

City of the Dead

T. L. Higley

Prologue

In my dreams, it is often I who kills Amunet. Other nights it is Khufu, in one of his mad rages. And at other times it is a great mystery, destined to remain unknown long after the *ka* of each of us has crossed to the west.

Tonight, as I lay abed, my dreams reveal all the truth that I know.

Merit is there, like a beautiful lotus flower among the papyrus reeds.

“Hemi,” she whispers, using the shortened form of my name in the familiar way I long for. “We should join the others.”

The tufts of reeds that spring from the marsh’s edge wave around us, higher than our heads, our private thicket.

“They are occupied with the hunt,” I say.

A cloud of birds rises from the marsh in that moment, squawking their protest at being disturbed. Merit turns her head to the noise and I study the line of her jaw, the long curls that wave across her ear. I pull her close, my arms around her waist.

Her body is stiff at first, then melts against mine.

“Hemi, you must let me go.”

Some nights in my dreams I am a better man.

“Merit.” I bury my face in her hair, breathe in the spicy scent of her. “I cannot.”

I pull her into my kiss.

She resists. She pushes me away and her eyes flash accusation, but something else as well. Sorrow. Longing.

I reach for her again, wrapping my fingers around her wrist. She twists away from my grasp. I do not know what I might have done, but there is fear in her eyes. By the gods, I wish I could forget that fear.

She runs. What else could she do?

She runs along the old river bed, not yet swollen with the year’s Inundation, stagnant and marshy. She disappears among the papyrus. The sky is low and gray, an evil portent.

My anger roots me to the ground for several moments, but then the potential danger propels me to follow.

“Merit,” I call. “Come back. I am sorry!”

I weave slowly among the reeds, searching for the white flash of her dress, the bronze of her skin.

“Merit, it is not safe!”

Anger dissolves into concern. I cannot find her.

In the way of dreams, my feet are unnaturally heavy, as though I fight through alluvial mud to reach her. The first weighted drops fall from an unearthly sky.

And then she is there, at the base of the reeds. White dress dirtied, head turned unnaturally. Face in the water. My heart clutches in my chest. I lurch forward. Drop to my knees in the marsh mud. Push away the reeds. Reach for her.

It is not Merit.

It is Amunet.

“Amunet!” I wipe the mud and water from her face and shake her. Her eyes are open yet unfocused.

I am less of a man because, in that moment, I feel relief.

Relief that it is not Merit.

But what has happened to Amunet? Khufu insisted that our royal hunting party split apart to raise the birds, but we all knew that he wanted to be with Amunet. Now she is alone, and she has crossed to the west.

As I hold her lifeless body in my arms, I feel the great weight of choice fall upon my shoulders. The rain pours through an evil gash in the clouds.

Khufu is my friend. He is my cousin. He will soon wear the Double Crown of the Two Lands of Upper and Lower Egypt. And when Khufu is Pharaoh, I will be his grand vizier.

But it would seem that I hold our future in my hands now, as surely as I hold this girl's body.

I lower Amunet to the mud again and awake, panting and sweating, in my bed. I roll from the mat, scramble for a pot, and retch. It is not the first time.

The sunlight is already burning through the high window in my bedchamber.

The past is gone. There is only the future.

And I have a pyramid to build.

Chapter 1

In the fifth year of Khufu, the Golden Horus, Great in Victories, Chosen of Ra, as the pyramid rose in the desert like a burning torch to the sun god himself, I realized my mistake and knew that I had brought disorder.

“Foolishness!” Khons slapped a stone-roughened hand on the papyri unrolled on the basalt-black slab before us, and turned his back on the well-ordered charts to study the workforce on the plateau.

I refused to follow his gaze. Behind me, I knew, eight thousand men toiled, dragging quarry stones up ramps that snaked around my half-finished pyramid, and levering them into beautiful precision. Below them, intersecting lines of men advanced with the rhythm of drumbeats. They worked quickly but never fast enough.

