doing down here?" The scar that ran from the corner of his right eye to his mouth should have ruined his good looks, but he was still a fine specimen of manhood, and his eyes twinkled warmly when he gave his twisted smile. She wondered yet again if his apparent interest in Meri was reciprocated. Meri wasn't saying, but the man kept coming around anyway, so there must be something to it... what girl could resist that much masculine muscle in one package?

He waved towards the boats. "I have a troop due in soon from Wawat. I've been expecting them every day for the last week. They must have been delayed, could be another week or more before I see them."

"There's a ship just docking now." Teta shaded her eyes against the sun reflecting off the water. "Looks like there are soldiers on board. Is this your troop?"

Nefer followed the line of her sight and nodded. "Looks like it. Well, may Hathor shine on you, ladies." He included Freta in his nod.

"Supper will be served at the third hour after sunset, if you want to drop by," said Teta.

He waved and called back over his shoulder as he headed toward the large ship settling into its moorings, "I may do that, thank you."

Teta ran her eyes over the soldiers on the deck. Such an influx of males was likely to lead to new business tonight, men straight off the boat from distant Wawat would be looking for

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female companionship. The men looked grubby and tired, the usual motley crew of all shapes and sizes.

As she watched, Nefer reached the ship, the gangplank was let down and the men began to disembark, carrying their packs with them. At their head was a solidly built man, not as big as Nefer, but with a barrel chest and solid thighs, he was followed by a tall, thin young man who appeared to be carrying both his own and the lead man's pack. The Commander and his adjutant, she guessed. The Commander reached Nefer and the two clasped forearms in greeting. *Yes, likely.*

The two men began to walk along the quay, trailed by the baggage carrying adjutant and the other men. The Commander suddenly looked over his shoulder as if sensing something and she caught his stare. An odd shiver, not unpleasant, ran down her spine. He turned back to Nefer and they resumed their stride.

She shook herself. Looking round for Freta, she found the girl telling over some faience beads at another stall.

"Come on, we need to get back before it gets too hot and this fish spoils," said Teta.

"Oh, I thought I'd go up to the temple for an hour or two," said Freta airily.

Teta pursed her lips and shrugged. She wasn't the girl's keeper. "All right, just be back in time to practice with Page before we open tonight. I've got a feeling we will be busy."

"The soldiers?" She waved at the stream of men following their leader up Temple Road towards the palace barracks.

Teta nodded.

Freta bit her lip, her dark-shadowed eyes, gone suddenly inward. *What was she thinking?* Teta frowned at her. They had done their best to shield Freta and Page from the activities of the house, but Freta was a woman by all rights now and had been for over a year. How much longer could they keep her sheltered from the business of the house? It was obvious from her dress that she was aware of her own assets, she took great care over her appearance whenever she appeared in public, like today. Teta had not bothered to apply makeup to come out to do the shopping, nor had she bothered to put on her best gown. Freta might act like a sulky child most of the time, but it was easy to see the trend her mind had drifted over the past year towards exploring her feminine power. She was untried as yet. Like a baby goat not sure of its legs. Well, the girl had to find out sometime. She lived in a lotus house, how else was she going to earn her living?

Freta straightened up and slung her long fair hair back over shoulders. "I won't be late." She turned and headed towards Temple Road.

Teta hitched her heavy basket and headed for the quieter Goldsmiths Way, which ran parallel to Temple Road.

#

Freta passed through the temple gates, into the outer courtyard, which featured a public altar for offerings. The courtyard was often crowded with the stalls of craftsmen displaying their wares for sale, but not today. The temple complex contained two temples, the larger one devoted to the City's god, Ptah, Chief of the Craftsmen, and a smaller one devoted to his consort Sekhmet, the Lioness. It was towards Sekhmet's temple compound on the left that Freta was headed. Skirting the healing center that sat between the entrance to Ptah's temple proper and the gates to Sekhmet's temple, she paused a moment in the lee of the wall, to tidy her hair and straighten her gown.

She sauntered towards the gates, smiling at the guards and with a nod as if she had business within; she slipped by and walked quickly away before they could question her.

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Sekhmet's precinct was a miniature of Ptah's, with an open courtyard, bounded on each side by colonnaded walkways with large square brick columns.

Freta's goal was the dance studio on the left-hand side. A long narrow room in which the dance troop practiced daily for the ritual dancing and singing they performed in the temple. Freta moved on silent feet between the columns and peered into the room. The dancers were warming up, stretching and swinging their legs and arms, flexing and practicing jumps and twirls. She watched with eager eyes, her mouth parched with anticipation, her heart thumping with desire. She wanted, more than anything in the world, to be one of them. She wanted to be in that room, limbering up and practicing to perform for the Goddess in the temple.

Freta shrank back as the leader of the troop arrived at the room's other doorway and entered the room. Peering through the gap between the curtain and the doorframe of the southern entrance, Freta watched as the Troop Leader took them through their paces, with and without tambourine and sistrum. Her feet moved of their own volition as she watched; forgetting that she might be seen by anyone crossing the courtyard, she twirled and jumped with them, following the movements of the dance, memorizing the choreography.

She came to a stop, sweating and panting for breath, her body jumping with the pleasure of the dance. The class was dispersing and she needed to run away too, before anyone saw her and questioned what she was doing. Normally, she would scurry back to the gates and flee back to the house. But today, a perverse notion took her in the other direction, towards the temple proper. It was forbidden for ordinary people to see inside the temple. Only the priests and temple servants were permitted in the outer courts and only the priests in the inner sanctuary.

It was drawing towards the hottest part of the day and there were less people about. She approached the entrance to the next court and peered through the open doors. It was a smaller hall, with columns holding up the roof. These were rounded ones, carved from pink granite, with lotus capitals. The roof was high, in shadow. She swallowed, her eyes penetrating the darkness to glimpse a second doorway in the rear. The doors were closed. The sanctuary, the place where the Goddess dwelt. She shivered in spite of the heat.

She glanced over her shoulder and seeing no one she stepped through the doors and came to a halt on shaking legs. She blinked in the darkness and sniffed the incense-laden air. Sinking to her knees she held up her hands in supplication. She had nothing to offer but her silent prayers.

Freta knelt there until her knees went numb, and her pulse had calmed to a steady beat. She felt the presence of the Goddess in her heart and in her belly. She had never been this close to her before. She smiled through her tears. She felt certain now. The Goddess would call her one day. She would serve in this temple, one day. Not yet, she needed to have patience, but it would happen, she knew that now.

Rising to her feet, her knees stiff from kneeling so long, her skin prickled with the sensation she was being watched. She scanned the shadows of the temple but couldn't see anyone. Hastily, she backed out into the sun, heat soothed her pricking skin. Turning, she shaded her eyes and walked quickly back to the gates. She passed through them with a smile and a flick of her long blond hair. The guards gawped at her as she skipped across the outer courtyard and back to the street. If someone was watching her, they hadn't stopped her. And nothing could take away the joy she had felt in connecting with the Goddess.

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CHAPTER THREE

Prince Ankhaf reached blindly for his breakfast roll, his eyes on the papyrus sheet in his other hand. Not finding the roll where he thought it should be, he looked up and found his wife's eyes fixed on him intently.

"What is it, my dear?" he asked mildly, putting down the papyrus and reaching for the honeycomb to smear on his bread.

