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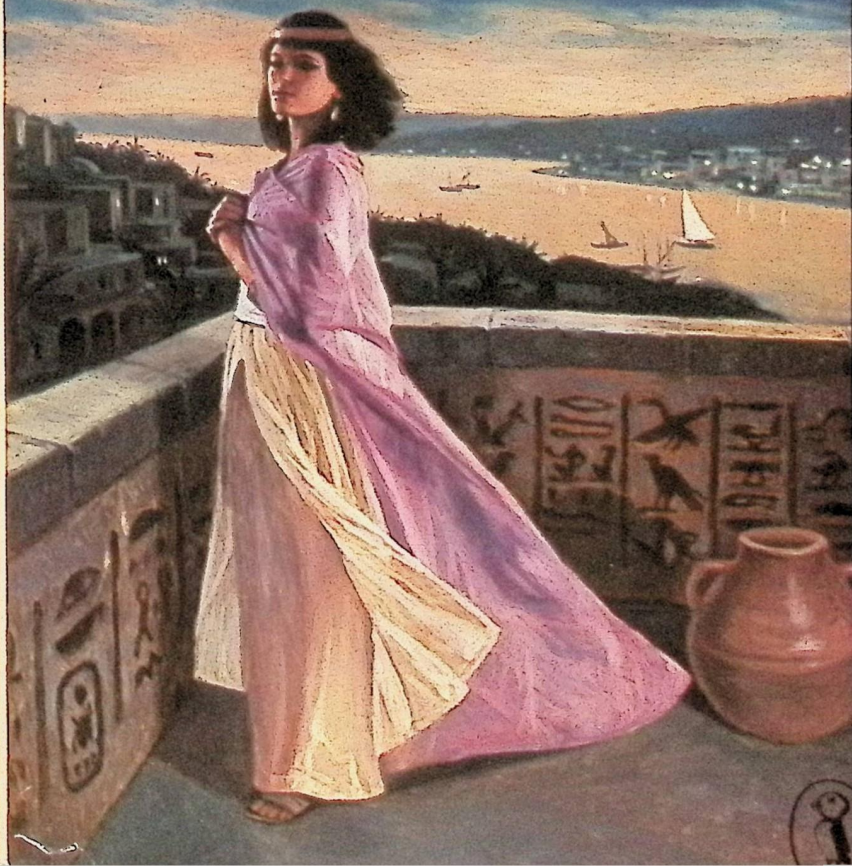
# M A R A

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## Daughter of the Nile

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by Eloise Jarvis McGraw



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# Part I—Menfe

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## CHAPTER 1

### 'The Mysterious Passenger

NEKONKH, captain of the Nile boat *Silver Beetle*, paused for the fiftieth time beside his vessel's high beaked prow and shaded his eyes to peer anxiously across the wharfs.

The city that rose beyond them shimmered, almost drained of color, in the glare of Egyptian noon. Doorways were blue-black in white buildings, alleys were plunged in shadow; the gay colors of the sails and hulls that crowded the harbor seemed faded and indistinct, and even the green of the Nile was overlaid by a blinding surface glitter. Only the sky was vivid, curving in a high blue arch over ancient Menfe.

The wharf itself seethed with activity. Sweating porters hurried in and out among groups of merchants haggling over stacks of cargo yet to be loaded; sailors, both foreign and Egyptian, swarmed everywhere, talking in a babble of tongues. A donkey drover pushed through a cluster of pale-faced Libyans, shouting at his laden beasts; three Mitanni traders in the fringed garments of Babel laid wagers on a dogfight at one end of the wharf, while a ring of yelling urchins surrounded a cage of monkeys at the other. Over all rose the rank smell of the river—an odor compounded of fish, mud, water-soaked rope, pitch and crocodiles.

But nowhere in that tangle was the one tall figure for which the captain searched.

Nekonkh chewed his lip and drummed upon the gunwale with his big, blunt fingers. An hour ago he had been uneasy; now he was so tense that when his helmsman strolled across the deck and touched his elbow, he leaped as if he had been burned.

"By Set and all the devils!" he roared, whirling about savagely. "Fool! Coming upon me from behind like that! What do you want?"

The helmsman took a hasty step back. "The cargo," he mumbled. "Everything is stowed, master. We're ready to sail."

"Well?"

"The—er—we await orders."

"Then await them!"

The helmsman laid his right hand on his left shoulder in the attitude of submission, and escaped, casting puzzled glances backward as he did so.

Nekonkh sighed explosively and mopped the sweat off his upper lip with a hairy wrist. He was a burly man with a fierce jaw contradicted by mild brown eyes, and just now he looked and felt a good deal older than his forty years. For a moment he leaned wearily against the gunwale, staring upriver, where the luxurious barge of some noble moved over the sparkling water like a gigantic water bug, twelve oars on each side dipping rhythmically. Then he straightened, shoved his square-cut black wig askew in order to scratch under it, and adjusted it again with an irritable slap.

Automatically his eye checked the *Silver Beetle*, moving about her trim scrubbed confines from the two great sweeps at the stern to the tall masts with their horizontally furled sails; past the tiny cabin to the bales of wool and hides stacked on the deck, the oarsmen lounging at their posts.

Yes, all was ready to sail, so far as cargo and crew were

concerned. But the passenger? The puzzling, unpredictable, portentous passenger whose very charm set alarm bells ringing loudly in Nekonkh's mind—what of him?

Nekonkh swore under his breath, wishing fervently that cargo and crew were all he had to worry about—wishing he knew either more or less. It was dangerous to have brains these days in the land of Kemt.