My voice took on a hard edge. “Perhaps, Khons, if you spent more time listening and less blustering—”

“You speak to me of time?” The Overseer of Quarries whirled to face me, and the muscles in his jaw twitched like a donkey’s flank when a fly irritates. “Do you have any idea what these changes mean?” He waved a hand over my plans. “You were a naked baboon at Neferma’at’s knee when he and I were building the pyramids at Saqqara!”

This insult was well-worn, and I was sick of it. I stepped up to him, close enough to map every vein in his forehead. The desert air between us stilled with the tension. “You forget yourself, Khons. I may not be your elder, but I am grand vizier.”

“My good men,” Ded’e interrupted, his voice dripping honey as he smoothed long fingers over the soft papyrus. “Let us not quarrel like harem women over a simple change of design.”

“Simple!” Khons snorted. “Perhaps for you. Your farmers and bakers care not where Pharaoh’s burial chamber is located. But I will need to rework all the numbers for the Giza quarry. The timeline for the Aswan granite will be in chaos.” Khons turned on me. “The plans for the queen’s pyramid are later than grain in a drought year. A project of this magnitude must run like marble over the rollers. A change like this—you’re hurling a chunk of limestone into the Nile, and there will be ripples. Other deadlines will be missed—”

I held up a hand and waited to respond. I preferred to handle Khons and his fits of metaphor by giving us both time to cool.

The sun hammered down on upon the building site, and I looked away, past the sands of death, toward the life-giving harbor and the fertile plain beyond. This year's Inundation had not yet crested, but already the Nile's green waters had swelled to the border of last year's floodplain. When the waters receded in three months, leaving behind their rich silt deposits, the land would be black and fertile and planting would commence.

"Three months," I said. In three months, most of my workforce would return to their farms to plant and till, leaving my pyramid unfinished, dependent on me to make it whole.

Khons grunted. "Exactly. No time for changes."

Ded'e scanned the plateau, his fingers skimming his forehead to block the glare, though he had applied a careful line of kohl beneath his eyes today. "Where is Mentu? Did you not send a message, Hemiunu?"

I looked toward the workmen's village, too far to make out anyone approaching by the road. Mentu-hotep also served as one of my chief overseers. These three answered directly to me, and under them commanded fifty supervisors, who in turn organized the twelve-thousand-man force. Nothing of this scale had ever been undertaken in the history of the Two Lands. In the history of man. We were building the Great Pyramid, the Horizon of the Pharaoh Khufu. A thousand years, nay, ten thousand years from now, my pyramid would still stand. And though a tomb for Pharaoh, it would also bear my name. A legacy in stone.

"Perhaps he thinks he can do as he wishes," Khons said.

I ignored his petty implication that I played favorites among my staff. "Perhaps he is slow in getting started today." I jabbed a finger at the plans again. "Look, Khons, the burial chamber's relocation will mean that the inner core will require less stone, not more. I've redesigned the plans to show the king's chamber beginning on Course Fifty. Between the corbelled ascending corridor, the burial chamber, five courses high, and the five relieving chambers that will be necessary above it, we will save 8,242 blocks."

"Exactly 8,242? Are you certain?" De'de snorted. "I think you must stay up all night solving equations, eh, Hemi?"

I inclined my head to the pyramid, now one-fourth its finished height. "Look at it, De'de. See the way the sides angle at a setback of exactly 11:14. Look at the platform, level to an error less than the span of your little finger." I turned on him. "Do you

think such beauty happens by chance? No, it requires constant attention from one who would rather lose sleep than see it falter.”

“It’s blasphemy.” Khons’s voice was low. It was unwise to speak thus of the Favored One.

I exhaled and we hung over the plans, heads together. Khons smelled of sweat and dust, and sand caked the outer rim of his ear.

“It is for the best, Khons. You will see.”

