

CLEOPATRA 53-52BC

Gold Is Where You Find It

~or~

Supersize Me!

Marian Marion Kebab

Foreword

In 53 BC, 16-year-old Cleopatra has been ruling Egypt for a year while her father enjoys early retirement. The country is in dire financial straits, although she was able to buy some time by exposing an embezzling Roman tax collector. There's a lot of gold and jewels buried with previous pharaohs and it's not doing them any good, so Cleopatra, like some rulers before her, decides to restart state sponsored tomb robbing, as well as anything else she can think of to raise funds, while engaging in covert diplomacy with the Roman empire.

Explore some tombs in the Valley of Kings. As a bonus, witness the possible origins of organized tourism, theme parks, franchised fast food, sports betting, ... and the chicken dance.

Humorous historical fiction. Not so much a *sequel* as a *continuation* of "Cleopatra 54 BC". If you missed the first book, there's an introduction to the main characters. Adult humor and situations, nothing explicit.

It's a story about how people deal with unexpected situations and unintended consequences, and how sometimes the heart just wants what the heart wants.

A lot happens outside of the recorded history, but there isn't anything that **couldn't** have happened.

This is the second book in a new series, a new genre. There's no such thing as "Humorous Historical Fiction." Did it work for you? Is there something you'd like to see? Please put your comments in a review. It encourages other readers to post their thoughts, too.

There are mileposts of history that can't be changed, but there's a lot of wiggle room in between. Happy Reading!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to my wonderful editor.
Sometimes what I thought I wrote isn't quite what the reader thinks they read.

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Introduction

Cleopatra Thea Philopator *aka* Cleopatra VII



In 53 BC, Cleopatra has just had her 16th birthday and finds herself ruling the empire of Egypt, bankrupt and deep in debt to Roman moneylenders entirely due to her father. Like any monarchy in any era, there's a court full of official advisors, but Cleopatra can't rely on any of them, and, instead, builds up a staff that she trusts, mainly because she can control them by pulling the strings in their relationships. Learning about couples' bonding for the first time, Cleopatra gets a little too involved and winds up in a curious "shared" relationship with someone else's husband.

Ptolemy Neos Dionysos Philopator Philadelphos *aka* Ptolemy XII
Reigning Pharaoh of Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands, Divine Horus, ... and stuff. He's not a bad guy, just the tail end of a long line of Ptolemies starting with Ptolemy IV, that just didn't get the memo about wise rule. For all government related business, he's retired, but he's still moderately active in religious state ceremonies, as long as they're fun. Give him his due: it took him years of negotiating, and bribing with money he didn't have, to secure the Egyptian empire with Roman backing for his children ... he deserves a little slack.

Dakka



Cleopatra has an eye for talent, and she found Dakka as an under-utilized herbal scribe working in The Great Library of Alexandria. Apprenticed to his witch doctor uncle in his youth, his deep knowledge of "practical" medicine (versus the Greek's "philosophic") makes him possibly the top physician in Alexandria. Dakka is married to Dedyet and they own a small house in the royal complex, all part of a plan to bind him to Alexandria. Cleopatra had been working side-by-side with him in a free clinic, when her medical interest got overpowered by her personal interest. Dakka is *shared* by Cleopatra and Dedyet, and dealing with the pair of them generally keeps him off balance.

Dedyet



Dedyet is priestess in the Alexandrian Temple of Isis. She was on a normal, slow career track until her natural abilities rocketed her to the head of the Fertility Arts department. This involves educating other priestesses in family and marriage issues ... and practices ... as well as aiding Cleopatra in tasks which involve manipulating relationships. Dedyet is married to Dakka, and is very loyal to him, but she enjoys teasing other men ... especially Kalek ... when she's in the mood. She saved the empire, and her own life, by making a devil's deal with Cleopatra, and she's not happy about it.

Kalek



Kalek plied the Mediterranean with his father in the wine trade, and speaks multiple languages as a result of eventually running the business. His true love was always painting, and on his father's death, he got a run-of-the-mill scribe job in The Great Library of Alexandria copying/enhancing maps. Cleopatra became aware of his artistic skill, aided by his photographic memory, and he enjoyed a rapid rise in responsibility. How he got his current position is a bit of a bewilderment to him, particularly with his keen distaste of governments in general, but he's quite keen on maintaining it. Kalek is married to Banafrit, and shares Dedyet's and Dakka's house (in a move to bind Kalek to Alexandria, as well). Kalek now works from home, generally in his underwear, a constant annoyance to his wife. Kalek doesn't know, exactly, how he managed to marry so far out of his league, but he's got no complaints. Cleopatra looks at him more and more as the goofy big-brother she never had ... who wouldn't dream of assassinating her.

Banafrit



Banafrit is a priestess in the Alexandrian Temple of Isis. She served as the right hand of the High Priestess, Hentaneb, as well as being the chief repair person for religious mechanisms, until her skills in the organization of intelligence won her a department of her own. She has her own staff and in particular monitors economic and agricultural data on the Nile and near Mediterranean. Banafrit is married to Kalek, and has a bit of a streak of jealousy. To her distress, it appears women are more attracted than they should be to her awkward partner. Or maybe it's her imagination?

Astarte



Astarte, and her sister Elissa, lost their family and entire Phoenician village to influenza. They were captured by pirates, sold as slaves, and eventually separated. By luck, Astarte was taken from her Roman master and dropped into the slave population of the Alexandrian Temple of Isis, largely due to her being mute. She found a retired priestess, Ashtoreth, who knew her as a baby, and who freed and helped her advance in the organization. Now, she's the "fixit" priestess who keeps the religious mechanical contraptions working (taken over from Banafrit), and is called on for special "engineering" projects. She's had visions, since before she was captured, of living in the house that Banafrit, Dedyet, Dakka, and Kalek all share ... making and having babies with Kalek. She's playing the long game to make this happen: her visions always come true. Astarte and Ashtoreth use a special sign language they call "Beautiful": it is to the common merchant's sign language, what ballet is to teenagers shuffling at their first dance.

Hentaneb

Hentaneb is the High Priestess of the Alexandrian Temple of Isis. In addition to running a major religious organization, she oversees many cottage industries, like papyrus making, which are marketed across the entire world. As if that wasn't enough, she is also the African continent's head of a multi-national, inter-denominational intelligence network. The Greek/Roman center of operations is the oracle of Delphi, and Hentaneb masters the African continent and the Middle East. Hentaneb is Cleopatra's closest confidant (she changed Cleopatra's diapers, and Cleopatra calls her "Nebby" in private). Hentaneb is Hannibal's paramour. On duty in the Temple, Hentaneb is fearsome to behold, her makeup emphasizing odd angles and generally giving off a sepulchral feel, and she's mastered a trick of movement where she appears to float across the floor. When she wants to melt Hannibal, her appearance is quite, quite different.

Hannibal Ahumm

Hannibal is an old-style Phoenician ship captain (the best sailors in the ancient world). Despite Alexander the Great conquering their empire 300 years previously, Hannibal and Astarte still strongly identify themselves as Phoenician (as does everybody else). Hannibal lost his whole family in the same catastrophe that took Astarte's. Hannibal is in charge of Hentaneb's private navy of "fast boats". These ships are like none other in the Mediterranean, and are rarely seen as they fly around on covert intelligence missions. Hannibal is Hentaneb's paramour, and for all his physical strength, absolutely helpless when she turns on the heat.

Orestes



Orestes is a Macedonian seaman, a close friend of Hannibal for decades, and a member of Hentaneb's intelligence organization. Orestes settled his family practically next-door to Hannibal's in Phoenicia, and lost them, too, in the same tragedy. Orestes lost any enthusiasm for real relationships, until he met Ensela in Meroe. After a slow burn, their relationship blossomed, but Orestes had to return to Alexandria to finish his mission. Now, he thinks of nothing else but returning to her. Orestes stands head and shoulders above the average Mediterranean man, and is powerfully built. His preference in warrior type incidents is to use his bare hands, as opposed to a weapon. Orestes is the first and only known survivor of a Nile crocodile mauling, thanks to Dakka.

Ensela

Ensela lives with her parents Hatshepsut and Talakhamani, in Meroe (Kush). She is Dakka's natural sister, and, upon his aggressive insistence, Kalek's sister by his being adopted into Dakka's family. It's almost impossible to describe her: she's something you have to experience. She's got an aura of "happiness" that seems to penetrate anyone she comes near, and it's ratcheted up by her helping the unfortunate and disadvantage d. However, NOW, for the first time in anyone's memory, she's morose by the absence of Orestes and the entire Kush capital is worried about her. Talak is an administrator in the palace of Kush. Hatti has a curious psychic ability that only works on members of her immediate family. Sometimes, Hatti can almost see in real-time what Dakka and Kalek are doing over 2000 miles away. Hatti assures Ensela that Orestes, and babies, are in her very near future.