He took a restless turn about the deck, his joined hands flapping impatiently at his back, and reviewed once more his brief acquaintance with the missing passenger. It was an acquaintance only ten days old; he had seen the young man for the first time the morning he set sail from Thebes on this trip to Menfe. Since the youth—Sheftu; he had said his name was—had paid his passage promptly, there seemed no reason to give him a second thought. He was pleasant but unobtrusive—tall, somewhere around twenty years old, with an attractively homely face and a common white *shenti* and headcloth like a thousand others. Except for a certain odd, lazy grace in the way he moved, the captain found nothing unusual about him.

That was at first.

Later, during the long, sun-drenched days of the *Beetle's* journey down the river, Nekonkh had good reason to study his passenger more attentively. Only then did he become aware of other details—for instance, the areas of slightly paler skin on Sheftu's upper arms, which indicated that he habitually wore bracelets, though his sole ornament now was a curious amulet on his left wrist; also the absent, brooding expression which sat so often and so oddly on his young face, and the suave charm which covered this instantly if he knew he was being watched. The charm itself was a little odd, once you thought of it. Since when did a scribe's apprentice—for so Sheftu had described himself—possess the smooth and subtle manners of a courtier? The captain grew surer and surer that his passenger was no ordinary nobody. Breeding was written in every line of his long, well-

muscled body, and his voice had the careless authority of one accustomed to being obeyed.

However, Nekonkh might have noticed none of this, had it not been for a conversation which suddenly focused his attention on the young man. It took place early one morning, about five days out of Thebes. The *Silver Beetle* was sailing past an ancient temple surrounded by scaffolding and piles of stone, around which workmen swarmed busily. Nekonkh, standing alone at the door of his cabin, scowled across the river and shook his head.

"Ail! There it is again!" he muttered sourly to himself.

"What do you mean, Captain?"

Nekonkh jumped. He had not heard his passenger come up beside him. "Why, the rebuilding of the old temple yonder," he answered, pointing. "If I've seen that sight once I've seen it forty times in the past few years. Our good queen Hatshepsut evidently thinks gold grows on papyrus stalks! Does she mean to restore every ancient building up and down the Nile?" Nekonkh grunted as scaffolds and workmen slipped upstream past the *Beetle's* stern sweeps. "It's not only the old ruins. Amon himself knows what her new temple at Thebes is costing poor folk like me in sweat and taxes!"

"The new temple is a beautiful one, though," remarked Sheftu. "They say every wall of the inner room is covered with handsomely carved reliefs."

"Reliefs depicting Her Majesty's sacred birth, no doubt?" inquired the captain sardonically.

"Of course. What better subject could there be? Hatshepsut was fathered by the Sun himself, nursed by goddesses, and named Pharaoh in her cradle."

"Aye, so she claims, so she claims!" snorted Nekonkh incautiously. "As for me, I would rather see a man on the throne of Egypt! That young Thutmose, her half-brother—when is he to grow up? For fifteen years now she's been acting as his regent, spending gold and silver like water,

sending ships—mine among them!—to the edge of the world for her own amusement, letting the empire foul its rudder for want of trained soldiers. And still the king does not come of age! Why? It's obvious, friend! He's not allowed to, nor will he ever be! Hatshepsut is pharaoh, and Egypt must put up with it!"

"You do not admire the queen, Captain?"

It was the very blandness of the voice that caused the alarm bells to clang suddenly in Nekonkh's mind. He swung around and really looked at his passenger for the first time; noted the cleverness of the irregular dark face, the odd little smile hovering about the mouth, the dangerous alertness of the long black eyes. Nekonkh went cold all over. What had he been saying! It was treason to speak against the queen—near treason even to mention the young king's name above a whisper, much less actually complain . . .

Full of a sudden clear picture of himself impaled on the torturer's stake in the midst of some desert, he sagged back against the cabin door. "May the queen live forever!" he exclaimed. "May my tongue be clipped if it utters a word against Hatshepsut, the Daughter of the Sun!"

"Pray rest easy, Captain." Sheftu's voice was like a purr. "You but stated an opinion. But you are somewhat indiscreet. There are those who might haul you off to the palace dungeons at once if they heard what I just heard." He gave Nekonkh a moment to absorb that thought, then added casually, "So you would overthrow the queen?"

"By the Feather of Truth, I said no such thing!" gasped Nekonkh. He darted an agonized glance up and down the deck, then strode to a deserted spot in the bows.

Sheftu followed, his face amused. "A wise precaution," he commented, arranging himself comfortably against the gunwale. "They say the queen's spies are everywhere."

"No doubt!" Nekonkh was convinced he was talking to one that minute. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and attempted to change the subject, but Sheftu overrode him.



"She has grounds for her constant suspicions. There's a group of reckless fools in Thebes—no doubt you've heard of them—who have organized in secret to topple Hatshepsut off her throne and set young Thutmose there instead."

"I know nothing of them, nothing! Such movements have started before, and been squashed like beetles. They must be fools indeed who would try again!"

"Perhaps." Sheftu shrugged expressively. He had lowered his voice, moving a little closer to Nekonkh. "But one must give them credit, Captain: they have courage. And they insist they are fighting for what all Egypt really wants. They say it's monstrous that a woman should wear the double crown, and call herself not Royal Wife and Consort, but King and Pharaoh. They say the backs of the people are breaking under her taxes, that the children's ribs show plainer with every statue of herself she erects in the new temple, while Count Senmut the Architect, the favorite, the Lord-High-Everything-In-Egypt, grows mysteriously richer each time a porch is built or a terrace paved. . . . Captain, they say—I but quote, you understand—they say she grows so arrogant that the gods themselves will soon rise up to strike her down, and Egypt with her! Should we permit . . ."