If blasphemy were involved it was my doing and not Khufu’s? I had engineered the raising of the burial chamber above ground and, along with it, Khufu’s role as the earthly incarnation of the god Ra. It was for the good of Egypt, and now it must be carried forward. Hesitation, indecision—these were for weak men.

“Let the priests argue about religious matters,” I said. “I am a builder.”

Ded’e laughed. “Yes, you are like the pyramid, Hemi. All sharp angles and unforgiving measurements.”

I blinked at the observation, then smiled as though it pleased me.

Khons opened his mouth, no doubt to argue, but a shout from the worksite stopped him. We three turned to the pyramid, and I ground my teeth to see the workgangs falter in their measured march up the ramps. Some disorder near the top drew the attention of all. I squinted against the bright blue sky but saw only the brown figures of the workforce covering the stone.

“Cursed Mentu. Where is he?” Khons asked the question this time.

As Overseer for Operations, Mentu took charge of problems on the line. In his absence, I now stalked toward the site.

The Green Sea Gang had halted on the east-face ramp, their draglines still braced over their bare shoulders. Even from thirty cubits below I could see the ropy muscles stand out on the backs of a hundred men as they strained to hold the thirty-thousand-deben-weight block attached to the line. Their white skirts of this morning had long since tanned with dust, and their skin shone with afternoon sweat.

“Sokkwi! Get your men moving forward!” I shouted to the Green Sea Gang supervisor who should have been at the top.

There was no reply, so I strode up the ramp myself, multiplying in my mind the minutes of delay by the stones not raised. The workday might need extending.

Halfway up the rubble ramp, a scream like that of an antelope skewered by a hunter's arrow ripped the air. I paused only a moment, the men's eyes on me, then sprinted the remaining distance to the top, weaving between the double line of laborers that snaked around the worksite.

One complete circuit of the structure, and I was back where I had begun, but a level higher. Here, the pyramid came to its end. Still so much to build.

Sokkwi, the gang supervisor, had his back to me when I reached the top. Several others clustered around him, bent to something on the stone. Chisels and drills lay scattered about.

"What is it? What's happened?" The dry heat had stolen my breath, and the words panted out.

They broke apart to reveal a laborer, no more than eighteen years, on the ground, one leg pinned by a block half set in place. The boy's eyes locked onto mine, as if to beg for mercy. "Move the stone!" I shouted to Sokkwi.

He scratched his chin. "It's no good. The stone's been dropped. We have nothing to—"

I jumped into the space open for the next stone, gripped the rising joint of the block that pinned the boy and yelled to a worker, larger than most. "You there! Help me slide this stone!"

He bent to thrust a shoulder against the stone. We strained against it like locusts pushing against a mountain. Sokkwi laid a hand upon my shoulder.

I rested a moment, and he inclined his head to the boy's leg. Flesh had been torn down to muscle and bone. I reached for something to steady myself, but there was nothing at this height. The sight of blood, a weakness I had known since my youth, threatened to overcome me. I felt a warmth in my face and neck. I breathed slowly through my nose. *No good for the men to see you swoon.*

I knelt and placed a hand on the boy's head, then spoke to Sokkwi. "How did this happen?"

He shrugged. "First time on the line." He worked at something in his teeth with his tongue. "Doesn't know the angles, I suppose." Another shrug.

"What was he doing at the top then?" I searched the work area and the ramp below me again for Mentu. Anger churned my stomach.

The supervisor sighed and picked at his teeth with a fingernail. “Don’t ask me. I make sure the blocks climb those ramps and settle into place. That is all I do.”

How had Mentu had allowed this disaster? Justice, truth, and divine order—the *ma’at*—made Egypt great and made a man great. I did not like to see *ma’at* disturbed.

On the ramp, a woman pushed past the workers, shoving them aside in her haste to reach the top. She gained the flat area where we stood and paused, her breath huffing out in dry gasps. In her hands she held two jars, brimming with enough barley beer to allow the boy to feel fierce anger rather than beg for his own death. The surgeon came behind, readying his saw. The boy had a chance at life if the leg ended in a stump. Allowed to fester, the injury would surely kill him.