Dioscorides Phacas

Dioscorides is a physician in Cleopatra's court. He served her father first, as physician and eventually manager of the treasury, and now is an advisor to Cleopatra as well. He is a great friend of the High Priestess, Hentaneb, and alternated with her on baby Cleopatra's diaper duties. Educated in Greek medicine, he's rapidly coming around to Dakka's methods, particularly witnessing his results. Dios operates the free clinic and sees patients with both Dakka, and Cleopatra. "Phacas" variously translates to "wart faced" or "mole faced", a condition that was resolved by Dakka.

Ashtoreth

Ashtoreth lived with Astarte's family for a few years during a time of personal troubles, when Astarte was a baby. She eventually wound up in Alexandria and became a priestess. She is now "retired", but her specialty was "dream interpretation", using her own intuition as well as the Egyptian Book of Dreams. She was largely abandoned to a slow death of "old age" ailments, until Astarte brought Dakka to her, who gave her a new lease on life. Ashtoreth is the paramour of Elpidios, although he can be very exasperating at times.

Elpidios

Elpidios is one of the many scholars on salary at the Museo in Alexandria. He, like the others, is housed, fed, and given a stipend ... to “think”. Elpidios’ particular interest is in “Greek wonder machines” ... devices designed by scholars in Greece as thought exercises, but Elpidios finds them more interesting to build. He is banned -for-life from the Temple of Isis for an indiscretion that happened years previously. Elpidios is the paramour of Ashtoreth, with a considerable history.

Batnoam

Batnoam is a young Phoenician seaman under Hannibal’s command. He left Phoenicia on his initial posting just before the influenza epidemic hit. He has been starstruck since his first glance of Astarte, and has been trying to get out of the friend-zone for months. Astarte likes him alright, but dreams of Kalek.

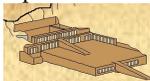
Mahu and Raia

Mahu and Raia are temple guards assigned to Cleopatra. They’re fiercely loyal not only because it’s their job description, but because Cleopatra learned from her father to take interest in their lives ... in their families ... and has helped them in difficult times, as she helps all her personal staff. Egyptian men from the interior average 5’2” in height, largely due to a diet dependent on beer and bread: nutritious, but very short on protein. Alexandrians are more like other Mediterranean peoples, and average 5’6”. Orestes is about 6’2” and massively built in the manner of someone who moves cattle around by carrying individuals. Mahu and Raia are around 6’6” and are easily mistaken for heroic statuary at a distance.

Archer and Danl

It’s not clear if “Archer” is actually his name, or just a very accurate title about his profession. Archer is a lean, soft-spoken, hard man, with a disarming smile, and an almost godlike skill in archery. When pushed, he can recite many classic works of literature in their original languages. His slight wife and their family live in Alexandria, and it’s not at all clear just how many children they actually have: there’s a “bunch”. His oldest son is Danl, a deady chip off his father’s block.

Hatshepsut



Hatshepsut was the fifth Pharaoh of the 18th dynasty of Egypt. Her magnificent mortuary temple has been visible to Thebans for over 1400 years. She was greatly respected by Egyptians, with the result that many, many Hatshepsut mothers named their daughters Hatshepsut. 80% of women in/from Thebes are named Hatshepsut (like Dakka’s mom). It’s almost an oddity if they’re named something else. This is actually a benefit if an alcohol addled man needs to address a woman.

Gaius Julius Caesar, Marcus Licinius Crassus, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus

These three men form the unofficial “First Triumvirate”, which means they pretty much control the Roman empire. Crassus is being an idiot, and against the wishes of the Roman Senate, and he’s dooming himself to a disastrous Parthian war. Cleopatra recognizes that with only Caesar and Pompey left, Roman civil war will break out. Pompey is the official protector of Egypt in Rome, and if he wins, nothing will change, but if Caesar wins, Egypt’s autonomy might be in jeopardy. Cleopatra plays both sides of this game, trying to increase her alliance with Pompey, and creating a diplomatic relationship with Caesar ... whom she’s never met ... and who is deep in Gaul 3000 miles away. Caesar is well aware that her unsolicited “gifts” are a means of gaining his loyalty, and he is very annoyed that Cleopatra’s worldwide intelligence gathering is superior to that of the Roman empire. He’s quite keen to figure out how it all works.

Marcus Antonius **aka** Marc Antony

Marcus led the cavalry that put Ptolemy XII back on the throne (the second time). He might have met Cleopatra in Rome when she was twelve, and certainly ran into her in Syria when she was thirteen, but when he got to Egypt, he turned right around and went back to Syria. There was no liaison of any kind: she was an underage child. Marcus is now currently working on his military credentials in Gaul: he had great success in Syria, but not much action in Britain. Marcus is related to Caesar, but he's just a junior officer being observed for performance, like all the others.

Nero Tacitus Paulus **aka** Paulus

Paulus is a Roman soldier who took a permanent semi-disabling injury in Gaul under Caesar. He was at the end of possible military promotions, stationed in Alexandria. Paulus was hand-picked by Cleopatra to be married to an Egyptian woman to sway his loyalty. He is totally unaware of the manipulation, but is deliriously happy with his wife, Aurelia Dendera (**aka** Dendera). Paulus never quite understands why Cleopatra gives him rank, and increased pay, and privileges. His is in an odd position serving as an information conduit between Cleopatra and Caesar, and is additionally getting pay directly from Caesar for this function. He feels like a "spy" of some sort, but both sides understand the arrangement. Paulus understands he's being used by a very wily Cleopatra, but he can never quite put his finger on what's going on. His wife Dendera is pregnant with their first child.

Chapter I – Co-Regent



Ensela was beyond happy. She kept on showing her mother her belly, convinced it was swelling. Hatshepsut wasn't at all surprised when Ensela just turned out to be late. Ensela was crushed: no one had ever seen her unhappy, and the whole city of Meroe worried about her.

The experience with Orestes had changed her. When she wasn't helping people, she couldn't keep her hands still. She wasn't really "thinking" about it, her hands took on a life their own ... sewing.

"Ensela, dear? You know spider monkeys only have *two* arms, right?"

"Oh! They're too small? ... I don't know what to do. Everything I do turns out in threes ... I think I'm doing two's, and then another arm appears out of nowhere. I don't know what I'm doing ... I can't concentrate. I can't help thinking about babies. I can't control it."

"BABIES! Oh my goodness! I thought you were doing some kind of 'be nice to monkeys' thing, dear.

The temple has some excellent clothes makers. They OWE you. Just tell them you're making clothes for other people's children, dear. They'll teach you."

"I really miss him ... it hurts."

“We *know* he’s coming back. I’ve seen it in my visions many times ... *and* your children. It’s just a matter of time, dear.”

Hatti and Talakhamani had been comfortable with their lives when they just lived with Ensela, but the return of Dakka, and appearance of pseudo-adopted Kalek and Orestes, had changed everything. The house felt empty now. With the building of an Orestes-sized house a little distant, it just seemed to emphasize his absence.

Instead of telling stories around the nightly fire, Hatti would give updates on what was going on with Dakka, Kalek, and Orestes in Alexandria. Her visions seemed to feed on intense emotions and there were plenty to spare. Talak found it more interesting than the weekly “State of Kush” updates in the palace.

Hatti embarrassed both Talak and Ensela with the boys’ reunions with their priestesses, up until the crisis with a young child, which Dakka had saved. She was pretty sure they were all married, because they were all living together and had signed documents. There was a young girl who seemed to get a lot of respect named “Brinksess” who visited them as a friend, but they always kept a little distant from. It was quite a shock when she realized the name was “Princess”. Talak was astounded: he had been working in the Kush palace for twenty-three years and no one was friendly to *him* ... although the oldest Kush princess had been asking him about Orestes’ return.

Banafrit and Dedyet had come into Hatti’s realm of visions as well, since they were emotionally bonded to the boys ... and there were a few visions of Orestes (she didn’t describe these much to Ensela because they always seemed to involve fawning women). Dedyet was in charge of something and was teaching classes to young girls. Banafrit seemed to have her own administrative department with a dozen employees or more: she got respect from EVERYONE. Kalek seemed happy as a clam, working in his house, not being involved with anyone, walking Sagira to the zoo and shorelines. Dakka had what he dreamed: a medical practice in Alexandria with another physician ... *and* the Princess. It wasn’t clear what that meant.

There were many humorous events in their lives, and it provided non-stop entertainment to the Meroe family. Hatti had seen their pilfering of the royal palace kitchens, and Dakka’s involvement with Ashtoreth (when Baska was around, he pestered her for details). Hatti was puzzled by a small orange haired girl who appeared on the fringes, always out of focus.