Nekonkh's brain was spinning. What was this young rogue up to, talking like a spy one minute, a firebrand the next? But no, of course he was but quoting. Yet the captain found himself responding fiercely to the forbidden words. Aye, it was true, it was all true, and everyone knew it! Count Senmut had a finger in every pot in Egypt, and as for the queen, that usurper . . . *Beware*, clanged the alarm bells. *You're walking into a trap.*

Sheftu was still talking, softly, insistently. "Should we permit these crimes, they ask? Can we risk the anger of the gods? Is not this woman a peril to all the Black Land?"

Nekonkh grasped blindly at a safe question, whose answer tradition had taught him. "The First Thutmose—he

who was pharaoh in my youth—he lives with the gods now. He will protect Egypt from their anger.”

“For Hatshepsut’s sake?” came the mocking whisper. “For the sake of the daughter who snatched his throne without waiting for him to die? Captain, he disowned her himself, he chiseled her name off all his monuments.”

“I know not for whose sake, I know nothing!” snarled Nekonkh. “You’ll not trick me into speaking treason I tell you! Hatshepsut is pharaoh. So be it! Maybe young Thutmose is not fit to rule. Aye, that’s it! Only a weakling could be held down so long by a woman—like a rabbit in a snare!”

There was no answer for a moment. When Sheftu spoke again his voice was grim and quiet, without a trace of mockery. “You are mistaken, Captain,” he said. “Thutmose is no rabbit, he is a lion. And the snare is not made that will hold a lion forever.”

Nekonkh turned slowly. “By the Blessed Son!” he exclaimed. “Which camp are you in, young man? Who speaks treason now?”

Sheftu eased back against the gunwale, his face bland and expressionless. “Why, no one, my friend,” he murmured. “We spoke only of snares and rabbits.”

Suddenly he smiled. It had an astonishing effect, that smile. It lighted up his dark irregular features with a charm that seemed to warm the world. The nervous sweat dried on Nekonkh’s brow, and his throat relaxed. He was even conscious of an obscure exhilaration, a sense of well-being. He found himself grinning genially.

“Aye, aye, you’re quite right, mate,” he agreed. “Snares and rabbits. Nothing more.”

Sheftu bowed and took himself off to the other end of the ship, and there was no more conversation that day. But Nekonkh watched his passenger with feverish interest from that hour on. By the time the *Silver Beetle* docked at Menfe he was convinced that Sheftu was not and never had been a scribe’s apprentice; in fact he strongly suspected that the

youth was one of those very fools—or heroes—who had secretly rallied about the king.

Furthermore he realized with a reckless sort of excitement that he, too, would be glad to offer his life to such a cause, for the sake of this extraordinary young man, his fettered king, and the Egypt they both loved.

Now, two days after docking, the new cargo was stowed and all was ready to sail. But still there was no sign of Sheftu. He had left the vessel as soon as it tied up, having arranged to return with it to Thebes when the time came. Then he had vanished into the tangle of mud-brick buildings, twisting streets, and hurrying, shouting, sweating humanity that was Menfe. He had not come back.

Restlessly Nekonkh paced his scrubbed acacia deck, from gunwale to cabin, from cabin to sweeps, back again to gunwale. Ominous pictures rose in his mind—Sheftu seized by some spy of the queen, Sheftu questioned by torture, Sheftu hanging head downward from the city walls.

What a fool I am, thought Nekonkh desperately. Why do I fret over the young rogue? For all I know he's reporting *me* to the queen's men this instant! . . . No, by Amon, when he spoke of the king he spoke his heart, I'd stake my last copper on it! If I had told him—if I had offered myself and my ship to him and the king—then he would have let me know his plans, what to do if he did not come back. *Hail!* That I knew more—or else nothing at all! What a fool I am! Why doesn't he come?

Eastward from the wharfs, in another part of the city, a young slave girl of about seventeen years sat in a sunny corner between her master's storerooms and his garden wall. She was bending over a papyrus roll held carefully in her lap, and her lips moved as she read.

Spend the day merrily.

Put unguent and fine oil together to thy nostrils,

Set singing and music before thy face.

Cast all evil behind thee, and bethink thee only of joy,  
Till comes that day of mooring in the land that loveth  
silence.

Spend the day merrily . . .

"*Mara!*" The harsh voice shattered the quiet of the garden. The girl snatched up the papyrus and stuffed it into her sash, half turning away from the grim-faced woman who had appeared in the storeroom door. "So there you are, Miss Blue-Eyed Good-For-Nothing!" the woman said angrily. "Idling away your time while the rest of us work like the slaves we are! Up with you! The master's *shentis* must be starched and pleated!"

"I wish they clothed his corpse," muttered Mara, flashing a venomous look over her shoulder.

"Aye, aye, so wish we all," retorted the other. "But Zasha's far from in his tomb, and his stick's livelier than he is, as you'll know if he comes home from his jewel trading and finds you skulking here. Come, now, up with you!"

"I come. Go away, Teta."

"Nay, I'll not go until I see you on your feet, and starting for the pressing rooms. Move, now!" Teta leaned farther out the door and peered suspiciously over Mara's shoulder. "What's that you're hiding, you thieving wretch? One of the master's scrolls again, I'll take my oath! *Hai-ai!* Remember the last time! He all but took the flesh off your shoulders, stupid, isn't once enough? Put it back, make haste, or I won't answer for your life. . . . Reading!" she grumbled, turning back into the house as Mara scrambled to her feet and ran in the direction of the Room of Books. "Idle as the mistress herself, when there's ironing to be done, and a thrashing is all she'll get for her high-and-mighty airs!"

May the *kheft*-things take that Zasha and all his kin! fumed Mara as she ran up the red-graveled path. Better not

to live at all than to live like this! I swear the dogs in the market place have a better life!