She wiped her fingers delicately on a napkin and said, "I was at the marketplace this morning and saw General Nefer."

"Yes?"

"It has come to Queen Meresankh's ears that he has formed an... attachment to—" she hesitated, "—a woman in that lotus house you investigated last year."

Ankhaf's eyebrows rose. "I don't know what you're talking about, my dear. What lotus house?"

"Anki, don't play dumb with me. I'm more than seven!" snapped his wife, putting down her goblet with a bang. "You may choose to think you keep your business secret from me, but I have my sources. So, it seems, does the Queen. I raise it, not to annoy you with women's gossip, but because too many questions in the wrong quarter may bring certain matters to light that you would rather remain in shadow."

Ankhaf sat back in his chair and regarded his wife with mild surprise.

"I've underestimated you, Hetti."

"Of course you have." She smiled sardonically. "I thought perhaps you could have a word in the General's ear. Tell him not to be so obvious. The Queen is not happy, she has an alliance in her eye for Nefer and doesn't want anything to interfere with that. If she decided to complain to Khafre, things could get ugly very quickly."

Ankhaf crumbled his roll thoughtfully. "Thank you for the warning, my dear."

She inclined her head and said, "Just try for a little subtlety, Anki."

#

Duaen paused at the door of the Prince's breakfast parlor to check he had the Prince's schedule. He had been so distracted lately that he had been trying his employer's patience mightily with stupid errors. It was Raia's fault. He grinned at the double-leaved door blindly seeing her delicate beauty spread out on the mattress for him, melted with desire. He suppressed a groan, feeling his cock harden under his robe. Raia, sweet life! He was delirious with happiness since she had finally given in and let him into her bed.

The door pushed open suddenly, jerking him back to reality and he stumbled backwards dropping the pile of papyrus, wax tablet and stylus in his hands.

Princess Hetepheres, Prince Ankhaf's wife, swept past him with a tut and a shake of her head.

"Look where you're going, Duaen!" She raised an arched eyebrow, above heavily made-up eyes, her strong features exaggerating her habitual haughty expression, stepped over his wax tablet and disappeared down the marble-floored corridor towards her own rooms, her elegant gown trailing a pretty beaded and tasselled shawl and the back of her regal head on swanlike neck, speaking eloquently of her royal highness's disdain.

Gathering up his papers, tablet and stylus, Duaen took a breath to steady himself. Why that woman rattled him so much he didn't know. She was scarier than both royal Queens put together. In command of himself once more and resolutely blocking any more thoughts of luscious, lovely Raia from his inner vision, he knocked on the door.

Commanded to enter, he opened the right leaf of the wooden door and went in. Prince Ankhaf was seated on a couch, the remains of his breakfast on a small table to his left, his

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bald head bent over a sheaf of papyrus. The room was elegantly and richly furnished and one wall was open to the courtyard, where plants and a fishpond made for a pleasantly cool oasis.

The prince looked up, he had been a handsome man in his day, he was still distinguished-looking, and power sat on him like a well-worn cloak, so customary as to be a second skin. He was the son, brother and uncle of two Kings, Vizier and Chief Justice, and Highest of the High Priests, the most powerful man, short of the King himself, the length and breadth of the Nile. Duaen swallowed and bowed.

"Good morning, my lord."

The prince eyed the pile of papyrus and grimaced. "Morning, Duaen. What do we have today?"

Duaen launched into the list and Ankhaf listened attentively, occasionally interrupting with a question or an alteration. To his embarrassment, there were a number of errors he had missed, which the prince picked up on. Finally, the prince looked at him and spoke with a gentle tone that sent a shiver down Duaen's spine and made him flush scarlet.

"Is there something wrong, Duaen? It's not like you to make this many careless mistakes."

Duaen swallowed, *Mins balls, what could he say? I'm in love with my brother's wife and we've been going at it like hares?* "N-nothing, my lord." The prince just looked at him. "I-I mean, I've been a bit distracted lately. My, my mother isn't well and I'm worried about her!" *Goddess, what a lie!*

"I'm sorry to hear that, Duaen. Perhaps you can take the day off and sort it out?"

Duaen swallowed, *oh khesh, was he being dismissed?* "That, that's very generous of you, but it isn't necessary, really."

"I think it is. I need my chief scribe with his wits about him. Go and sort it out." When the prince spoke like that you didn't argue.

He bowed. "Th-thank you, my lord." He turned towards the door and the prince's voice arrested him as he reached it.

"In future, Duaen, perhaps you will trust me with the truth? I won't pry into your business. I hope it goes well for you, but do you think I'm so old I've forgotten what it feels like?"

"What, what feels like, my lord?" Duaen turned, his heart thumped heavily in his chest and his legs felt wobbly.

The prince gave a small smile. "You're as lovesick as a bull in heat, young man."

Duaen flushed bright red, opened his mouth and shut it again.

"So go and work it out of your blood and come back when you can function properly."

"Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord." Duaen backed out and scampered down the hall and out of the palace, a strange mix of elation and fear chasing him.

#

Setka settled into the chair in the private audience room and tried to suppress the urge to tap his leg nervously. It wouldn't do to show his inner agitation. His great uncle Ankhaf, the Vizier was an astute man. In fact, he was so damned powerful now that he made Setka sweat with fear, no matter how hard he tried to pretend otherwise.

Last year's attempt to snatch power from the previous Vizier Minkhaf had backfired in a way that he hadn't anticipated. Ankhaf stepping into Minkhaf's shoes had now added the power of the Vizierate to his already esteemed position as Greatest of the Five, the most senior of the High Priests, after the King himself. But it wasn't Ankhaf's titles Setka was

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worried about. Nor the wealth and temporal power that came with them. Those Setka could deal with.

He jerked his head up as he heard voices and sandaled footsteps in the corridor. His heka senses prickled and he closed his eyes a moment to steady his pulse and breathing and mask any stray thoughts that could, like a pebble in a pond send detectable ripples to alert Ankhaf to things Setka wished to remain hidden. The man's heka was so powerful, Setka could feel it from here.

The door pushed open and Setka heard his uncle giving some last instruction to someone before he stepped into the room and shut it behind him.

Ankhaf nodded at him. "I'll be with you in a moment, Setka, my apologies for keeping you waiting."

Setka leaned back in his chair and tried to look nonchalant as Ankhaf crossed to his large low desk and began sorting through some papers.

"When you're ready, Uncle." He caught his fingers tapping on the chair arm and stopped them. His stomach muscles tightened and he tried to relax them by breathing slowly. The shadows in the corners of his mind danced and teased, trying to break through the veil he had drawn across them. Sweat beaded on his upper lip and forehead, and he passed a hand casually over his face to wipe it off.

Ankhaf rose and went to a side table with goblets. "Wine, Setka?" he said, pausing with the jug poised over a goblet.

"If you are, yes." Ankhaf poured and offered Setka a goblet seating himself on the couch at right angles to Setka's chair.

Setka sipped the wine gratefully. It was sweet and full-bodied, Delta wine he guessed.

"So, Setka, your report please," said Ankhaf taking a generous mouthful and savoring it.

Setka cleared his throat and began his weekly report on the state of trade in the capital. In addition to his role as Steward of the Palace, he now held responsibility for overseeing trade in certain luxury items and services that were directly controlled by the crown. These included Lotus, and certain personal services. His role was to regulate the price and sources of such products and services.