Hatti had also described the tense family meeting where Dedyet was very angry, and Dakka was distraught. The faces and emotions all came in very clearly, but she couldn’t make sense of what was going on. Thank goodness it ended with Dedyet cuddling Dakka.

Then one-night Hatti was beside herself and was babbling half sentences. Baskakeren happened to be there, hoping to catch up with what he had missed while on the island, and he kept checking things to make sure she wasn’t ill.

Talak: “I’ve never SEEN you like this. Can I help? Wine? Hugs? Anything?”

Hatti: “I’ve seen something ... and I can’t talk about it.”

Both Talak and Baska were speechless. Hatti “talked” ... all the time, non-stop ... and her favorite thing to talk about were her visions.

Hatti: “I think ... I think ... it’s a state secret.”

Talak and Baska just gave her some time.

Hatti: “Dakka got involved in something, maybe against his will ... but he *seems* to be handling it ... I don’t see how it can possibly turn out well.”

Φ Φ Φ

“Watcha doin’ back there *Daaakkaa*?”

“I’m kissing your shoulder ... What does it *feel* like?”

“It feels like there’s some nibbling going on, too.”

“... Maybe.”

“It kind of tickles ... please continue.”

“As you wish, your royal Highness, Lady of the Two ...”

“**NOW** you’ve stepped in it.”

“... uh oh.”

“Say it ... Say my name ... the way I like it.”

“... *Cleopatra* ... MMMmmphhh!!”

Φ Φ Φ

“Dios, how are we **ever** going to get her out of bed?”

“You’re the Fertility Arts expert, Hentaneb. Why are you asking **me**?”

“I’m getting desperate.”

“What did you tell her when the scribes and priestesses got back together the first time?”

“Let the Fates decide.”

“... and how’s that working out for you?”

“Shut up.”

<she punched him>

“The Pharaoh stepped in for her in court. He’s a bit rusty, but he’s congenial and wastes a lot of time chatting, so things shouldn’t get too muddled up ... but I think he’s getting bored. He keeps giving me ‘looks’.”

“I suppose we could get Dakka out with a medical emergency. Anyone on your list we can throw in a pigpen ... or to a hippo?”

“**THAT** was uncalled for Dios! I’m distressed. Do you really want to make me angry?”

“Just teasing.”

“Not very well.”

“Well, how long does it usually take for a sixteen-year-old girl to get bored?”

“In **BED!** ... are you **serious**?! You’re not helping at all.”

“Maybe the Pharaoh could help?”

“What now?”

“What if he just walked into the small house and ... uhhh ... **requested** her to come back?”

“What if it was **you**, Dios? You go to someone’s house ... to drag your daughter out of someone’s bed ...”

“A **married** man’s bed ...”

“Oh! Thank you so much for that ... to make her go back to work?”

“She **likes** her dad, right?”

“What if she’s making noises? I hear it’s pretty constant over there. The guards wear earplugs.”

“That’s all I’ve got Hentaneb. Maybe his distaste for court will overpower his embarrassment for his daughter. He’s not exactly unfamiliar with such activity, you know.”



Dedyet wasn’t surprised at the Princess’ behavior with her husband, but she didn’t have to like it, and it felt a lot worse than she had anticipated. It was her idea and it had saved their lives, but now she had to deal with the consequences. She had been sleeping on Banafrit’s bed in the War Room to get out of the house, but enough was enough.

Dedyet wanted her own husband back, but if she did the wrong thing, she might wind up dead. Hopefully, the Princess had calmed down a bit. Dedyet was ready to try.

Dedyet waited for the breathing in Dakka’s room to be slow and regular, then she slipped into the bed and embraced whatever parts of Dakka were available. She knew he was awake and whispered in his ear:

“You are **mine!**”

Dedyet awoke early, but remained still, just to see what would happen. Eventually, she heard the Princess kissing and moving around Dakka, then hopping out of bed.

“I’m getting some fruit and something to drink. Can I get you anything, Dedyet?”

“No, Princess ... I’m fine ... thank you ... ?”

“I think I’ll clean up, too ... you can have some time to yourselves.”

“Thank you, Princess.” <Isis’ Great Teat!>

Dakka was on Dedyet in an eye blink.

“Easy husband. There’s no time for what I want. Besides, I’m giving my body a break ... as **you** suggested ... I’m skipping the root this cycle ... and I don’t think we need to complicate our lives with babies right now.”

There was a terribly sad noise from Dakka.

“You’re not worn out by your other **young** wife?”

“I want **you!**”

“Silly husband ... just hold me ... tight.”

“Dedyet, I’m **so** sorry ... I never wanted to ...”

“Goddammit! Just shut up and kiss me!”

When the Princess came back, they just changed places. It took a lot of effort for Dedyet to maintain a cheerful face, and she wondered a bit if the Princess was doing the same thing. She made it as far as the doorway, then her feet wouldn't move. She was fighting a battle with herself: she desperately wanted to leave, but she thought that the best way to get the Princess out of her bed was to make sure the Princess knew what she was doing ... so she could successfully entrap someone else when the empire needed it.

It would be so much easier if it wasn't Dakka ... **her** Dakka.

Dedyet took a deep breath, held it, then let it slowly out. She put all her effort into turning around with a pleasant face.

"Princess? ... Try small circles ... the *other* way ..."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!"

Φ Φ Φ

Divine Horus, Lord of the Two Lands, left his entourage outside the door and walked into the small house. It happened to be Dakka making noise.

"Patti? ... **PATTI?! ... CAN YOU GIVE ME A MINUTE?!**"

"It's my **DAD!**"

Dakka was gasping for air, and was in no shape for a response of any kind. The Princess wrapped herself up in a sheet, and did a quick stumble to her father. Her face was beaming and she hugged him tightly.

"WOOF! ... nothing mean, but you could use a wash ... you smell like ... uhhh ... never mind." <He crinkled his nose.>

"**Daddy!** It's so **amazing!!**"

"Yes, yes ... I know little monkey ... it's not a dad/daughter thing, OK?"

"but, but, but ... I **need** to tell you about ..."

"No. No, you don't. I know we're Ptolemies ... but we're not **that** kind. Please? Save it for your friends ... your little family **here.**"

"OK, daddy ... just ... I didn't know it could **be** like this. I'm so happy."

"I'm pleased for you, little monkey ... I really am ... but we need you back."

"But, but ... I just **got** here!!!"

"It's been almost three weeks, little ferret."

"**WHAT?!!!!**"

"I've tried to manage things, but I'm just not competent ... any more ... if I ever was. I signed a bunch of stuff I should've read more closely, and there's some kind of real estate thing between the temple and governor in Abydos ... apportionment? evaluation something? ..., and I've been keeping some foreign ministers drunk so I don't have to deal with them. I need you back Patti, **PLEASE?!!**"

She half-turned, looking at the bedroom door. “But, but ...”

“Your empire needs you.”

“It’s not **FAIR!**”

“No, it isn’t. Not fair at all ... **Co-regent.**”

“What now?”

“You heard me. I told you I was going to do this. It’s done ... the ceremony is just for show.”

“Daddy, just a little more, **PLEASE?!!**”

“I’ve got some engineers breaking through walls, building you a passage from my palace right through the wall of this house. When they break through, you need to come to court with me ... just for a few hours. Then you can come back without anyone noticing. You don’t have to give up your nice doctor ... just let him rest a little. It’ll be a couple of days from now.”

“Oh, **THANK YOU** ... daddy ... daddy ... *daddy.*” <she was hugging him>

Before her father reached the door to leave, the Princess had started up Dakka again ... the Pharaoh just shook his head with a little chuckle. Kalek came tearing in through the door and bumped into him without realizing who he was.

“AHHH!!! ... umm .. Pharaoh! ... uhh ... your Majesty! ... ahhh ... I’m so sorry ... Majesty ... I ..”

“Calm down, Kalek ... it’s alright. We’re all friends, here.”

The Pharaoh had his hand on Kalek’s shoulder ... **touching** him. Then he just walked away.

“Uhhh ... Pharaoh? ... Your Majesty?”

“What, Kalek?”

“Would you like to go fishing ... sometime? ... Majesty?”

“We’d love to, Kalek.”

MY dad used take me fishing in the marshes. I wonder what Kalek has in mind.



Everyone awoke to a great hammering on the other side of Banafrit’s and Kalek’s bedroom wall. The dishes on the table were dancing around with each stroke, and some cups had fallen off a shelf. By the time they had all left, the sound of small rocks hitting the floor had been replaced by full size bricks. Astarte came in as if on cue. The Princess had given her the responsibility of finishing off the doorway. Astarte, of course, knew exactly what it should look like, having seen it hundreds of times in her dreams.

Near the end of the day, Astarte walked into the War Room and straight up to Banafrit, completely ignoring Kalek working close by. She signed and mimed that she needed Kalek to interpret to the workmen for her. Banafrit gave her Kalek, but even though absolutely nothing untoward had happened, there was still something about Astarte she couldn’t put a finger on that bothered her.