She pulled open the heavy door and slipped across the cool clay pavements of the Room of Books, to shove the papyrus to its place among the others on the shelves. For a moment she stood, letting her envious gaze rest on one neat roll after another—*The Proverbs of Ptah-hotep, The Prophecies of Neferrohu, The Book of Surgery, The Eloquent Peasant, Baufra's Tale*—forbidden treasure houses of wisdom and poetry and ancient fable which it was a crime for her to touch. Yet Zasha could read no more of it than could his vain and empty-headed lady, who spent most of her time before a mirror. He could write no more than his name, but must call in a scribe on every occasion. Mara's lip curled. Beast! Slave though she was, she could both read and write, thanks to a former master. And she spoke Babylonian as well as her own tongue.

But what good did it do her? Zasha was rich, and that was what counted. He was rich and he was free.

She turned to look wistfully about the room, and as she did so the old memory returned to haunt her. It was all so long ago and vague now that she never knew whether it was real or imagined, but somehow, somewhere, maybe only in a dream, she had known a room like this; like this only finer—high-ceilinged and luxurious, with rich furnishings and shelves of scrolls.

There were times when her conviction was strong that she had once lived a different life. Sometimes—very seldom now that she had grown older—there had even come the fleeting vision of a face, a beautiful smiling face with blue eyes, like her own, and the dim recollection of someone bending over her and laughing. . . .

A dismal rumbling from her stomach brought her back to the present. Someone will be bending over me with a stick soon, she thought. I had best be gone from here.

Her stomach protested its emptiness once again, mak-

ing her feel lightheaded and dizzy, as she hurried out of the room and across the garden. She clenched her teeth and pulled her sash tighter. One thing she could never remember was a time when she had not been hungry.

"Well, Teta, the scroll is returned," she remarked as she entered the storeroom. "Where are the precious *shentis* of that swineherd, that son of wretched Kush, beloved of crocodiles—"

"*Ast!* Behold them in their usual place!" rasped Teta, pointing. "That tongue of yours will flap once too often, Reckless One! Be silent and useful, for oncel!"

Teta turned back to her task of sealing wine jars, and the earthy smell of the clay she was using mingled with that of the hot starch as the two worked for a while in silence. Presently a new fragrance drifted in through the open door, from the direction of the kitchen nearby—the fragrance of roasting waterfowl.

"Ahhhhh!" groaned Mara, stopping in the midst of wringing out one of the linen kilts. "Great Amon, is there anything at all to eat in this place?"

Teta tamped down a pottery bung, tied it firmly with linen, capped it with clay and pressed down Zasha's seal before she answered. Then she half turned, gesturing toward the shelves that lined the walls. "Plenty," she said sarcastically. "Help yourself."

Mara's eyes traveled over the shelves, stacked with jars and kegs, and sacks of dried fish—all sealed and untouchable, save at the order of the mistress. Then she finished wringing out the *shenti*, flung it in the basket, and gave another yank to her sash.

"Someday," she said through her teeth, "I'm going to have gold. So much gold that I could eat roasted waterfowl every day. So much that I could buy Zasha and his simpering wife and all his relatives, and toss them to the crocodiles!"

Teta laughed shrilly. "*Hai!* tell me another, stupid! A slave

you are and a slave you'll be, if you don't die before your time from the beatings you get for your impudence. Gold! Hail Gold!"

Yes, gold! thought Mara. And jewels, and linen so sheer you can see through it, and little alabaster pots like the mistress' to hold the paint for my eyelids, and freedom, freedom! A slave I'll *not* be all my life! Someday there'll be a chance—and though it cost my neck I'll take it, snatch it!

She hurled the last kilt into the basket and swung the basket to her head. "Farewell, Teta," she muttered, starting for the pressing rooms. "Take care you don't faint of emptiness where the mistress can see you—it might offend her!"

"Gold!" retorted Teta, still chuckling under her breath. "Hail Gold!"

Mara slammed the door behind her. She crossed the courtyard to the pressing rooms with the smooth, swinging stride made second nature to those who habitually carry burdens on the head. Setting the basket on a stool beside the narrow table she went to poke up the fire that was to heat the irons.

*Spend the day merrily*, echoed the *Song of the Harper* ironically in her mind. *Bethink thee only of joy, till comes that day of mooring in the land that loveth silence . . . Lo, none that hath gone may come again.*

Aye, and who knew when that day of mooring would be upon one, swift and final? Here were the hateful fluting irons, the steaming *shentis* of that son of crocodiles, Zasha; outside the air was soft, the sky blue as the eye of heaven.

Suddenly Mara flung the poker into the fire with all her strength. She whirled out of the room and across the red-graveled path to a dom palm that grew beside the garden wall. Up she scrambled like a squirrel, her bare toes clinging to the rough bark. At the top of the wall she glanced once over her shoulder toward the closed storeroom door, then leaped down on the other side.

Freedom, brief and costly though it might be, was hers for a little while. She was laughing aloud as she plunged into the nearest alleyway and through the next street, in the direction of the market place.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Sale of a Slave

ON THE SHADOWED side of one of the mud-brick buildings that edged Menfe's thriving market place, Sheftu stood quietly, with folded arms. His position commanded a good view of the entire area—merchants' and bakers' stalls, shops of silver-workers, weavers, glassblowers and makers of sandals. Here a potter spun his wheel and shaped the clay, chanting supplications to Khnum, ram-headed deity of all potters, who had once shaped man himself on a divine wheel. There, in a shady corner, a barber plied his trade, jostled by roving fishmongers. The square was thronged with shoppers—the white-clad, copper-skinned, black-wigged inhabitants of Menfe with their baskets and their squabbling voices and their long, painted eyes.

They took no notice whatever of Sheftu, whose ordinary white *shenti* and headcloth made him inconspicuous, and whose immobility made him seem merely part of the shadow in which he stood. Outwardly casual, he was inwardly as alert as a cat at a mousehole. His eyes, the only



part of him: that moved, flashed restlessly over the crowd, searching, probing, overlooking nothing. He had been waiting a long time.