He submitted a written report to Ankhaf's tribe of scribes, but Ankhaf liked a verbal report weekly from Setka himself. There was nothing untoward to report this week so why Setka should feel so nervous had him puzzled, but something had his heka senses on high alert, he just couldn't place what it was.

"Good," interrupted Ankhaf. "I hate to burden you further, Setka, but there is a minor matter I need assistance with, and I am wondering if you will oblige me?"

Setka's heart stuttered and he swallowed a mouthful of wine to steady himself. "Of course, Uncle, if I can." He smiled, but his cheeks felt tight.

Ankhaf leaned back with a sigh. "My personal scribe, Duaen, do you know him?"

"Not personally, no, why?"

"He has formed an unfortunate attachment to some woman. It's affecting his work."

"What exactly do you want me to do?"

"Just keep an eye on him. He knows everyone on my staff, if I ask one of them to do it, he will likely recognize them. Have you got someone discreet who can be your eyes and ears?"

Setka nodded slowly. "Yes, I believe so."

"Excellent. No need for your man to do anything, just keep you apprised of Duaen's movements. If he looks like doing something foolish, let me know."

Setka bowed in acknowledgement, suppressing a smile. He wondered fleetingly why he had been so worried.

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CHAPTER FOUR

"You can wash up first before you make your report if you like, Commander," said Nefer, leading the way through the barrack's gates.

Djef shook his head. "If it's all the same to you, General, I'd sooner deliver my report and go home. I want to see my wife."

Nefer nodded. "Very well, come this way." He led Djef, trailed by pack-pony Tepi towards his office.

Djef sighed, it was good to be back home. Just an hour or so more and he would see Raia. He had been fantasizing about it for weeks. Three years was a long time and he missed her! He had every one of her precious letters wrapped carefully in a leather envelope inside his shirt. He'd read them so many times the papyrus was grubby and stained. After being apart for so long, to be this close to her, had him fretting in a lather of impatience. Their house was three streets over in the quiet residential quarter. As soon as his report was given he would leave here, head straight to a bath house to clean up and surprise her. He had half a dozen presents for her, bought at various points over the three years and kept, carefully wrapped against breakage. Each one prompted by some thought, some memory of what she liked or of some fantasy of pleasing her, of coaxing her out of her cool shell, of having her show the elusive affection she had once shown to him in the early days of their marriage.

He grinned. He had played this scenario out a dozen different ways but the ending was always the same. It always ended with him buried to the hilt in her warm soft flesh. His body tightened in anticipation and he suppressed a sigh.

They crossed the hard-baked earth compound of the practice yard, to the row of low mud-brick buildings down one side and into the shade of the colonnaded walkway. At the end, Nefer led the way into his tiny office. Tepi dropped their packs to the ground with relief and Nefer offered them both a cup of warm beer. All three sat cross-legged on the floor on the cushions provided, round the General's low bench style work desk.

They took the cups gratefully and drank.

"Now, your report, Commander."

Djef waved at Tepi for his pack, which he handed to him. Pulling out a large package of letters and papers he handed it across to Nefer.

"Before I forget." He separated it into two piles and extracted two folded and sealed sheets from one of them. "This is a letter from the Governor of Kush, Minkhaf, for the King and another for Chief of Police Nejem, do you know him?" He handed them across and Nefer took them with a nod. Djef indicated the smaller of the remaining two piles. "These are the accounts and reports for the last three months." He put his hand on the other pile. "And these are the personal letters of the men and staff. You'll see them delivered, General?"

"Of course." Nefer put the larger pile aside and flipped through the other set of documents. "Anything in particular I should know about?" he asked, looking up.

"Yes." Djef took a breath and let it out slowly. Leaning forward he extracted a specific report and nodded at it. "It's all there, but I'll summarize. The night we were set to leave, one of my patrols reported back in. They had been attacked by a Wawat raiding party and decimated. Only four of them survived." He swallowed. Four out of twelve! And every one of those eight men lost was a weight on his heart. Neby his friend among them. He needed to see Neby's family; he sighed, pushing away the thought.

"We delayed our departure until the survivors returned with the bodies, what was left of them. We didn't have the means to deal with that many bodies properly. We were forced to bury them quickly." He swallowed again.

"I sent a report to the Governor at Toshka, but since I was coming home anyway, I thought I would get the news to you quicker than he would. I think the Wawat are planning

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an uprising. This is the third attack on a patrol in as many months, but the first with such devastating consequences."

Nefer looked grim, scanning the report in front of him. Looking up he said, "I'm sorry for your loss, Commander. I gather you stayed to brief your replacement?"

"Yes, Commander Hor is in full possession of the facts. I gave him the benefit of my advice, General."

"Did he take it?"

"He's young, General. His first command, poor sod."

"Hmm. Should I send reinforcements, do you think?"

"Yes, I think so. The mining operations are likely to come under pressure otherwise."

Nefer nodded. "Well, thank you for your service, Commander. I'm sure you wish to be off home. Enjoy your leave."

Djef smiled tightly getting to his feet. "I intend to, General."

Nefer and Tepi rose with him. "Would you consider going back, Commander?"

"Not in a million years, General. I've done my time in Wawat. Find someone else for that purgatory."

"A pity, your experience would be helpful. Would you mind if I called on your advice in the event the King wishes to discuss the matter?"

"Advice you can have for free, General, but with respect, I'm not going back there for love nor a tomb on the plain of Rosetau."

Nefer nodded offering his arm. "Message received, Commander."

Djef clasped the other man's arm and turned to Tepi, hovering sweaty and limp behind him. Glancing back at Nefer he said, "Look after this one, will you? He's still a bit wet behind the ears, but he's got potential."

Nefer nodded, looking Tepi over.

Tepi blushed and Djef clasped his arm and then gave the boy a hug. He was tall and too thin, but strong and fit as a bull. "Come and see me in a few days, boy, when I've settled in. I'd like you to meet my wife."

Tepi nodded, stammering. "Thank, thank you, sir. I'd like, like that."

"Come for dinner. Fatten you up."

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CHAPTER FIVE

Teta stepped back off the front stoop and stared at the locked door in frustration. *Why wasn't Babi answering the door, or somebody? Surely, they weren't all out?*

She stepped up to attempt a third knock when the door flew open and Babi stood there a big grin plastered to his ugly black face.

"Sorry, Mistress Teta. I didn't hear you knocking over the noise."

She could hear voices and laughter from the main room. He took the basket from her and added, "Mistress Maati is here with Rane and the baby."

"Oh." Teta forced a smile. Of course she was happy for Maati, but things hadn't been the same since she met Ranefer. They used to be friends. Now, Maati had a husband and a baby...

Teta shook herself and plastered a smile on her face, taking back the basket. "That's wonderful, I'll just take this out to the kitchen first. Need to put the fish in the cool room." She ducked down the side passage to the back of the house, pursued by the sounds of laughter, conversation and the ridiculous noises adults made in the presence of an infant.

After the kitchen, she ducked upstairs to change her gown. Running out of excuses, she descended the front stairs and went into the main hall, where everyone seemed to have gathered, drawn to baby bliss like bees to a honey pot. Yes, they were all here, except Freta, of course.

Predictably, Percia was nursing baby Kati, her pretty round face smiling and making cooing noises for Kati's entertainment. Rane stood behind her watching with the daft expression of a besotted father. Page had one of Miu's full-grown kittens, Isis, in her lap, her head cocked listening to the conversations around her, lovely gray eyes, staring sightlessly at the opposite wall. Teta made an effort to unclench her fist and smooth her dress over her hips.