In Astarte's absence, the workmen had quickly cleaned up and tried to flee. She was hopping mad ... literally "hopping." She was signing furiously and assaulting the last man trying to pass through the opening.

Kalek: "She wants a door. A big thick one with a full bar across it. She won't let it go. She'll bother you for days. She'll chase you home ... you **know** how Phoenician girls are."

To be fair, none of the workmen actually new "how Phoenician girls are", but the way Kalek said it, it sounded like a legitimate threat. Besides, now that someone who could talk had shown up, they couldn't claim they didn't understand. Having dealt with fussy palace types before, it would just be easier to do the door and be done with it. They found a suitable door in a storeroom of Ptolemy VIII, and repurposed it.

Astarte lowered the oversize bar into place. She had rigged up some pulleys and guides to make this a one-handed operation. She crossed her arms, nodded at the door, and smiled at Kalek.

"Good job, Astarte!"

Kalek reached forward to pat her shoulder, but she ducked under his arm and hugged him ... hard enough to last her until the next opportunity. Kalek was gasping a bit for air when she let him go.



There were two thrones now, with Cleopatra seated next to her father. Her own throne had a step built-in so her feet didn't dangle (she had used a stool on her father's seat). She was doing her best, but it was clear her mind was elsewhere. It wasn't until she read a document with some greasy lawyering that she snapped out it.

"Do you take us for **FOOLS?!!**"

Everyone stopped breathing ... including the Pharaoh.

"Thank your gods we are in a magnanimous mood today."

She started drawing lines through the text, and making notes in the margins.

"Do it over. If you add something else, or twist our directives, we shall take it as a direct **insult**. Get out."

That's my girl!

"Rough three hours at work, my little Princess?"

"Shut up ... and attend your Highness, peasant."

"As you wish, royal co-regent, Lady of the Two ..."

“You’ve stepped in it AGAIN ... Say it ... the way I like.”

“... *Cleopatra* ...aaaIIIIYYYY!!!!”



Cleopatra was in the Throne Room, in a break between diplomats. The High Priestess knew what her frequent lapses into a dreamy expression meant, but all in all, she was getting hold of herself and getting back to normal.

“How do people EVER get out of bed, Nebby?”

“Most people have to earn a living, take care of children, feed themselves ... ‘life’ sorts of things, Highness.”

“The coupling was wonderful, but the Fertility Arts scrolls hadn’t prepared us for the ... ***everything***.

A tiny movement against Dakka, and every nerve in our skin fires. The feel of him, the way he looks at us, the way he touches us, the things he says, his breathing, just lying next to him, ... it’s like another world.”

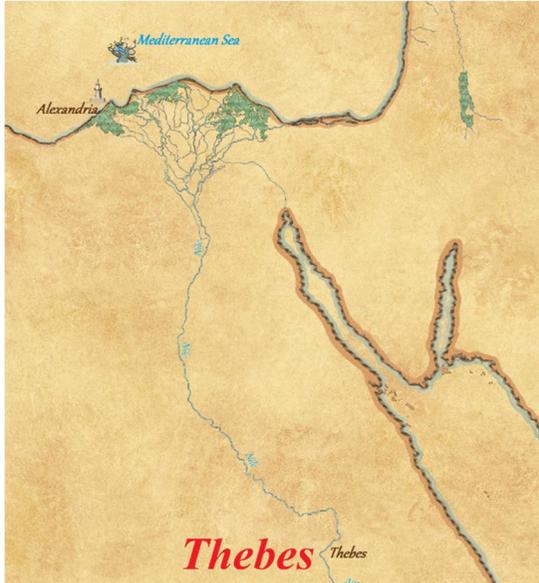
“Now you understand why it bonds people together so tightly, Highness.”

“Mmmm ... and I think I understand my father a lot better, now, too.”

“Tummy trouble, Highness? You’ve been chewing on mint leaves all day.”

“No. No, no. It reminds us of Dakka. He keeps mint leaves by the bed. He’s a great kisser.”

Chapter II – Nefertari



This was a good day. Nefertari had finished two clients by lunch, and had two more to fill out the afternoon. She wasn't just "a" bookkeeper: she was "the" bookkeeper of Thebes. When the tax collectors examined books and saw her stamp, there were no audits, no questioning, ... they just copied her figures, picked up the tax, and moved on. She didn't work "for" the government, and that was the beauty of her business. She used every corner of the law to save a client money, but never exceeded it. In her five years of operation, not a single client had been fined. The government liked her because she saved them time. Her clients liked her because she saved them money.

The front door was open, and Nefertari did a quick knock and strode in ... to see three grown men cowering in a corner, fighting to be the one with his back against the wall. In front of them was a full grown, eight-foot-long Egyptian cobra, its head and full hood swaying while it examined the men.

For its part, the cobra was tasting the air, and was wondering if any of the men were carrying any small rodents in the folds of their clothing ... or maybe a tasty black rat.

"Oh, for crap's sake! Can the three of you just grow a pair? ... You big whiny babies!"

Nefertari stepped back out through the door and selected a stick from the half dozen leaning against the wall. They were pretty much all the same: a relatively straight five-foot stick with a "Y" on the end. She walked back into the room.

"Cooooossss, coos, coos, coos ... coooooossss, coos, coos, coos."

The cobra excitedly turned to see what kind of food it was going to get, and Nefertari pinned its head to the floor with the “Y”. She grabbed the snake behind the Y with both hands and dragged it outside. The building next door had a low wall and she pulled the snake over to it. With some effort, she kicked the tail-end to middle of the snake over the wall, then tossed the head-end over with a great heave.

“Hey! HEYY!!! Anyone there? Ya got a runner!!”

When Nefertari got back, the men were still cowering in the corner. One had wet himself. Another had done something else.

“Is it gone, Tari?”

“You call yourselves ‘men’? What the Hell is wrong with you?!”

“It was a POISONOUS COBRA!!”

“That a child could have handled, you big frickin’ babies!”

“It surprised us! It just appeared out of nowhere!!”

“Out of nowhere my ass. They BREED them next door you idiots. What did you think the sign ‘Sacred Cobra Nursery’ meant?”

“We can’t read Egyptian.”

“... said by someone trying to do business in the heart of Egypt. Does your mother know you left home? Why did you think this place was so cheap? Didn’t you wonder about the *smell*? Frickin’ MORONS!”

“Will it come back?”

“Probably not. I scared it. There’s nothing stopping its brothers and sisters, though. I would strongly advise you to go next door and have them show you how to handle a stick. Goddamn stupid halfwits ... WHAT are **you** doing, jackass?”

“Errrrmm ... I’m ... closing the door? ... so they won’t come in?”

“Never, EVER close the door. They WILL get in a hundred different ways in this rat trap. Always make sure they can LEAVE! How did you guys ever get this far? That snake has more sense ... You’ve got records for me?”

“Oh ... yes, yes ... right here. There’s not much.”

“Poor sales, I’m guessing? You two, please get changed, the smell is pretty bad ... and you, watch for snakes ... Don’t just stare at the front door, moron. Keep your eyes moving around the room ... look for movement. Isis frickin’ mother of us all, what a bunch of clowns.”

The books were done quickly.

“You’re not very good at this. Perhaps you should do something else, or move somewhere else. No matter what you do, your very next step should be to learn how to handle snakes from your neighbor. I’ll bet you a copper you get two more before sunset ... Lord knows how many in the night. You might want to sleep someplace else.”

Stupid empty headed Greek merchants: the Med isn’t big enough for them? They have to come HERE?! Scared of a stupid snake. What next?



“Hey, Tari! You *know* I could show you a good time ...”

“How would I *know* that? Your girlfriend says you’re a bit substandard.”

“Hey, baby! Don’t be like that ...”

He put a hand on her shoulder. She put her fist to his jaw. He went down like a stone.



“Hey, Nebo. I’m so sorry to hear about Hatti.”

“Twenty years ... twenty years ... at least I’ve got the kids, Tari.”

“She was a good woman. I liked her. ... Ooof! ... those cinnamon rolls? I beat up a guy once to get one.”

“You serious?”

“C’mon! It was the LAST ONE.”

“Errmm ... they WERE pretty good.”

“Let’s get the books done, then we can reminisce ... you’re my last stop today.”

“Here.”

“Great Mother of Ptah! What happened? Your books used to be ... ‘pristine.’”

“Hatti did the books.”

“Oh ... no,no,no ... YOU did this?”

“Yes?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“I’m doing the books now.”

“Great Mother of Ptah. What’s this? Is it ‘ξ’ or ‘ζ’?”

“Errrrmm ... can you tell by context?”

“What the Hell are you talking about? Numbers don’t have ‘context’ ... they’re numbers ... How much do you usually sell a ... phwotnik? ... for?”