Presently his attention was drawn to a little commotion in a far corner of the square. A group of soldiers, pushing officiously through the crowd, had shoved a ragged girl against a passing litter, so that she collided with one of the Nubian bearers. He in turn lost his balance, staggered and almost dropped his corner of the litter; whereupon the bejeweled great lady inside thrust her head between the curtains and began to scold furiously.

"Begone, rabble!" shouted the servant in attendance behind the litter. He sprang forward, yelling imprecations, and began to lay about him with his stick, his blows falling impartially upon the bearer and the unfortunate girl, who screamed back at him with equal fury, in both Egyptian and Babylonian. Suddenly she dodged out of his reach, ducked with remarkable agility between the legs of an ass and vanished into the crowd. An instant later, however, she reappeared some distance behind the litter, strutting along in the wake of the self-important attendant in a perfect imitation of his pompous swagger. The bystanders roared and slapped their thighs.

Sheftu was grinning too. He was sorry when with a final mocking impudence, the girl melted once more into the crowd.

Her lithe image still in his mind, Sheftu returned to his vigilant scanning of the market place. The messenger was late. A glance at the sun told him that he dared not wait much longer, that if the promised signal did not come soon, it would never come, and all his arguments and pleas of yesterday had failed. He stirred restlessly in his shadowed corner, and gnawed his lip.

Suddenly he caught sight of the girl again. This time she was quite near him, strolling with apparent aimlessness among the stalls. She stopped to watch a potter at work,

and Sheftu studied her curiously, unable to fit her into any of the usual categories. Her face was mobile, alert and vivid, broad across the cheekbones, smudged with dirt—a gamin's face. But it was set with eyes as blue as the noon sky—a rare sight in Egypt. She was far too ragged to be the daughter of even the poorest merchant, yet she must have some education, for she had spoken Babylonian; and her slim, wild grace had nothing whatever in common with the stunted brutishness of serfs or porters. What was she?

She wandered a few steps farther, and Sheftu's eyes followed her. Had he not been watching closely he would never have seen the swift glance she threw into a side street, where a baker's apprentice was hurrying along balancing his great flat basket of breadstuffs on his head, waving a palm branch over them to keep off the crows.

Tongue in cheek, Sheftu continued to watch. He was not surprised when the girl stepped innocently into the street at the precise moment that the baker's apprentice darted around the corner of the stall. There was a shout, the inevitable sharp collision, and bread, basket, palm leaf scattered in all directions.

Instantly the girl was all remorse. She was everywhere at once, snatching up the loaves and dusting them, soothing the apprentice with smiles and sympathy that caused his frown to give way to a flattered smirk. Only Sheftu, shaking with silent merriment, observed the good half-dozen honey cakes that found their way into her sash instead of the basket. His enjoyment increased as she began to nibble one absently under the baker's very nose, chattering to him meanwhile; it passed all bounds when she actually took another from her sash, offered it prettily to the bedazzled youth, and strolled off down the street leaving him blushing and gaping happily after her.

By Amon! thought Sheftu, nearly choking with laughter. There is as witty a piece of devilry as I've ever seen! What a girl this is!

Suddenly he stiffened, and the girl vanished from his mind as if she had never been. There, across the market place, lowering his earthen jar into the public well, was a Nubian in a red headcloth.

Sheftu waited tensely as the jar went down once, twice, and after a pause, a third time. It was the signal. With a long sigh of relief he stepped at last out of his shadowy corner. The Nubian shouldered his water jar and departed; Sheftu, mingling inconspicuously with the crowd, followed in the same general direction, keeping the red headcloth always in sight.

Once out of the market place, the black man moved swiftly through a maze of alleys and side streets, Sheftu following at a discreet distance. Presently the guide vanished abruptly into a doorway.

There was a porter coming toward Sheftu down the street; behind he could hear other footsteps, and quarreling voices. Continuing his same unhurried stride he passed the doorway without a glance, strolling on until the porter had disappeared around a corner, and the quarrelers were abreast of him. He glanced at them casually as they passed, and was surprised to see the same girl whose antics had amused him in the square. She was being dragged along roughly by a scowling man with a cruel face, who wore gold arm bands and appeared to be a person of some consequence. It was he who was doing most of the talking. He muttered imprecations under his breath, exploding now and then into angry curses and giving another jerk on the girl's arm. She responded sometimes with a protest or a whispered Babylonian phrase, but for the most part accepted the abuse passively—or so Sheftu thought until she flashed a look in his direction and he saw her eyes, blazing like blue jewels in her tanned face. There was no submission there, and not a trace of fear, only fury. But Sheftu realized with a sudden shock that she was a slave. She must be; otherwise, angry as she was, she would openly rebel against this man,

who was evidently her master. Now the contradictions in her appearance were no longer baffling. Probably she had been well born, stolen as a child from her family, sold and resold until there was no one left who could possibly know who she once had been.

As the two disappeared into a side street Sheftu turned back toward the doorway, feeling spiritless and depressed. It was a crass and ugly world where such a girl could be kept a slave.

So occupied was he with this notion that only habit caused him to conceal his face from the other figure who appeared at that moment on the street—a man swathed to the ears in a woolen cloak, though it was warm noonday. This man strode along in the direction the girl and her master had taken, and like them, turned the corner.

It was Destiny that passed, but Sheftu could not know that. He knew only that the street was now empty, and he walked swiftly toward the doorway through which the Nubian had disappeared.

Two streets away, the girl and her master were nearing home.

"Goat! Barbarian! *Swineherd!*" raged Mara under her breath, in Babylonian. She far preferred to rage in Egyptian, since its heavy gutturals lent themselves perfectly to invective. But she was too wise to indulge her preference at the moment. With her arm in her master's harsh grasp, and his other hand reaching for his stick, she confined herself to a tongue he did not know. Even so, it was satisfying, since she knew it infuriated Zasha to be reminded that his slave was better educated than himself.