A laugh from Maati drew her attention to the group standing in the middle of the room and she walked over to them. Maati's face lit up at the sight of her, she held out her arms.

"Teta, at last, we thought you must have bought the whole market!" Teta hugged her, grinning, something warm unfurling inside her. Of course Maati still cared about her.

"Gosh, you're still huge, Maati girl!" she said teasing. Teta and Percia had always had the largest breasts of the group until Maati fell pregnant, now Teta felt positively small by comparison.

Maati readjusted the straps of her bodice and grimaced. "I know and I keep leaking. Must be time for another feed!" She turned towards Percia. "Give her here I need to unload!"

Maati settled with Kati and popped out a dusky breast to feed the infant. Tearing her eyes reluctantly from her proudest creation she said, "Where's Freta? Wasn't she with you?"

Teta shrugged. "She's gone off to the temple, again."

Niki, who had been handing round honey cakes, looked up. "You shouldn't let her wander around by herself."

"For heaven's sake, Nik, she's a grown woman, I can't stop her," said Teta, prickling at the implied criticism.

Niki compressed her lips and looked away.

Teta took a honey cake off the platter and muttered, "Sorry, but you need to lighten up, she's not a child anymore."

"She's still an innocent."

Teta cocked an eyebrow. "You think?"

Niki flushed. "You know what I mean."

"She might technically still be a virgin, but I doubt there's much innocence left." Teta took a bite of the honey cake. "Oh heavenly, who made these?"

Percia smiled. "I did, you like?"

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"Hmm," said Teta popping the last of the crumbly nut-filled cake into her mouth and licking her fingers.

Niki threw her one of her deep soulful looks and said quietly, "I'd like to think we can spare her as long as possible."

Teta licked honey off her lips. "Not for much longer, Nik. She's got that look about her. She'll be experimenting soon if she hasn't already. Best if we pick someone suitable to start her off, don't you think?"

Niki swallowed and sighed.

"Oh, that reminds me—" Teta looked round for Meri who was standing with Rane, chatting. Meri looked stunning as always in a new white gown with a red belt fastened with a carnelian Tyet, the amulet of Isis, Mother of Horus. Lifting her voice she said, "Meri, I met Nefer down at the quay, we'd best gear up for tonight, a troop of King's men just got in from Wawat this morning. My guess is they'll be down here like a bunch of arrows when they hear about us."

#

Meri slipped away upstairs after Maati and her family left, unable to suppress the little spurt of pleasure at the notion that the General would likely come calling tonight. General Nefer had been haunting the place almost since the day they opened their doors. Sent initially to spy for Prince Ankhaf, the man had kept coming back, well past the date when he could claim any official business to be here. And Meri knew why. It was her he came to see.

Just to talk. They would sit in the courtyard and chat or eat a meal, occasionally she would invite him to a more private room, but he had made no attempt to move their relationship on to another footing and she had hesitated to do so, not because she feared his rejection, but because, like him, she knew it wouldn't be wise.

They hadn't discussed it, but she knew. He was a high-ranking court official. A member of the elite, close to the crown. He had no business having a relationship with a lotus woman, at least not a serious one, and Nefer wasn't capable of anything else. And she couldn't afford to lose her heart to anyone, least of all to a man who she suspected of loving her more than was good for either of them.

Reaching the top floor in a state of uncharacteristic abstraction she almost ran into Page carrying a bundle of dirty linen. Except that Page, with her heightened senses heard her coming and neatly sidestepped her. With a mumbled apology, Meri watched the girl negotiate the stairs with unerring confidence. No one who didn't know would guess she was blind. Meri's heart, beat faster with the anger that was never far from the surface when she thought of what Apepi, their erstwhile employer, had done to Page.

Unclenching her fists and her jaw with an effort, she moved towards the room at the back of the house that she used as her office. The room overlooked the courtyard and was her private oasis, a place she could go to think and find her inner strength. The weight of responsibility for the house weighed heavily on her shoulders and she often felt that the only thing that saved her from slipping into a blithering mess some days was the chance to come and sit in the quiet of her room and contemplate her dreams of the future.

The question pressing on her today, was, did the General have a part to play in that future or not? Anyone who knew her, recognized her ambition. Meri did not trouble to hide it. Was Nefer her meal ticket to an easy life? She let the curtain drop on her small office and went to lean on the windowsill overlooking the courtyard. And if he did offer her a way out, could she turn her back on the other girls and leave them to fend for themselves?

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The tinkling sound of the water fountain came to her with a waft of cooler air from below and she sighed. She loved this place, the house they had made their home. One that owed nothing to a man's controlling hand. She had sworn she would never be beholden to a man again, never give another man, power over her or those she loved. Was she in danger of surrendering her power to another man, now?

Nefer was nothing like Apepi. Despite his huge size, the General was not violent or vicious. Correction, she suspected in the right circumstances the man could be exceedingly violent, but he would never offer her or her girl's violence, of that, she was sure. He was kind and thoughtful and considerate. She could do a lot worse.

She turned to contemplate the piles of papyrus scrolls, clay and wax tablets on her desk. Running the house took a lot of work. They were reaching the stage where she might be able to delegate some of it, but she was reluctant to let go the reins. She liked to be in charge, she liked to juggle a multitude of tasks and decisions in a day, she liked the responsibility, and yes, she liked the power. She wasn't ready to give it up yet.

She would welcome the General as usual tonight, as a friend, but she wasn't about to give up her independence yet. And she wasn't about to lay her burdens at his feet, no matter how strong his arms and broad his shoulders to take them up. Settling to her desk, she took up her stylus and began checking the accounts.

#

It was the hottest part of the day and the inhabitants of the Golden Lotus, were all taking naps. Driven from her bed by the need to pee, Teta crossed the shimmering rear courtyard to the privy hopping on ginger feet. Returning to the shelter and relative coolth of the house she ducked down into the cellar for a cup of water from the large-lidded barrel there. The cool store was dug out of the earth about six feet square, and accessible by a ladder from the kitchen above. Dipping a cup from the barrel she drank; putting down the cup, she turned to make her way back up the ladder to resume her nap and was brought up short by a noise from above in the kitchen. Rats? Perhaps, but with so many cats roaming the house you'd think not.

Climbing high enough to see over the rim, she peered across the dim kitchen floor in the direction of the main rooms. Nothing. Then she smelled it. The distinct musky scent of rutting male.

Turning her head slowly, she spied them and nearly fell off the ladder. At the far end of the kitchen, Babi stood with his arms round a smaller, lighter-skinned man. The two were kissing, passionately, each with a hand up the other's kilt, each jerking the other off.

Clinging to the ladder, Teta stared in fascination as Babi lifted the other man up, with one arm round his waist. They pushed aside their kilts to reveal their erect cocks now level with each other and the smaller man grabbed them and worked them vigorously with one hand, the other round Babi's neck. Babi used his other hand to help his lover stroke their conjoined cocks. Their muscles worked and their skin glistened with sweat in the half light. The scent of rut got stronger.

Teta felt a drop of moisture dribble down her inner thigh, and her flesh twitched and throbbed with arousal. She had never watched two men make love before and she was surprised at the effect it was having. She could hear them now, heavy breaths and little grunts of satisfaction as their strokes got more frantic. She didn't recognize Babi's lover, although he seemed vaguely familiar. But there wasn't much light in the kitchen and she couldn't see his face.