“There’s no such thing.”

“YOU wrote it!!”

“That’s not what I meant to write.”

Tari took a deep breath to steady herself.

“... and what, perchance, did you intend to write?”

“I have no idea.”

“Who did you sell it to? Do you know a guy named ... Grglwump?”

“Did I write that?”

“Get a lamp and sit down Nebo. This is gonna be a while. I’ll do this out of respect for Hatti, otherwise I’d walk out.”

It took hours ... and every ounce of client-patience that Tari had. It became very clear that Nebo could almost read, but couldn’t write to save his life. He had just, sort of, “gotten by” scanning for words he knew and depending on his wife. His books were almost useless, and Tari had reconstructed most of them by getting him to remember transactions.

"I can't do this again, Nebo. I think it's bringing on the demon."

"Oh! I'm terribly sorry. Anything I can do?"

"No, I'll manage ... but I can't go through this again. How old is your oldest son?"

"Eight, I think."

"You 'think'? Typical dad. He's a little young, but send him to the House of Life at the Isis Temple.

Use that money I found; the money that guy never paid back. Turn your son into a scribe. He can help you, and it'll give him an alternate career if something goes sideways. In the meantime, you'll have to pay a scribe to help you. I just can't do this again Nebo."

"I understand, Tari ... I'll do as you say. Thanks for all your help. Tax guy comes this week."

"Yeah, I know. Let me know when you have decent books and I'll come back."

"Thanks, Tari."



Tari was in the middle of the street when the demon struck. It was the hours squinting over lamplight, then the setting sun cutting through her eyes, which she had hoped to avoid by leaving earlier. At first, it seemed like just the edges of her vision were wavering, then it expanded across her whole field of view. It was impossible for her to focus, then the vertigo appeared. She usually didn't get both. This was going to be a bad one. She carefully plodded towards a tavern, swaying a bit,

trying not to fall in the middle of the street ... or appear as vulnerable as she felt. Then, someone grabbed her arm.

“It’s OK, Tari. It’s me.”

“Thank God, Felix. This is a bad one.”

Felix ushered her to a chair in a cool dark corner. Tari just sat back, closed her eyes, and tried to relax. Felix had helped her before and made her a tonic. He dug out a mortar and pestle from her bag and ground up some of the roasted Ethiopian beans, then dumped them in a mug of boiling water from the tavern. While it was steeping, he fished around for the ground willow bark, and added it when the cup had cooled a bit.

“Two doses, please, Felix.”

“Done ... I gotta go, Tari, you gonna be alright?”

“I’ll be fine ... I’ll get my sight back in twenty minutes or so. I might wobble, but I can get home.

Thanks. You really helped me this time. What’s on your schedule?”

“Well, I just got done handling today’s catch.”

“I could tell.”

“Oh, crap ... I’ll have to wash ... after I haul some garbage ... then I bartend until ten ... then there’s a private party gig.”

“Oooh ... what kind of party?”

“The kind of party that can afford musicians and dancers ... golden belt dancers.”

“*Naughty* party. Greeks love that ancient stuff. Is Ki going? I hear she’s really good.”

“She is ... and she is. It’s really good money, and Aristarchus keeps his guests under control.”

“Aren’t you worried about going home late?”

“Ram’s meeting us.”

“Throw him an insult for me.”

As she had expected, her vision eventually cleared, but her balance was still off. If she closed her eyes, she couldn’t walk without falling ... she needed visual cues. There was nothing for it but to try and get home. She couldn’t wait any longer. It was already darker than she was comfortable with.

“Like an escort, Tari?”

“How much did you pay Felix to let you know, Ram?”

“The usual.”

Tari let him hook her elbow with his. The additional support really helped. She didn’t have to look to know he was grinning from ear to ear.

“It’s really kind of creepy that you keep me under surveillance.”

“You know it’s not like that. All our friends know I want to help when you need it. I just incentivize the process ... Heard about the snake.”

“Morons! Get a place right next to a temple nursery and don’t know what to do with one measly snake.”

“You know, Tari, *most* people weren’t trained like us. *Most* people are a little iffy with snakes.”

“Goddamn frickin’ overgrown babies.”

“You should really try to form opinions about things ... What set off the demon this time? Do you know?”

“I think it was squinting over Nebo’s hen scratchings combined with the setting sun right in my eyes.

I suspected that might happen, but he just lost his wife ... That’s what I get for being nice.”

“Hey! You nearly fell that time. Put your arm around my waist.”

“... and you’ll do the same? You just never quit, do you?”

<She nearly fell ... again, and did as he suggested>

“bastard.” <not really serious>

Ram: “Evening, Hatshepsut. I’ve brought you your lovely daughter.”

Tari: “Give it a rest.”

Hatti: “Thanks, Ramesses. Looks like the demon took her legs this time. Put her on the couch please ... sit right next to her and I’ll get you some beer.”

Tari: “MOM! Butt out!”

Hatti: “He’s hauled you back from where ever. It’s the least we can do.”

Tari: “Fine, but stop trying to glue us together.”

Hatti: “Stop trying to fight him ... Heard about the snake. Everyone’s talking about it. It’s the joke of the day.”

Tari: “Frickin’ morons.”

Hatti: “LANGUAGE! ... stay for dinner, Ram?”

Tari: “MOM!”

Φ Φ Φ

“I don’t know why you fight so hard, Tari. You will **NEVER** find another man who loves you as completely as Ram ... who will support you ... who will take care of you.”

“I think I fare pretty well without anyone. I don’t NEED anyone.”

“... and what about a family?”

“I don’t need babies right now.”

“... and what about when you do?”

“MOM! Just drop it!”

“You know that betting pool at the tavern just keeps getting bigger.”

“That’s just a stupid rumor.”

“You’re lying to yourself. There’s over six month’s pay in there now ... all to the first girl that bed’s him. They’re ratcheting up their game.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You don’t think other women are interested in him ... just for fun?”

“Shut up, mom.”

“Have you really taken a good look at grownup Ram? He turns women’s heads.”

“Just shut up.”

“Your lovesick childhood playmate has become a very handsome, very lonely man with eyes only for you. Some woman will find him when he’s most vulnerable, most lonely, and you’ll never see him again.”

“WHAT’S HER NAME?!!”

Chapter III – *Dragonfly*

Ramesses and Nefertari were raised together. The families had a shared business, and their mothers had become pregnant at nearly the same time. While their fathers were busy robbing tombs, the children played in the desert under their moms' supervision. They napped together in the heat of the day, slept together under the same blankets at night, learned to handle the dangerous desert creatures, and were taught the trade as they grew. Their mothers dreamt of their marriage from birth, naming them after Ramesses the Great and his favorite wife to push the Fates along.

Their fathers had a minor falling out in their teens. Ram's father was feeling his age and no longer felt the risks of the business were worth it. He decided to go "legitimate" and sell knock-off copies of tomb goods to Greek tourists, with a few dealings in authentic antiquities done on the sly. Tari's father continued being active in the desert, mostly selling through Ram's dad, but it wasn't the same partnership. Tari's father was always a little miffed because Ram was so good underground, and now was a mere "merchant." In his view, Ram's father had taken him away. Tari's father had died in a work accident. Ram's father had died of mummy cough, picked up from one of the antiquities.

Ramesses was killing time, waiting for Felix' and Ki's party to wind down. He was minding his own business in a tavern, gnawing on a hunk of brown bread and drinking beer. It was a slow night, and the working girls were clustered around his table ... all trying to outdo each other in sweetness ... or seductiveness ... or playfulness. They hadn't quite found the right wedge they needed to crack him. There was a sizable sum of money for the girl that got him to give in. As each girl spoke, the others gauged his reactions to see if there was something they could use.

"I know what you won't do. That's all right. We could just play and kiss all night. Nothing frisky. Just come up to my room, Ram. I get lonely there."

All eyes were on Ram's face, looking for tells.

"You're very sweet, Cinnamon ... but I can't stay, I have to meet someone."

"Just a little? It's just play. I've got some Sicilian wine and a pile of Tobek's cookies. I'll show you how they kiss in Gaul."

"It's different?"

"Curious?"

"No ... no,no,no ... just no time. Sorry, Cinnamon."

"If you're short on time, I know something we can do quickly."

"I'll bet you do, Coriander ... and would I survive?"

"Let's find out, shall we? I'll be gentle ... more or less."

"I know a game we can play."

"Saphron! Please put that back on."

Ki and Felix were in the street, leaning up against the wall of the house they had been in, waiting for Ram. Felix was holding his hands against his chest like upturned claws. The Great Crocodile in the sky told them it was near midnight.

“I noticed when you stopped playing. Are they bad, Felix?”