"Son of three pigs! Know-nothing!" she spat at him.

"Cease that babble!" he roared. They had reached the front courtyard of his house and he gave her a fling that sent her staggering across the paving to land painfully upon the broad stone steps.

cloak and brought out a purse, which he flung contemptuously at Zasha's feet. Then he led Mara out of the courtyard without another word, leaving the merchant white faced and staring behind him.

The whole thing had happened so fast that Mara felt giddy. In astonished silence she followed her new owner through the crooked streets, stealing curious glances at what she could see of his face. But he was an eye, a jutting nose, and a length of white wool, nothing more. She shrugged and gave it up. No doubt he would show himself in time. Meanwhile—she felt a glorious lightness grow within her at the thought—meanwhile, she was rid of Zasha! Of all the masters she had had, he was the worst. Perhaps this new one would feed her.

Her hand went to her sash, where a few of the honey cakes were still tucked away safe. She frowned. She had meant to give one to Teta, poor soul, who would now have to iron those hateful *shentis* still lying neglected in their basket. It was too bad. She had never resented Teta's scolding, knowing that most of her ill temper stemmed from hunger.

No matter, Mara thought, and her face cleared. Teta is gone from your life as others have come and gone, and their fate is no concern of yours. Look after yourself, my girl! Nobody else will.

After some minutes of walking they came to an inn surrounded by a high mud-brick wall. The man turned through the gate, ignored the lower-floor entrance and led the way up a flight of stairs set against the outside of the building. When they reached the room at the top he secured the door and turned to face Mara, throwing off his cloak at last.

She had to make an effort to conceal her surprise. He was dressed in the finest linen, with arm bands of chased gold and a broad jeweled collar of remarkable beauty. A man of great wealth! But his face filled her with misgivings. It was cold and stony as the Sphinx itself.

"Your name, girl?"

"Mara. Daughter of Nobody and his wife Nothing."

His granite face showed no flicker of expression, but his voice grew icy. "Take care! Wit becomes impudence in a slave's mouth." He sat down in the room's one chair and regarded her impassively. "I watched you in the market place. You are both daring and unscrupulous, and you think fast. I have been looking for a person with those particular characteristics. Also I noticed you speak Babylonian. I presume your command of the language goes somewhat beyond mere invective?"

"I speak the tongue well," murmured the girl. This conversation astonished her even more than the suddenness of her sale. She could not imagine its purpose.

"Good. Now look you. I have bought you for no ordinary purpose, as you may be guessing. I have a very special duty for you. But—" he leaned forward to emphasize his words, "it is so dangerous a duty that I will give you free choice whether or not you will attempt it. If your choice be 'nay,' you have only to say so, and I will sell you at once to some other master. I've no need for more household slaves."

"And if my choice be aye?"

"It may bring you sudden death, or worse. But you will find the danger has its compensations. So long as you obey my orders you will be quite free from the usual slave's life, and if you carry them out successfully, I will free you altogether."

Mara gripped the edge of the table that separated them. There was no hesitation in her mind, but it took a moment to control the wild excitement that filled her. "Aye! My choice is aye!" she whispered.

"Think well. You may be choosing destruction."

"No matter! I would rather be dead than a slave!"

He gave a faint smile. "So I thought. Now listen closely. One reason I picked you is that you have the appearance of a girl of the upper classes—or you would have if your hair

were clipped and dressed and your rags exchanged for decent clothing. If these things were done, do you think you could live up to your fine garments?"

"Why, yes, I suppose I could act the part of a human being."

He chose to ignore the sarcasm. "So be it. As you heard, I bought you in the queen's name. You will serve the queen as well as myself, though no one will know this. No one will realize you are a purchased slave at all, for you will masquerade as a free maiden, the daughter of a priest of Abydos, now dead. *If anyone should find out differently, you will die at once.* Do you understand thus far?"

Mara tingled with fresh astonishment. His eyes were cold, his mouth implacable. He meant exactly what he said. "I understand," she said slowly. "What service am I to do?"

"A princess of Canaan, one Inanni, is on her way to Thebes at this moment to become the wife of the young pretender Thutmose. She has her own train of servants and waiting women, but she will need an interpreter." The man leaned forward, jabbing his finger at Mara. "You are to be that interpreter. You will go at once to the city of Abydos, where the princess is spending a week in the usual ceremonies of purification. You will seek out an Egyptian called Saankh-Wen, who is in charge of the ships, and give him this."

He drew from his girdle a tiny green scarab, inscribed with the name of Hatshepsut. Mara took it in a hand cold with excitement. So far this man had not really told her anything. What was behind all these strange instructions?

"The clothes? The hair?" she murmured.

"Saankh-Wen will arrange for all that," returned her master, gesturing impatiently. "When you leave Abydos attached as interpreter to Inanni's train, you will be suitably adorned, and entirely above suspicion of any kind. Now."

He paused, fixing her with narrowed eyes, and Mara stiffened.

"Once in Thebes," the man went on softly, "you will accompany the princess to her quarters in the palace and remain there for an indefinite period. You will be present at all her interviews with the king, naturally, since she does not speak a word of our language, and he will not deign to speak hers. *Keep your ears open.* Listen to whatever goes on between the king and those who surround him—his servants, his scribes, his musicians. I want to know which of these people carries his orders to others outside the palace walls. Somehow he is sending and receiving messages. I want to know how."

Mara stared at him, breathing hard. "In short, I am a spy."

"Exactly. If you are as clever as I think you are, you should have no trouble obtaining this information. If you succeed, you will not be dissatisfied with your reward. But if you fail, whether by accident *or design*—"

He did not finish the sentence. He did not need to. He was smiling in a way that sent a little trickle of fear down Mara's spine.