Babi made a guttural grunting sound and an answering moan from his lover signalled their approaching release. In the next moment Babi stiffened and clutched the other man

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closer. Teta saw a spurt of seed fly up from their conjoined hands and splash down on Babi's dark-skinned arm. In the next moment she saw the other man tremble and jerk and a second shower of seed followed the first.

They clung together a moment longer, then Babi set his lover down with tender grace and the other man stood with his face buried in Babi's chest a moment. Finally, he raised his head and Babi kissed him with a tenderness that made Teta's heart tug with envy, oh, to have some man kiss her like that... Then he stepped away, pushing his kilt back into place and Teta slid down the ladder out of sight, her heart thumping wildly in her chest.

She listened with straining ears for their departure, which they did in silence, not a word exchanged.

When she was sure they had gone, she crept up the ladder and upstairs to her own mattress. Lying down on her side, she tried to compose herself for sleep. The sounds of the other girls sleeping was a comfort.

She had always guessed that Babi was a devotee of Set, a man who preferred other men, but she had not really realized what that meant until now. The need for secrecy, the need to cover up one's desires, because they were not acceptable to the majority.

She rolled over and closed her eyes, determined to sleep. She needed to work tonight.

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CHAPTER SIX

Maati smiled at the face of her sleeping infant and with one last tender look, she turned away to find her husband watching with an equally foolish look of love at the pair of them. It made her heart swell and she hugged him from sheer happiness, burying her face in his shoulder. He put his arms round her and pulled her close and whispered in her ear, "Is she asleep?"

She nodded. Little Kati was worn out with all the attention of the visit to the Golden Lotus.

"Good," murmured Rane, picking her up and tiptoeing quietly across the room to their bed, lowering her onto the mattress. She put up her arms to pull him down into a kiss. They had made several attempts to make love the last few nights and been interrupted by Kati's fussing and crying until Maati was too tired to stay awake.

Kissing her deeply and with more haste than he usually showed, Rane pushed up her gown, his hands exploring her breasts, belly and hips with quick strokes. She could feel his desperation, his cock hard and warm through the fabric of his kilt. She gave him kiss for kiss, running her hands down his back and pulled his kilt up to touch his bare buttocks, just as eager as he to take advantage of the few moments of peace.

Only the sounds of their elevated breathing and the rustle of cloth being pushed aside marred the silence of the hot sleepy afternoon. His hand ran lower over her belly and between her legs, his fingers stroking and exploring her wet folds. His breath was hot against her neck as he kissed and nibbled the tender flesh. She moved under him, stifling the urge to moan aloud with the sharp pleasure sizzling along her nerves. She was primed and slippery, open and aching. She wanted him now. Her hips jerked in involuntary desire as she tried to keep her breathing quiet.

He thrust his tongue in her mouth and pushed two fingers inside her, pressing his thumb to her nub, circling with a rapid light touch that experience had taught him gave her the quickest release. He knew her so well. She flung her head back, arching as he moved from her mouth to her breast, latching onto her engorged nipple and caressing it lightly with his tongue. He knew better than to bite or pull too hard on her sensitive nipples. His touch was just perfect to send her crazy. She shuddered and bit his shoulder to stop herself from crying out. His fingers were good but not enough, she wanted him, the full length and firmness of him inside her, now!

She lifted and spread her legs, pulling at him with desperate shaking hands. Getting the silent message, he lifted his hips slightly, scrabbling with one hand to get his kilt clear and settled into the cradle of her hips.

His hard cock pressed at her entrance, his face buried in her neck as they clung to each other, desperate and shaking with frustrated desire, and the equal need to stifle the sounds of pleasure they would normally make. She moved her hips and pulled at his buttocks with her hands, he pushed forward and slid into her with a hitched exhalation. She could sense the stifled groan in his body as he shuddered and tensed.

Joined, they held still a moment as he lifted his head to look down into her face. She smiled at him and he smiled back, the tender exchange of love. Then he moved a fraction in her and his face twisted with desire; all his love and aching desire for her written on his face. She loved that about him, the openness of emotion, the raw passionate love he showered her with, in words and deeds, and the way he looked at her, touched her. Her insecure heart, hungry for reassurance, ate up his outpouring of loving words, his strokes and gestures of caring. She wished she could reciprocate as easily, but the words always stuck in her throat.

Her eyes welled with emotion as he lowered his head and kissed her deep and desperate, his body shaking with his raw need, a hunger she shared. She pushed up into his downward

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thrust and they moved together, the rustle of the mattress beneath them and their deepened breathing the only sounds.

Goddess! She moaned silently as his thrusts speeded up. *Oh Min, yes!* She lifted her legs higher trying to take him deeper. His hands squeezed her hips hard as he used his knees for leverage, thrust deep, hard and fast. *Yes. Oh yes!*

She twisted under him as the pleasure built. *Yes! Yes!* Her body shuddered and clenched, overtaken by the sudden rush of sweet pleasure, sharp and breathtaking. *Ohh!* Just as it crested and crashed over in a rolling flood, she felt him shudder and catch his breath on a strangled grunt. Then she felt the flood of his release in hot pulses in her body. He jerked and thrust in the final spasms and collapsed, trying to muffle his breathing with the pillow beside her head. Her body relaxed in post-release bliss and she felt as if the mattress was swallowing her up and pulling her down into darkness.

She felt him withdraw and roll onto his side and pull her closer and then sleep took her away.

#

Rane held her close, listening to her breathing settle as she drifted off to sleep. He was drowsily content himself. With half an ear cocked to listen for Kati, he relaxed and enjoyed the moment. It was harder to find the time for lovemaking these days, but the pleasure of it wasn't lessened for the wait. Gone were the times when they could make a meal of it. It all tended to be rushed like that, but it was still good. Very, very good.

The feeling of being home, of security that he had craved all his life and never had, filled him up and he smiled at Maati's sleeping face, wanting to hug her and kiss her with his overflowing feelings of love and protectiveness. Only knowing how precious sleep was for her these days stopped him. He would let her sleep and perhaps if they were lucky, he could wake her for second round later.

He was happier than he had ever been in his life. It was a strange and frightening feeling. Little Kati was a delight and she had won his heart from the moment she opened her lovely blue eyes and stared blankly at him, waved her perfect little fingers and toes and smacked her little lips. He refused to contemplate the notion that she wasn't the daughter of his body. She would be his daughter in every way that mattered, as Maati was the commander of his heart. He would let nothing and no one come between them or hurt them. They were his to care for and protect. It was a fierce promise in his heart.

He settled back, wanting to enjoy this rare respite, not waste it in pointless worry. Where had his ability to take everything as it came gone? Once upon a time he wouldn't have let pointless worrying spoil his present. But then he'd had nothing to lose. Now he had everything and it was impossible not to worry about it being taken away.

#

Rane woke to the sound of knocking—no pounding—on the front door. Shaking off his stupor he remembered they had given their porter and house maid the afternoon off. Whoever was knocking was being quite persistent about it. He sat up just as Kati let out a mewling wail.

He went to the baby in her box cradle and recoiled from the smell. Picking up the now wailing infant, he held her out, turning as Maati sat bolt upright.

"She's soiled herself," he said. Maati sighed and got up, waving him to the stairs.