“Yeah ... they REALLY ache. I can barely move the fingers now. It’s a good job I can sing or I would’ve lost out on a lot of tips. You do OK?”

“Better than OK. Especially after I gave that big fat guy a black eye. Aristarchus gave him an earful, then gave me a sack of coins ... in addition to my pay and other tips. It was a really good night.”

“Oh! I missed that! Did he paw you?”

“He **TRIED** ... but I let him know that wasn’t acceptable. Some of those Greeks go absolutely nuts when they see a dancer only wearing a belt and wig. Go figure. It was funny to watch their wives reining them in.”

“You were really good ... really sexy and fun.”

“Only because you played so well. We make a good team ... were you WATCHING me? Thinking of switching sides?”

“No. It’s just the whole atmosphere. I don’t think the other girls put as much life into it as you do. You make EVERYONE want to get frisky. It was a great party.”

“Thanks. You couldn’t have said a nicer thing. Back atcha ... where’s Ram?”

“Something must’ve happened. I don’t feel like staying exposed like this ... we should go.”

Ki and Felix started walking home. In the wealthy part, they stuck close to the walls, and walked in the shadows. As the homes and buildings got smaller and had more alleys, they walked in the center of the street so they wouldn’t be surprised.

“I think we’ve got trouble.”

Ki had heard movement behind them. With quick backward glances, she saw three figures in the shadows ... furtively closing the distance.

“Here.” <She gave Felix one of her daggers, from a scabbard on her thigh.>

“Nice leg, but I can’t use this.”

“Just force your fingers closed on it ... and bluff. I know it hurts, but don’t make a sound. Stand up straight ... don’t look vulnerable.”

Ki grabbed two of her other daggers. When she thought the distance was right, she whirled around, took a solid stance ... and watched the three figures flee down an alley. Another figure was running up to them.

Ki: “Ram! Thank goodness.” <she hugged him> “It was about to get dicey!”

Ram: “From what?”

Felix: “You didn’t see them?”

Ram: “See who?”

Ki: “It must be nice to have a scary reputation. What happened?”

Ram: “Some outsiders try to roll me.”

Felix: “Roll **YOU**?! What were they thinking?”

Ram: "Outsiders ... they pulled knives. It got messy. I felt bad leaving them to bleed out, so I had to find a cop."

Ki: "Another day in the life of Ramesses the Great."

Ram: "Shut up ... What were you going to do with that dagger, Felix? It looks like you can barely hold it."

Felix: "Ki said to bluff."

Ram: "You'd be a lot better off just whacking them with your harp."

Felix: "My **HARP?!!**"

Ki: "Give me back my dagger, please."

Ram: "Nice bit of leg there, little girl."

Ki: "Why thank you kind sir ... Wanna see more? ... *Big boy?*"

Felix: "Get a room."

The first stop was Felix' house. Ram busied himself heating up water in a pot for Felix to soak his hands. Ki got him some ground willow and wine ... and made him a sandwich. When they heard the rustle of armor outside the door, they knew his partner Magnus had returned from some military patrol or other.

Ki: "We were at a party and he played his fingers out."

Magnus: "Thanks for helping. I've got him now." <He walked up behind Felix, kissed him on the head, and started rubbing his neck and shoulders.>

Felix: "I did really well today. Check out my purse!"

Magnus: "Let's get you feeling better, first. Thanks again, Ki ... Ram."

Ki+Ram: "No problem."



"How's your dad, Ki?"

"Alright, I guess. He gets a little worse as time goes on. The Temple herbs seem to be helping him deal."

"You OK for money? I can help a little."

"We're doing OK for now. You're a good friend. When I need help, I'll ask ... OK?"

"OK. Don't be shy. I don't like any of my friends to struggle."

Ki: "Oh, daddy! You're still up? ... It's like ..."

Ram: "Around 3 ..."

Senenmut: "I had to get up to ... you know."

Ram: "I got something for you ... here."

Senenmut: "These two daggers are ordinary crap, but THIS one is *very* nice. The jewels are singing to me ... they're crying to be free. Get my tools, would you, Ki? No point making them suffer."

Ram: "I thought you'd enjoy them."

Senenmut: "Thanks, Ram."

Ram: "While your dad is busy, could you help me with something?"

Ki: "Of course."

Ram: “How serious is *this*?”

Ram dropped the top of his tunic, and revealed a strip of cloth tightly bound around his middle. The part on his back was blood stained.

“Get in a knife fight, be prepared to get cut.”

“The blood has dried, Ram. Let me sponge it off, everything’s stuck to everything.”

“Take your time. I don’t want to come home bloody. It upsets mom.”

“It’s not very deep Ram, but it’s long ... you need stitches.”

“Damn. There goes my night ... what’s left of it.”

“Temple is closed, isn’t it?”

“Not for me. We have an arrangement.”

“Of COURSE, you do! *WHAT* was I thinking? *Everyone* bows to Ramesses the Great.”

“Shut up.”



“Whaaaa? Who? ... What’s going on? It’s the middle of the night! Why are you waking me?”

“Priestess, you said to let you know the next time Ramesses showed up. He’s here. Waiting in the House of Life. I think he’s hurt.”

“Good girl! Off with you now. Don’t tell anyone else.”

“Yes, priestess.”

It wasn’t exactly the “middle” of the night. The Great Crocodile was gone from view. It was only another hour or two to sunrise. The roosters were lazily rousing, scratching the ground and promenading. For someone used to getting up long after breakfast, it was pretty much the same thing.

Meryet smelled herself, did a quick wash, arranged her hair, did her makeup, put on her most engaging perfume, and put on the sheath dress that fit her the tightest. She hiked up the skirt so she could run, and dashed to the clinic in the House of Life. She settled herself and her dress before walking in.

“Ramesses! So good to see you again, how can I help?”

The perfume hit Ram like a club. It was difficult to remember why he came.

“Uhhh ... Meryet? Ummm ... oh! My back! I might need some stitches.”

“Let’s see. Just take the whole thing off, the fabric is getting in the way.”

“OK.”

Meryet wasn’t just examining him, she was lightly stroking him around the wound. Her perfume was closer, stronger ... she was making little feminine “mmmm” noises. It was overwhelming.

“It’s not too bad. A little cleanup, a little sewing, ... good as new. Just don’t strain it for a while or you’ll rip out the stitches.”

Ram just laid on his stomach and relaxed, while Meryet did all the doctoring. He just sort of “floated” in her touch, in her scent, with her sounds. She started massaging parts of him that weren’t affected and weren’t even near the wound.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re so tensed up, Ram, I’m afraid your skin will pull itself apart. I just came back from classes in Sais. Let me try this technique on you. I’m not sure it’ll help, though. None of my patients had this much muscle. It’s hard to get my fingers in. It’s like working on a concreted rock wall.”

The floating sensation increased. Ram felt like she was disconnecting him from his arms and legs. He barely noticed when she rolled him over and continued on his front. He was barely conscious.

Meryet **HAD** him. She hiked up her dress to her hips and straddled him.

“**MERYET! WHAT** are you **DOING** to that poor man!!”

“I’m trying to relax him ... *completely* ... Isetnofret.”

“Get off ... GET OFF OF HIM! ... if you want to do that kind of therapy, you’re in the wrong department.”

“Goddammit ...” <Meryet imagined the tavern jackpot flying away on wings.> “... so close.”

“Ram? Ram? RAMSESES?! You there?”

“Mmmmmmmmmmm. What hap-pened? ... What’s going on? I’m all disconnected.”

“Meryet was a little too enthusiastic ... I’ll put you back together.”

If there is such a term, Isetnofret did “reverse massaging.”

“What just happened, Isetnofret?”

“It’s that damn tavern pool. Meryet must’ve have joined.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Has it occurred to you that all this nonsense would end if you just take a girl ... any girl ... to bed?

Just once? You can have your pick of all the single women in Thebes ... and some of the married ones too.”

“My soul just isn’t in it.”

“I don’t think it’s your soul they’re after.”

“What do I owe you for this?”

“Nothing, this time. It’s on the house.”

“NO! No,no,no ... I know that tone. Let me pay, PLEASE!”

“This comes from the High Priestess herself. We were going to do this anyway, you just saved us the trouble of finding you.”

“Oh, come ON! You’re taking advantage of me. I took *two* orphans last month!”

“... and we hear they’re doing very well. Just one this time. An adorable little girl.”

“I’m not that good with girls. Why can’t you keep her here? This place is FULL of girls.”

“She’s deaf and mute ... and terrified of her own shadow. We’ve tried to let her fit in, but she just can’t handle any kind of group. She can’t communicate. We can’t give her the attention she needs. She needs a small family to bring her outside of herself. She NEEDS you.”

“Every single time I come near this place you have an orphan who ‘needs’ me. You’re shameless with me.”

“Get on your game face ... here she is.”