She took a deep breath. "How am I to report to you?"

"Leave that to me."

"Is it permitted to know your name?"

"It is not. The less you know, the less you will be tempted to let your wits run away with you." The man stood up, taking a heavy gold chain from his neck. "Take this. It will pay your passage to Abydos. Get on the next boat that leaves." Again the thin smile. "Remember I am no stupid baker's apprentice. Should the chain—and you—disappear somehow between here and the wharves it would be . . . regrettable. Do we understand each other?"

"Perfectly," said Mara.

"Then go. Enjoy your freedom and your fine clothes and your acquaintance with royalty—while you can. It may not last long."

He leaned back, gesturing toward the door, and Mara



realized that she was dismissed. She was free, free to walk out that door, make her way unchallenged to the wharf, and set sail for Abydos, Thebes—adventure. No more rags. No more beatings or loaf snatching. No more hunger! Instead there would be luxury and royal intrigue and excitement; and once she was in the palace, whatever this man's threats might be, there would be endless opportunities for a girl who knew how to use her wits!

The future opened up before her in a vista radiant with possibilities, each more entrancing than the last. Without knowing it, she laughed aloud for joy.

The man's dry voice rasped suddenly across her day-dreams. "Be careful, Mara. You are still a slave."

She shrugged and grinned. "I'll try to remember."

"I will be there to remind you," he remarked acidly. He jerked his head toward the door and this time she went, without even looking back.

## CHAPTER 3

### The War Hawk

WHEN Sheftu had assured himself that the street was finally empty, he opened the door in the wall and quickly slipped through it. The Nubian was waiting for him.

"This way, my lord," he murmured.

"Well, Ebi, what think you? Is there good news for me?"

Sheftu asked in a low voice, following the servant across the courtyard.

"I cannot say, master. This garden is green and pleasant. Khofra is an old man now. To be truthful, he is tired of both wars and pharaohs, having seen too much of both in his life. I think he will decide to stay here."

Sheftu's heart sank. But he said only, "Perhaps he may yet be persuaded."

"The old are sometimes stubborn, master," said Ebi.

Sheftu smiled grimly. "The young are sometimes even more so! He'll come to Thebes if I have to carry him there in chains."

"I wish you good fortune, then." Ebi stopped before a door. "He is here. Enter, if you will."

Drawing a long breath to calm his nerves, Sheftu opened the door and stepped into a quiet, sunny room. It was of familiar design, spacious, rectangular, windowless. But the two outside walls stopped some feet short of the ceiling, and through this open space, which was divided by graceful columns, light and air poured down into the room. In its center, in a chair beside a low table, sat the man Sheftu had come to see—Khofra, the warrior hero of all Egypt. Veteran of countless foreign campaigns, leader of men and for many years chief general of all the armies under the First Thutmose, Hatshepsut's father, Khofra was now, at sixty, enjoying a peaceful old age. But he was far from feeble. His eyes still flashed dark fire under his white eyebrows, and the hand he stretched out to Sheftu was vigorous and firm.

"Well, my boy. Were you observed?"

He laughed soundlessly at the expression on Sheftu's face, and waved his visitor to a seat. "No, no, naturally not. You are discretion itself, as skilled in mummery as you are in guile. One would never recognize the gold-hung son of Lord Menkau in those simple rags. I must congratulate you. You look neither more nor less distinguished than every

third man one meets in the street, and so are practically invisible."

"That was my aim, Honored One." Sheftu forced himself to sit down unhurriedly, place relaxed hands on the arms of his chair and smile with a confidence he was far from feeling. "When you come to Thebes to offer your services to the queen as head of her armies, I promise none but you and Ebi and the king will ever have known of my connection with the affair."

"When I come?" said the old man drily. "I did not know I had made the decision."

"A mere formality! Yesterday I spread the facts before you, revealed our plans and begged your assistance, without which we must fail. Today I come to hear your answer."

"And you have not the slightest doubt what that answer will be?" inquired Khofra, even more drily.

"Not the slightest," said Sheftu.

For a moment their eyes met, the old man's ironic and a little sad, Sheftu's dark and steady. Khofra gave a laugh that was half a sigh, and moved restlessly on his cushioned chair.

"Look you, my boy," he said. "I was young once, I know what you are feeling. I, too, loved my pharaoh; I rode in my chariot against his enemies and was fearless, and smote them down in great numbers and brought their severed hands and ears to his tent and was happy when he smiled. Together we subjugated the whole southern land of Nubia, even beyond the third cataract of the Nile. Together we rode northward against the Keftiyews and the Canaanites and gazed at last on the strange Euphrates, the river which flows the wrong way. Together we returned to the Black Land with prisoners by the thousand—with an empire! But we were not together after that, not ever again, my friend. Pharaoh knew me not, once the empire was gained. He valued me not, loved me not, wanted me not. I was for-

gotten as though I had never been." The old general broke off, looking down at his hands.

"*Haut meryt*, you are mistaken!" protested Sheftu. "There is no name better remembered or more honored than yours in all the Black Land."

"Honor I never cared for—nor fame nor riches—then or now. 'Beloved General,' you call me—" Khofra raised his head. "That was what I wanted, to be pharaoh's friend at home as well as on the battlefield. But pharaohs do not love men, they use them. No, Lord Sheftu, I have seen enough of pharaohs. Serve yours if you will—I will stay comfortably at home. And when young Thutmose tosses you aside like a worn sandal, come to me. Perhaps I can comfort you."

There was a pause. Then Sheftu said gravely, "You do not understand, *Haut Khofra*."