"I'll see to her, answer the door."

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He handed over Kati and bolted, secretly relieved. Not that he wouldn't have cleaned her up, he'd done it before. He headed down the stairs, straightening his kilt and the visitor knocked yet again. He reached the door and unbolted it, swinging it open and gaped.

"My lord Prince!" He stared down at Setka the King's Steward. The other man smiled his cat-eyed smile and stepped up onto the stoop. Behind him a courier stood holding a wooden box.

"Did I disturb your rest, Citizen Ranefer?" asked Setka.

Rane flushed at the knowing look in the other's eye. Setka had a talent for making him feel awkward and embarrassed. Stepping back, he held the door open as the prince mounted the remaining steps and walked past him into the main hall, followed by the man with the box.

"Welcome, Prince, ah, what can I do for you?" asked Rane, following him into the hall.

Setka surveyed the room, chose a couch and sat down, waving at the box carrier to put it on the other couch, which he did, taking up an at-ease stance behind it.

"I came to see the child and Khamaat. I brought a present," said Setka expectantly.

This was neither Setka's first visit nor his first present, he came at regular intervals and the visits never failed to make Rane uncomfortable. Rane rubbed his shaven scalp and said, "Maati is upstairs I..." He stopped. "Ah, the servants have the afternoon off, I'll see if I can find some refreshments—"

"Geb can do it, show him the kitchen." He waved at the man and Rane glanced at him.

Geb nodded his head in a pseudo bow and followed Rane to the kitchen, where Rane showed him around and left him to it.

Rane returned to the main hall to find Maati with Kati greeting Setka warmly. Something didn't sit right with him about the prince, but Maati was so glad to see him, he didn't have the heart to put a damper on her happiness. She had told him how kind Setka had been to her. He didn't understand why, and his instincts told him there must be something wrong with it, but he couldn't fathom what.

So, he swallowed his worries and smiled at the King's Steward and watched in wary silence as their visitor offered his daughter a wood and cloth doll. She was too young for it yet, but her small hands batted at it and she waved her arms and legs and gurgled appreciatively. Maati looked on with maternal pride.

Geb appeared with a tray of honey cakes and wine, Setka made polite conversation and even went so far as to hold Kati in his arms, bouncing her expertly on his knee, which treatment she seemed to like. Rane gritted his teeth and tried to smile. Eventually the guest rose to leave and Rane thankfully herded him towards the door. He reached for the bolt just as a knock sounded on the other side.

#

The door opened and Teta looked up startled into Rane's surprised face. "Teta!" he said.

She smiled. "Rane, you left this behind this morning—" She waved the baby's shawl at him. Behind his shoulder a slightly built man in rich clothing stared at her with startling green eyes. The long narrow eyes widened slightly at the sight of her and an odd shiver ran down her spine.

The man touched Rane on the arm and said in a cultured voice that marked him as a member of the elite as clearly as his clothes and well-manicured appearance, "Please introduce me to your guest, Ranefer."

The man smiled at Teta, but the expression in his eyes, made her neck prickle. She was used to men taking an interest in her. Her looks were startling, generally she welcomed such interest as a way to control the poor beast afflicted with it. Men, in her experience, were all victims of the instrument between their legs and she was well equipped to deal with their desires. This man gave her shivers and not of the nice variety.

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"This is Mistress Teta, a friend."

The man bowed and held out one smooth long-fingered hand festooned with several rings.

"Teta, this is Prince Setka, the King's Steward."

"My lord." She bowed her head and offered a hand, her heart doing an odd thump. Her experience of men stopped short of royalty. But of course, this man was a cousin of Maati's.

"Alas, I have another appointment or I would be tempted to stay and extend my acquaintance with you," he said with a deepening of his crocodilian smile. "Ah, would I be correct in assuming you are one of the beauties from the Golden Lotus?"

He had stepped down into the street and met Teta eye to eye, she was a bare finger width taller than he was. She nodded, quite unable to summon up one of her sharp replies. Something about the man took her breath and her wits, she didn't like the feeling.

"I shall have to visit you there," he said, pressing a kiss to her fingers. His lips were soft and his touch warm, which for some reason startled her. She expected it to be cool. He stepped away from her, bowed to Rane and kissed Maati's cheek, bestowing a gentle pat on Kati's head and then headed down the street followed by another man in a kilt and black, jaw-length hair.

#

Setka waited until they had reached the end of the short street and turned the corner before he spoke to the man following two paces behind him, "Geb, you noticed that lotus woman?"

"Yes, my lord."

Setka stopped and looked over his shoulder, catching a hastily smothered smirk on Geb's face.

"Difficult to miss I grant," conceded Setka.

Geb nodded, falling into step beside Setka as the two continued walking.

"I want you to, ah, make her acquaintance."

"Yes, my lord," said Geb with an unsuccessful attempt to appear indifferent to this command.

Setka suppressed a smile of his own. "Find out what you can about her family, where she was born, when."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Djef stopped before the front door of the two-story townhouse he had put a deposit on fifteen years ago when he asked Raia's father if he could marry her. He had been seventeen then and she was fifteen. It seemed like an eon ago on the one hand, and like yesterday on the other. Where had all those years gone and what did they have to show for it? He felt almost as nervous now as his seventeen-year-old self, had been waiting in her father's front room.

He had washed and shaved and changed his clothes. Ditched the uniform he'd been living in for three years for civilian dress. Nothing fancy, most of his income had been paid directly into his treasury account here in the capital for her use and to service the debt on the house. His personal upkeep was met by the fort in which he'd served during his time in Wawat. As a commanding officer, that was high enough to feed himself with a little left over to trade for additional needs.

The blank white walls of the house stared back at him blind and noncommittal. It ought to feel like home, but the truth was it didn't. His narrow cell in the fortress barracks back in Wawat hadn't felt like home either, but he must have gotten used to it, because being away from it was making him feel oddly nervous. The double-leaved wooden front door was shut. He pushed it and found it was locked, so he knocked. And waited. The sun was getting higher in the sky and the temperature was starting to rise. He sweated under his clean linen shirt.

He knocked again, beginning to feel irritated. He was about to knock a third time when the door opened and a young boy's face peered out.

"Who are you?" asked Djef.

"Porter Den," said the boy promptly. "What you selling?"

"Nothing. I live here," snapped Djef, shoving the door wider and elbowing his way into the house.

The boy stepped back going a pasty shade of gray. "You the master?" he asked, his spindly limbs starting to quiver.

"Yes. Who did you think I was?" growled Djef looming over him.

The boy cowered away, edging into the corner of the tiny porters' lodge. "Wasn't expecting you," muttered the boy.

"Well don't just stand there! Where's your mistress?"

The boy went white and gulped. "Don't know! I swear!" And bolted round Djef and out the front door.

"What the—" Djef stared after him and then shrugged, slamming the door. *He could whistle for his pay that one. Bloody useless.*

Hefting his pack, he moved into the reception hall of the house. It was neatly and elegantly furnished with cushioned couches and low tables. The little niche let into the rear wall, housing a dyad of the city god Ptah and his consort Sekhmet, showed a lit bulb of incense that perfumed the room with a pleasant scent. Light streamed through the door that led to a second room that in turn gave on to the courtyard. Beyond the courtyard lay the kitchen and storerooms, separated from the main body of the house in case of fire. A staircase that led to the second story and the roof, rose up one side of the courtyard. It was strange to be home, everything familiar and not...