A little six-year-old girl was escorted into the room. She had the dark skin of the desert people, and was wide eyed, terrified, and cringing. She clung to an almost shapeless doll.

“Hi ... oh, um” . **Hello** ... “My signing is pretty bad, Isetnofret.”

“That’s OK, I’m not sure she can sign either ... you’ll learn together. I knew I’d get you when you saw her.”

“You’re just plain evil. This is above and beyond the call. I want something.”

“What?”

“Free care and meds for Senenmut.”

“Ki’s dad? Done ... as if you’d refuse her if I said ‘no’.”

Ram knelt on the floor, tried to make himself small, and offered her his hand. She shrunk away.

“Isis Great Teat ...”



NoName didn’t have a name. If she had been given one at birth, no one had ever given her a clue what it might be. She obviously couldn’t have known her father had tried to kill her when he discovered what she lacked. It was her mother who saved her, and paid for it.

NoName was beaten many times for not doing things she had been commanded, but had no way of comprehending. Her mother was abused too: she figured it was just something that happened in life. At the end, she watched her father beat her own mother to death, and she had escaped before he had come looking for her. She was able to hide in the baggage of a caravan for a few days, before they found her ... but they weren’t a cruel people. They realized her problems and simply had no resources to take care of a non-productive member. They abandoned her outside of Thebes.

NoName observed beggars getting alms and she tried that, but she was unable to even beg for pity. Desperate, circling an aggressive street dog for a crust, she noticed people giving temple food offerings. She was small, and able to hide in the shadows, and when she thought everyone had left, she darted for the nearest edge of food.

This sort of thing was not unknown in the temples, and NoName was caught right away. Had this been one of the male deity temples, the priests would’ve probably just thrown her back in the street (too small for a beating). By luck, she had chosen an Isis temple, and they cleaned her up and put her in the slave quarters.

From NoName's perspective, every day presented a new obstacle that she didn't know how to deal with. Everything was new and strange: she'd make an attempt to deal with it ... then it would change. She couldn't fight with the larger girls for food, and was trying to survive from table scraps. The woman that brought her here, took her to another, bigger room. All the young girls were dressed in clean tunics, and appeared to be chatting and laughing. She was allowed to eat as much as she wanted ... AS MUCH AS SHE WANTED!

NoName stuffed herself to the point of pain every meal for the next three days, then thought that maybe this part WOULDN'T change. She didn't know what to do during the day. She followed girls around to different jobs, but she couldn't follow instructions and they eventually treated her like furniture: they'd take her places, but stick her off to the side or in corners.

Then the man appeared. NoName was afraid of men, and she was nervous because they had gotten her out of bed apparently just to meet him. The adult women in the building were nice to her, and the young girls certainly weren't mean ... they were just busy. She didn't like the thought of being with a man. She felt safer *here* than she ever had.

No man had ever bent down to her with a kind face. NoName didn't know what it meant, but she had felt what a man could do with an open hand. The women took her to the front of the temple and just watched the street. The early morning people were going to their various tasks with the first rosy rays of the sun. After a bit, they pointed to a man taking a puppy on a walk. The puppy had string tied around its neck and the man was jerking it around, trying to control the dog. They watched the pair until they walked out of view.

The man who had crouched to her, and had the open hand, tied off one end of a long leather thong around his neck, then gave her the loose end. What was she supposed to do with this? She tugged lightly, and the man responded as though something very heavy had knocked him off his feet ... his eyes were wide, practically popping out, his arms were flailing, he was tipping in various directions. She did it several times, each with a slightly different performance ... just about to fall, then regaining his balance only to tip in another direction. Once, he tipped backwards and flipped onto his hands, walking around upside down like he was very confused, then flipping back to his feet. It was quite entertaining for anyone watching.

The priestesses were elbowing each other: it was the first time they had seen the girl smile.

“This ALWAYS works.”

NoName got the idea that she couldn't stay in the building and had to go with the man, but he was BEGGING her to come. She had no idea what would happen if she refused, but it seemed like she was being given a choice for the first time she could ever recall. She eventually decided the man was worth a try ... she could always return to the street or maybe try another of the big buildings ... or come back here.

The man pointed, and the pair of them walked in that direction, with her tugging the leash from time to time, thinking it was very odd that he allowed himself to be controlled like a dog. Would a mean man do that?

They eventually came to a small house, went in, and the man retreated to a far corner. There was a woman there ... a cozy, soft woman ... still dressed in night clothes ... who reminded her of her mother more in attitude than body. The woman got a terribly sad expression on her face and started crying, then kissed NoName on her head ... a few times ... then started hugging her. They were very nice hugs.

It took a couple of weeks before NoName accepted the fact that she had a new family. She was quick to do the dishes and sweep the floor, but sometimes the people would sit her down, give her something sweet, then continue the job **she** had been doing. "Sweet" was an entirely new concept for her, and she liked it. It was the one thing they wouldn't give her in any quantity.

The woman began taking her outside, first little trips, then further and further. When they did this, the woman would tie their waists together. NoName did not like this until she noticed that ALL the mothers did that with their children. It wasn't the mothers tugging at their children : it was children constantly trying to get into things, knock over things, take things ... tugging their mothers. If someone got between them, the mothers would immediately respond with angry faces, and mouths and arms that moved quickly. In NoName's case it was hardly necessary, since she always had a firm grip on the woman's clothes.

On one trip, a vendor had small dresses, and one had a colorful dragonfly embroidered on the shoulder piece. NoName was entranced. The woman noticed her attention immediately.

Ram had been working on an antiquity replica. He put down his work for the day and he did his usual routine. He had been doing exactly the same thing for days ... counting on repetition. He gave NoName a hug and kissed the top of her head, pointed at himself and signed "Ram" by closing his hand but curling his thumb and pinky into ram's horns. Then he pointed to his mom and signed "mom" with an open hand and thumb to his chin.

For the first time, the girl pointed at Ram and gave his sign, and did the same with his mother and her sign. She pointed to herself, then to the dragonfly ... then made her left hand perpendicular to floor, and cupped her right hand on top of it. She was a little frustrated when they didn't get it. She opened and closed her cupped hand. Nothing ... Then she spread both arms and flapped them like wings.

"Dragonfly!!"



Chapter IV – *Gold Is Where You Find It*

The Pharaoh was in a good mood. Most of the previous day had been spent in a religious ceremony. He had forgotten which deity. He used a boilerplate speech which he had pretty much memorized over the years, and it had spots to insert the deities' names and unique traits. He had taken to writing these on his hand to avoid mistakes in delivery, but they were all smudged now. That looked like a "B": Bastet? Bes? Babi? Babi didn't make any sense ... he didn't remember any baboons. Bastet maybe? It felt like more of a Bes party afterwards, and it was a great one. He played his flute along with the band, the dancers were very nice, the wine was alright (but he preferred his own palace-made beer), and that new girl from the Black Sea tried very hard to separate herself from the pack and please him. All in all, it was very good to be Pharaoh.

Then he stepped into Cleopatra's office.

The first thing he saw was the top of his daughter's head, as she had her head down and was examining documents. The desk was STACKED with them. Documents always meant unpleasant questions, usually concerning money. The Pharaoh knew this wasn't going to turn out well, and he tried to beat a hasty retreat.

"Come right in, oh Divine Horus, Lord of the Two Lands ... take a seat. Let's talk."

She hadn't even lifted her head. The Pharaoh started to squirm.

There was a huge sigh from the Princess, then she lifted her head. When she was reading documents on the right, her hair had gotten in the way and she had made a random pony tail on that side. The same thing happened on the left. The oddly angled hair bunches were quite cute in a little girl way, but there was a very angry face in front of them.

"Tell me, oh great Pharaoh, have you *EVER* looked at financial records? **EVER?!!!**"

"Ummm ... I have good advisors?"

"Don't you **DARE** try to blame this on your advisors. They do what you tell them."

"Is there a problem of some sort?"

"**A problem?** Why, yes ... now that you mention it. There **is** a problem ... **YOU!!**"

"I'll go get Dios. He was in charge of the treasury."

"Don't bother. I have his records ... and **notes** right in front of me. He burst into joyful tears when I relieved him of that responsibility ... and stay right where you are. I'm nowhere near done."

"Yes, Patti."

"Don't 'Patti' me ... do you even **KNOW** the state of the treasury?"

"Err ... I was just there the other day. It appears to be empty. Not even a copper."

"Good, good ... glad to know you're keeping up ... and why do you suppose that is?"

"Romans took all the gold?"

"Your poor advisors. I'd give them all raises for putting up with you, **IF WE HAD ANY MONEY!**"

You've single-handedly bankrupted the empire!"

"... but didn't you get gold from Gabinius?"