"Understand?" The old man frowned in surprise. "Certainly I understand. You wish me to come to Thebes as head of Hatshepsut's troops, especially the two thousand of the bodyguard, who are sadly in need of training. You wish me to train them, inspire them, discipline them to blind obedience to me personally, so that at my word of command they will rise against the queen herself. I understand all this perfectly. What you do not understand, my boy, is that I have finished with pharaohs."

"But I do not ask it for pharaoh. I ask it for Egypt."

Khofra's fingers stopped drumming upon the table. "Egypt?" he echoed.

"Aye, my general! Have you never known that it was Egypt you served?" Sheftu left his chair to stand over the old man. "That empire you conquered—was that pharaoh's? No, pharaoh is dead. It is Egypt's! But by all the gods, how long can we keep it, with this pampered woman on the throne? All Syria is growing restive. The Kadesh, the Keft-yew, they have not felt the point of an Egyptian spear since their graybeards were young, and they need to be taught

respect. You think Hatshepsut will do it? Pahl She cares for nothing except building more temples—at whatever cost!”

Sheftu broke off, breathing hard. Khofra's still profile told him nothing, and he had a sudden terrible vision of returning to Thutmose empty handed. He leaned closer, gripping Khofra's chair. "But Egypt cares! Egypt groans under taxes, while the empire slips away, bit by bit! With you in control of the Army, Hatshepsut can be overthrown, and Thutmose, who is a man and a warrior, can set things to rights. *Hai*, think, Khofra! Pharaohs come and go—what matter if one used you and tossed you aside and loved you not? Egypt loved you, and she needs you worse than ever before. She is sick! Will you let her die?"

Still the old man sat motionless. Sheftu had done all he could, and he knew it. He straightened slowly, in a silence only intensified by the humming of bees in the acacia blossoms outside, and the shrill, far-off scream of an eagle. Khofra was looking at his hands, where they lay palm-down on the polished table. They were powerful hands still—blunt fingered and scarred and sinewy—and once they had gripped the mightiest sword in all Egypt.

The general rose suddenly and walked to the open door, where he stood looking out at the sunny courtyard.

"You are a remarkable young man, Lord Sheftu," he murmured at last. "Remarkable and wise, for you have shown me a thing I never knew. So Egypt loved me!" He paused, and for a moment longer remained motionless, leaning against the doorframe. Then he turned back into the room. "Egypt needs me? So be it. I will come."

"Blessed of Amon!" breathed Sheftu. He crossed the room and bowed low. "In pharaoh's name, in Egypt's name, I thank you, *Haut meryt*."

"I want no thanks. Up, my lord. It is I who thank you. You've cured an ache of twenty years' standing—and at last made my life seem a reasonable thing."

"Reasonable? By all the gods, it's glorious! Now, more than ever. This news—" Sheftu stopped, then suddenly laughed. "This news will cheer my prince so that he may even smile upon the Canaanite princess!"

"Thutmose has sent for a Canaanite princess?" exclaimed Khofra.

"Can you think so, my general? Nay, it is Hatshepsut who has sent for her. Thutmose wants no barbarian for a wife! He rages like the leopard of Upper Egypt at the very idea. It is just one more arrogant insult from that most arrogant of women, his sister. She holds him fast in a snare of politics and spies, and when he struggles, offers him this princess as one offers a toy to a fretful child. Ai, Khofra! She underestimates him!"

Khofra gave his soundless laugh. "A pretty scene it will be, the arrival of this unfortunate Canaanite! When does she come?"

"Soon. Her barge is at Abydos now. I may reach Thebes before her—unless my good river captain has set sail already, fearing me dead. I must take leave." Sheftu turned, placing his hand on his shoulder as he bowed once again. "Live forever, *Haut Khofra!* Till we meet again in Thebes."

Five minutes later he was hurrying through the side streets toward the wharf and the *Silver Beetle*. Thanks be to all the gods, his mission to Khofra had been successful. But there was one great obstacle in his path before it was finished. Word must be sent to the king as soon as possible. Since Sheftu's own carefully maintained position at court was that of a trusted favorite of the queen, it was unthinkable that he give Thutmose the message himself. And the old palace servant who used to act as go-between had been murdered in his bed two weeks before.

Sheftu's jaw set. It was dangerous business, to have anything to do with the king. So dangerous that it was highly uncertain where he would find another trustworthy mes-

senger who was daring enough to serve him well. Yet find one he must, and soon.

He was still pondering the problem as he came out onto the wharves a few moments later, perceiving to his relief that the *Silver Beetle* was still waiting for him. It was the only southbound ship in the harbor; he would have been in a sorry plight had it sailed without him. A figure on its deck straightened suddenly and flung up an arm in greeting; Sheftu grinned as he waved back. Nekonkh must have been having a bad time of it the past hour. Well, so had he—but now all was done and they could be on their way. He moved swiftly toward the ship.

At the other end of the wharf, the slave girl Mara was picking her way through a tangle of fishing nets and up-ended reed boats. She shaded her eyes to scan the line of vessels which bobbed along the quay, their masts swaying and weaving with the motion of the water. Far down toward the southern end of the wharf she saw what she was looking for—a stout-timbered Theban craft with an embroidered sail.

For a moment she stood motionless, grinning triumphantly. Then she started to run.

A few minutes later she was on the deck of the *Silver Beetle*, looking coolly into the face of the fierce-jawed riverman who was its captain.

“Passage to Abydos?” he roared. “We’re a cargo ship, Mistress High-and-Mighty! We’ve hides and sheep’s wool on board, so many there’s scarce room enough for the oarsmen to dip their paddles! Think you we can set up some dainty pavilion in the middle of—”

He stopped abruptly. From her outstretched fingers dangled a massive gold chain.

The captain grunted. “HmMMM. *Hai*, what a trinket that is, to be sure. Is it not too heavy for you, little one? Pray let me bear the burden.” He took the chain into his own

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