He trod up the stairs on quiet feet, his heart thumping heavily. He guessed that perhaps she was taking a nap, it was coming on midday and the heat was rising outside. His mouth felt suddenly dry and his palms wet with anticipation. *What would she say? Would she be pleased to see him?*

He reached the landing, which gave onto an open sitting room. It had a large picture window overlooking the courtyard. Turning, he faced the doorway to the bedroom. It was covered with a curtain that stirred slightly with a breeze. He paused, licking his dry lips. She

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must be asleep; the whole house felt like it was asleep, drugged with the heat. He imagined her lying on her side, her face relaxed and at peace, her soft brown hair spread out on the pillow, her shapely body naked beneath the sheet, or perhaps on top of the sheets... He took a quiet breath and let it out. His pulse beat in his ears and his cock firmed in anticipation.

He stepped up to the curtain and pulled it aside. Raia lay naked, sprawled on her back, asleep, her legs splayed, and beside her lay the body of a naked man on his front, one thigh hooked intimately over hers, one arm possessively across her belly. The air was heavy with the fug of sex.

Djef's stomach lurched as if he'd been punched and the pack slipped from his nerveless fingers to the floor with a thump. The noise made Raia open her eyes. He watched her expression through a rising red mist, shift from confused, to horrified to plain terror. She batted at the body beside her and made a whimpering noise that sounded faint through the roaring in Djef's ears.

The man stirred and looked up and Djef launched himself across the room and with a guttural roar, pulled his brother off the bed and shook him like a cloth doll.

Duaen's face turned red and then purple as Djef's hands squeezed his throat, and he gurgled, his hands scrabbled at Djef's trying to dislodge them. Raia launched herself at him, clawing and screaming in his ear. He shook her off and she came back at him. He flung Duaen's body across the room and swung at her with a livid roar, breathing like an enraged bull, almost blind with fury. He was going to kill them both.

Flung back by the force of his swing she scrabbled backwards away from him and he advanced on her.

"Lotus eating slut!"

A hand grabbed his arm and swung him off balance. He turned and his brother's fist hit him square in the face. He shook his head, shedding blood and swung his fist, smashing into Duaen's jaw, except his brother ducked and his fist hit the plaster wall instead. Pain seared up his arm from his knuckles and fed his rage. Turning, he grabbed Duaen and twisted his arm up his back forcing him to his knees.

"Khesh eating, bach sucking son of Set! I'll kill you!" He sucked great lungful's of dry air and kicked his brother hard in the crotch. Duaen cried out and curled round his injured balls. Djef picked him up and threw him across the room where he hit the wall and slid down onto the mattress.

Crawling across the mattress, Djef punched him in the face. Duaen's head bounced under the impact, smashing into the wall, blood splattered across the sheets. Djef punched him again.

A piercing scream in his ear made him flinch, as he drew back for a third punch.

"Stop it, you bastard! You'll kill him!" Nails clawed at his cheeks and his arms, and teeth sunk into his earlobe and bit down hard.

He yelped and letting go of Duaen, he flung round dislodging her and sending her sprawling on the mattress. He raised his fist, breathing hard and stared at her as she curled up, putting out her hands to protect herself. He gulped and turned away, just as a blow caught him on the side of his head, sending him sideways off the bed platform and into the opposite wall.

Duaen scrabbled off the bed after him, looming over him his fist raised, his face dripping blood. "Touch her again and I'll hekhen kill *you!*" he said.

Launching himself off the floor with a yell, Djef knocked Duaen back onto the bed, grabbing for his throat. Holding him down with one hand on Duaen's throat, his knee in his chest, he punched him again in the face. His hand tightened on his brother's throat. Duaen flexed the muscles in his neck and tried to buck him off, punching him on either side of his head with both fists together. Djef's head rang like a bell and his vision went blurry. Pressing

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down, he used all his weight trying to squeeze the breath out of his brother. Duaen's arms dropped as his face began to turn red, then purple. Duaen's thrashing slowed, and Djef pressed harder, watching the life slowly fading from his brother's eyes. His teeth bared in a grimace, he said viscously, "Die, you hekhen bach sucker! Die! Khesh eating demon! Die!"

Something hard and heavy hit the back of his skull and a scream in his ear sent him catapulting into darkness with the words. "*You* die, you beast!"

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Nejem, Chief of the City's Police Guard, was tidying up the papers on his desk preparatory to leaving for the day. An early finish for him, but it was his eldest daughter's name day and he wanted to be home in time for the celebrations. He was particular about the neatness of his office, something his chief scribe of recruits was acutely aware of, unfortunately the man was ill today and Nejem was doing his own filing. It was beyond him to leave the pile for Nebek to deal with in the morning.

Satisfied with a clear desk, he was in the act of bolting and sealing his door when a familiar deep voice hailed him from across the street. The police headquarters was on the intersection of Chariot Way and Royal Road, in the heart of the city. The rich timbre of that voice sent a liquid shiver down his spine and he was forced to compose himself before turning round.

General Nefer, jog trotted across the street towards him. The General was dressed as usual in his uniform; the sequined cuirass on his massive chest caught the light and sparkled. Ra was heading for the horizon and threw long shadows across the dusty street. Nefer reached his side of the road and said, "I'm glad I caught you. An early finish today?"

"My daughter's name day celebrations. What is it, General? Something urgent or can it wait until tomorrow?"

The General reached into his sporran and said, "A patrol of men serving at Buhen got in this morning with letters and reports. The Commander was entrusted with a letter from the Governor for you." He drew out a folded and sealed papyrus letter. "Here."

Minkhaf? The former Vizier, and his erstwhile boss. Why would he be writing to him? He took the letter and turned it over checking the seal. Yes, it was Minkhaf's seal.

"Thank you, General. I'd invite you for a drink, but as I said, I need to get home." A pity, he wouldn't mind an hour or two in the General's company.

"Next time perhaps," said Nefer with a smile that sent another liquid shiver down Nejem's spine, and warmth to his groin. "I hope the name day is a success, how old is your daughter?"

"Twelve. My youngest is six." Nejem cleared his suddenly choked throat.

"You are fortunate in your family," said the General.

Nejem nodded. "I think so."

"Well, good night," said Nefer turning away.

Nejem returned the pleasantries absently fingering the letter. Heading in the opposite direction to Nefer he contemplated whether to read it now or later. Deciding that as the letter had taken several weeks to reach him, it could wait another few hours, he tucked it in the wallet he wore under his shirt and quickened his pace. He wanted to see his girls. He had a present for Ty, he thought she would like and couldn't wait to see her face when she opened it.

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Djef woke to the taste of dust in his mouth and a blinding pain in his head. *Was he dead? The dead ate dust, didn't they?* His body hurt. Something sharp hit him in the cheek and another in his back. He heard a sound like a child's giggle. *Were there children in the realm of the dead?*

He groaned and opened his eyes. He was lying on hard packed earth, long shadows told him it was late afternoon. A rain of sharp objects fell on him. He got his hands under him and heaved himself onto his knees shaking his head and squinting in the glare of the dying sun. A ring of ragged street urchins stared at him, one had been poking him with a stick, others throwing pebbles and small rocks at him. He snarled and the stick piker threw his weapon away and fled, the others followed with shrieks of fear and laughter.