“How do you think the army is getting paid? The administrators? The palace food suppliers? The police? The navy? The city water workers? The waste handlers? We can’t afford new construction ... maintenance to prevent ancient buildings from falling on people is killing us! I knew things were bad from those Roman bribes, but you’ve been letting our system of government collapse on itself.”

Cleopatra had come out from behind her desk and was stalking him ... like an animal.

“Umm ... ummm ... I’m sorry? Really, sorry?”

“AAAHHHHH!!!! You’re ‘**sorry**’?! I feel like hitting you with something ... like a temple column.”

“I’m your **FATHER!**!”

“Yes, you are ... and I love you dearly ... but by any chance do you know what last night’s party cost? I just totaled up the receipts.”

“Errrr ... isn’t that a religious expense?”

“What the Hell are you talking about? We can’t expense-out our bills from our taxes. We don’t PAY taxes, we COLLECT taxes ... I know you have no idea. I’m making a point. That one party cost 3500 silver we don’t have. You have independent resources to cover it?”

“Well, no ... I ...”

“No, you don’t. This can’t go on. From now on, all your expenses come through me for approval BEFORE you spend the funds. You’re on an allowance. I’ll give you 750 a month. If you want a big party, learn to save.”

“YOU’RE TREATING THE DIVINE PHARAOH OF EGYPT LIKE A CHILD!!”

“If it walks like a duck ...”

“**PATTI!!!**”

“... and no more foreign food imports.”

“Patti, please ...”

“... or foreign fabric ... or foreign women ... you can *think* global, just *buy* local.”

“You’re taking all the fun out of it.”

Cleopatra was patting her father’s head.

“It’s alright, daddy. It’s just until I can get us back on our feet. A little belt tightening now, then back to normal.”

“Don’t wanna.”



Dedyet was enjoying her lunch while dabbling her feet in the salt water pool. Morning classes were over and preparations for a holy day had left her afternoon free. It looked a lot like the fish had gotten plumper under Ashtaroth’s attention. The pink anemone had moved again, somehow, and Dedyet was looking for it so she could tease its defender crab.

“Dedyet? You have two clients in your office ... waiting for you.”

“What now? ... CLIENTS?! ... What are you talking about?”

“It’s a Fertility Arts thing. You have to talk to city people sometimes.”

“About what? Bedding?”

“I think it’s more like ... whatchamacallit ... *counseling*.”

“About *what*?”

“I dunno ... I think ... more like ... family stuff? ... marriage? ... keeping people together?”

“Isis Great Teat.”

“Don’t get mad at **ME!** I’ve never had anything to do with it.”

“My predecessor did this?”

“She said it was her favorite thing to retire from.”

Dedyet found a wife and husband in her office, already squabbling. They barely noticed her coming in. She drew herself up, put on a very serious face, slowly sat down with all the gravity of the High Priestess, and put what she thought would be a calming edge on her voice.

“What seems to be the problem here?”

Then it began.

It was only about fifteen minutes in, but it seemed much, much longer. Each person had been insistent that the other was describing their situation incorrectly. They were constantly interrupting and contradicting each other and the volume kept increasing as each tried to make it clear that only they were reporting the facts. Dedyet couldn’t hear words any more. She saw their mouths moving, and their angry faces ... and noise. So much ... so much noise. It was a tangible feeling: like a temple guard pushing her head against a wall.

“STAHHHPPP!!!!”

They slowed down a little.

“NO! Everyone shut up or GET OUT! ... Your choice.”

She may have been short, but she had a way getting their attention. They were temporarily silent, but both looked like volcanoes waiting to erupt in an instant. Dedyet had an inspiration and grabbed a box of scarabs she was using for Gabiniani feasts.

“Only ONE person can talk ... the one that holds this scarab. If the other interrupts, they’ll have to wait outside until their partner is done ... and they won’t hear what’s going on. Your partner could be telling bold faced lies about you and I’ll just be believing them. Better to shut up and listen to what they say so you can defend yourself. Got it? ... I said: **GOT IT?!!**”

They nodded, a bit sheepishly.

“C’mon. Rock, papyrus, scissors ... NOW! Get your hands up ... one, two, THREE!”

The husband won.

“He always ...”

“Shut **UP!!**”

Dedyet had noticed a variety of hourglasses on a shelf, and now she understood what they were for. She inverted the smallest one in full sight.

“GO!”

The husband got out two sentences before the wife interrupted.

“OUT!!”

Φ Φ Φ

Kalek was pleasantly surprised when Dakka joined him for lunch, outside the small house with their feet up on the low wall. Sagira acted like he was a long-lost friend. It had been weeks.

“I don’t wanna talk about it, Kalek.”

“That’s great! I don’t wanna hear about it. Have some pi.”

“Pi? You’ve given it a name?”

“It’s round, isn’t it?”

“For the love of ... fine. Are you stealing palace beer again?”

“Since I was over there ... it’s so much better than from the beer guy.”

“You know parasites are a very low form of life.”

“... and?”

“I’ve got something serious to talk about, Dakka.”

“Not now, please. Just let me enjoy this moment of nothing ... you can babble, but I won’t listen.”

“I don’t need much help right now, but I need you onboard.”

“You’re going to pester me and ruin my lunch until I listen?”

“Yep.”

“What is it you’re eventually going to ask from me?”

“Money.”

“You have *plenty* of money. We practically have no expenses.”

“**WE** need more. For our families. We may have to hock our jewels.”

“Can you assume I just agree with the buildup and skip to the punchline?”

“We need to prepare for bad times.”

“What kind of times?”

“Take your pick: Romans, Ptolemies, Egyptians ...”

“OK.”

“That’s it? I had a speech ... topic cards and everything.”

“I know everybody says you’re a bit ‘off’, but you always have good ideas for keeping us safe.

‘Families’ did it for me. I’m in.”

“Who says I’m a bit off?”

Φ Φ Φ

“High Priestess?”

“What is it, Banafrit?”

“Can you spare a few minutes ... in the War Room?”

“Of course.”

“I’ve noticed that agricultural areas are painted now ... rather drab colors for Egypt.”

“It’s the harvest, High Priestess. We’re in the last weeks of Shemu. Kalek made me this key.”

Banafrit gave her a wooden board with colors and descriptions.

“Oh, this is clever. Frog green is normal harvest, light green is 10% more, bright green above that ... and it gets sandier going the other way.”

“Look at the map, High Priestess.”

“Didn’t you finish painting?”

“It is complete. From all the harvest reports, High Priestess.”

“Good Lord! What’s all this sand? Shouldn’t it be green?”

“I believe it should be, I don’t know why it’s not. Could you ask her Highness to send scholars out to investigate? I was thinking plant and agricultural people from the Museo ... High Priestess.”

“The Hell with that! Give me your hand.”

The High Priestess took off her seal ring and slipped it on one of Banafrit’s fingers.

“Use this temple seal to get into the Museo and draft the scribes. I’ll get you a royal seal to set up the trip ... or get Dakka to do it, if it takes too long. We’ve only got a couple of months before all the evidence gets submerged with the next flood. My God, Banafrit! How did we get by without you?”

The High Priestess glanced around to see if anyone was looking, then broke character and gave Banafrit a quick hug. Banafrit did her blotchy blush.

Φ Φ Φ

“We’re pulling our hair out, Nebby. We just can’t get gold fast enough.”

“Is there a problem with your plans, Co-regent?”

“Co-regent’ ... still getting used to that. It’s not as sweet as ‘Princess’ and not awe-inspiring like ‘Majesty.’ It sounds more like an administrative position.”

“Isn’t that exactly what it is, Highness?”

“Yeah, well ... you know what we mean ... don’t you? ... Never mind. What were we discussing?”

“Gold, Highness.”

“Gold is coming in from Kush. I’ve still got some of Gabinius’ gold ... but the harvest was barely average, and the taxes have to last us the whole year. ... Oooh, are *we* going to hug Banafrit when we see her ... Maybe we can improve next year, but we’re stuck with this year’s yields. All the temple industries are doing well, but you can’t run an empire on that ... AND pay the interest on our father’s loans. We need more gold.”

The High Priestess had been through this kind of discourse many times. She stayed silent, waiting for the finish.

“There’s a lot of gold just sitting in the ground, Nebby. We’re simply going to take it.”

“What? Besides the Kush mines, Highness?”

“Mmmmmmm? We were thinking much, much closer.”

“No ... no,no,no ... are you **serious?** From the royal **tombs**, Highness?”

“They’re not using that stuff. WE need it.”

“But, but, but ... the Pharaohs! ... Highness.”

“We wouldn’t be the first dynasty to go ... ‘retrieving’. Even our grand-uncle melted down Alexander’s coffin, and Alexander was a RELATIVE ... We know the religious-y part is hard for you, Nebby. I just can’t think of anything else right now. We’re STARVING for cash.”

“As you wish, Highness.”

“Find me an expert, Nebby.”

“As you wish, Highness.”