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He looked at the blood-speckled earth under him and wiped his face with one dusty hand. His palm came away bloodied and dirty. He stared at it dumbly. Fog filled his heart and a strange pain that he couldn't put a name to. He looked up, he was in the street. A street. He looked up and down it. An alley.

He got his feet under him and stood up slowly, swaying. He felt sick.

Leaning against the blind back wall of a rundown building he tried to think. *Which way to the river?* He squinted at the sun. *West. The river was that way.* He walked slowly to the end of the alley and paused trying to get his bearings. *Yes, that street looked familiar.* He turned right into it and continued at a slow pace. Working his way in a weaving dog leg fashion, he reached the entrance to the barracks just as the sun was about to slip below the horizon and the guards were preparing to shut the gates.

Swaying, he stood in their path and demanded General Nefer. The guards, thinking him drunk, tried to move him on.

He bellowed at them in his best Commander-is-pissed-off voice, "I am Commander Djefatsen lately of the Fortress of Buhen in Wawat. Let me in!"

They flinched but still hesitated. Then a voice Djef recognized. "Commander!" Tepi appeared out of the shadows. Taking one look at him Tepi stepped forward and put a hand on his arm. "Commander, what happened to you?"

"What does it look like?" snapped Djef. Then, "I need a drink!"

Tepi's lips twitched and he said, "Follow me, sir."

Djef was staring into his beer pot. The beer house was full and noisy. He was drunk enough to be detached from his surroundings, but not drunk enough to forget why he was here, with a bunch of smelly drunken soldiers instead of home with his...wife...

He just wanted to find a hole to crawl into and die, so the pain would go away. But there were no convenient holes, just a beer pot, and he could see the bottom of this one already.

"Come on." Tepi shook his arm and tugged at it.

Djef looked up muzzily. "Where we going?"

"Dunno, someplace—" Tepi hiccoughed. Bending his long body, he dragged Djef to his feet, and tugged him along after the other men. He didn't want to go, but it didn't seem to matter. The other men were laughing and talking, a couple were singing.

This street had braziers every few hundred cubits, must be a well-to-do part of the city. The houses were blank-walled and discreet, but the whitewashed stucco was smooth and fresh looking and the doors solid timber. Were they going to some up-market beer house? Or a private party?

The men at the front of the group appeared to have stopped. There was some debate about which door to knock on. Djef listened to the argument with half an ear. Losing patience, he stepped forward and said, "What's the matter? This the house you want or not?"

"Not sure, sir. The directions said it was here but—"

"But?"

"Well, it doesn't look like—"

"One way to find out soldier—knock!" said Djef, pounding firmly on the door.

A few moments later the door opened and a large medjai stood in the frame, his scarred face frowned down at them. The sounds of music, singing, conversation and laughter poured out.

Djef looked at the indecisive soldier, who stammered, "Is this the Golden Lotus?"

The medjai bared his teeth and it wasn't a smile. "We're closed." And slammed the door in their faces.

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Djef stared fixedly at the door for a moment then shoved it hard with one hand and one foot. It flew back on its hinges banging into the wall. Djef surged forward, followed after a moment by the other men. Tepi hovered somewhere at his elbow.

The medjai turned back to block the inner doorway. He was a big man, as big as Nefer and black as charcoal. Djef bared his teeth back and said, "I think you need a lesson in manners!"

"No, Citizen. You do," replied the medjai firmly. "Now leave or I will be forced to take steps to remove you."

"Apologize for slamming the door in my face and I will," said Djef in the kind of voice that generally had his men wetting themselves. *Come on hit me, you big son of a sow! Just give me an excuse!*

"What is going on, Babi? Trouble?" said a low feminine voice from behind the big man.

"Not at all, Mistress Teta. These men were just leaving."

"Really?" A woman ducked under the big man's outstretched arm and Djef stared, stunned breathless. She was astonishing, a sculpture come to life. A beautiful aristocratic lady from her arched brows, set over large almond-shaped eyes, dressed effectively with kohl and malachite, to her slender sandaled feet. High cheekbones, a distinctive jaw and long slender neck, gave her a graceful, elegant look, which, when coupled with a wide full-lipped mouth, sent a message of promise at an impossibly high price. She had the sort of figure that men fantasized about and seldom saw in real life, generous breasts, an impossibly small waist and slender curved hips, which assets showed to their very best advantage. Accentuated by the figure-hugging red beaded gown that she wore, over an underdress of translucent white linen,

She stopped two cubits from him and assessed him with a cool expression that went straight to his cock. Goddess, where had he seen her before? In his dreams most likely. Yet...something about her...the memory refused to materialize. Remembering belatedly to breathe, he took a deep breath and got a lungful of her scent. A musky-sweet, exotic perfume, slightly spicy and potent enough to make him giddy and bring his cock to full attention. She licked her bottom lip as if reading his arousal on his face and smiled.

"Perhaps I can help?" she said.

#

Teta ran her eyes swiftly over the collection of men stuffed into the porters' lodge and came to rest on the man who was the obvious leader of the group. He was perhaps half a head taller than her and broad through the shoulders and solid through the chest, with powerful forearms and biceps visible below his short-sleeved shirt. He was dressed in civilian clothes, but everything about the way he held himself screamed soldier to her. There were bloodstains and dust on his clothes, he looked like he'd been in a fight and recently; there were crusted scratches and purpling bruises on his square-jawed face. His stance suggested he was looking for another. He smelled of sweat, dust and beer, and a base note of male that pulled at her.

His eyes snagged on hers and she took a shallow breath, she had seen him...the memory came back...this morning walking with Nefer. This was the patrol Commander. Fresh off the boat and looking for trouble. She licked her lip and smiled. She liked trouble, especially when it came in a solid muscular package smelling like it wanted to rut her...

"Perhaps I can help?" she said again.

"No need, Mistress Teta. I can handle it," said Babi behind her.

She threw a saucy look over her shoulder at him. "I'm sure you can, Babi, but—" she turned back to the visitors, "—this man looks like he's been roughed up enough already." She bestowed one of her caressing looks on him and said, soothingly, "Are you and your men

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looking for the beer-house down the street, Commander? This is an invitation only evening you know. Unless of course you know General Nefer?"

The man's eyes bulged slightly with surprise and he cleared his throat. "The General is here?"

"Why, yes, he's a particular friend of Meri's. So I suppose, if the General will vouch for you..." She looked them over doubtfully.

The tall thin one, standing just behind the Commander blushed scarlet and the other men began edging backwards towards the door, with mutters of, "Ra's balls, the General..." They got themselves out the door and melted into the night, but the Commander held his place, despite the thin one plucking him on the shirt and muttering out the corner of his mouth, "Commander..."

"Stand your ground, Tepi," said the Commander. "Yes, Mistress Teta, I believe the General will vouch for us." He waved the blushing Tepi forward. "This is my adjutant, Akhu-Tepi." He gave her a neat bow. "I am Commander Djefatsen. I must apologize for both my appearance and the manner of our entry to your premises. I've had a rather trying day and my temper got the better of me."

Something in his eyes as he said that, made her grin. *The man had a sense of humor. Better and better.*

"Well, perhaps you and your adjutant would like a drink, Commander?"

She turned and stared Babi down, *I know your secret, lover boy. But it's safe with me. Now let me have my fun, think I can't handle him?* The big man moved aside reluctantly and allowed her to escort the two men into the front room.

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