I masked my faintness with my anger and spun away.

“Mentu!” My yell carried past the lines below me, down into the desert below, perhaps to the quarry beyond. He should never have allowed so inexperienced a boy to place stones. Where had he been this morning when the gangs formed teams?

The men nearby were silent, but the work down on the plateau continued, heedless of the boy’s pain. The rhythmic ring of chisel on quarry stone punctuated the collective grunts of the quarry men, their chorus drifting across the desert, but Mentu did not answer the call.

Was he still in his bed? Mentu and I had spent last evening pouring wine and reminiscing late into the night about the days of our youth. Some of them anyway. Always one story never retold.

Another scream behind me. *That woman had best get to pouring the barley beer.* I could do nothing more here. I moved through the line of men, noting their nods of approval for the effort I’d made on behalf of one of their own.

When I reached the base and turned back toward the flat-topped black basalt stone where I conferred with Khons and Ded’e, I saw that another had joined them. My brother.

I slowed my steps, to allow that part of my heart to harden like mudbricks in the sun, then pushed forward.

They laughed together as I approached, the easy laugh of men comfortable with one another. My older brother leaned against the stone, his arms crossed in front of him. He stood upright when he saw me.

“Ahmose,” I said with a slight nod. “What brings you to the site?”

His smile turned to a smirk. “Just wanted to see how the project proceeds.”

“Hmm.” I focused my attention once more on the plans. The wind grabbed at the edges of the papyrus, and I used a stone cubit rod, thicker than my thumb, to weight it. “The three of us must recalculate stone transfer rates—”

“Khons seems to believe your changes are going to sink the project,” Ahmose said. He smiled, his perfect teeth gleaming against his dark skin.

The gods had favored Ahmose with beauty, charm, and a pleasing manner that made him well loved among the court. But I had been blessed with a strong mind and a stronger will. And I was grand vizier.

I lifted my eyes once more to the pyramid rising in perfect symmetry against the blue sky, and the thousands of men at my command. “The Horizon of Khufu will look down upon your children’s grandchildren, Ahmose,” I said. I leaned over my charts and braced my fingertips on the stone. “When you have long since sailed to the west, still it will stand.”

He bent beside me, his breath in my ear. “You always did believe you could do anything. Get away with anything.”

The animosity in his voice stiffened my shoulders.

“Khons, Ded’e, if you will.” I gestured to the charts. Khons snorted and clomped to my side. And Ded’e draped his forearms across the papyrus.

“It must be gratifying,” Ahmose whispered, “to command men so much more experienced than yourself.”

I turned on him, my smile tight. “And it must be disheartening to see your younger brother excel while you languish in a job bestowed only out of pity—”

A boy appeared, sparing me the indignity of exchanging blows with my brother. His sidelock identified him as a young prince, and I recognized him as the youngest of Henutsen, one of Khufu’s lesser wives.

“His Majesty Khufu, the king, Horus,” the boy said, “the strong bull, beloved by the goddess of truth—”

“Yes, yes. Life, Health, Strength!” I barked. “What does Khufu want?” I was in no mood for the string of titles.

The boy's eyes widened and he dragged a foot through the sand. "My father commands the immediate presence of Grand Vizier Hemiunu before the throne."

"Did he give a reason?"

The prince pulled on his lower lip. "He is very angry today."

"Very well." I waved him off and turned to Khons and Ded'e, rubbing the tension from my forehead. "We will continue later."

The two overseers made their escape before Ahmose and I had a chance to go at it again. I flicked a glance in his direction, then rolled up my charts, keeping my breathing even.

Behind me Ahmose said, "Perhaps Khufu has finally seen his error in appointing you vizier." Like a sharp poke in the kidneys when our mother wasn't watching.

"Excuse me, Ahmose." I pushed past him, my hands full of charts. "I have an important meeting."

Chapter 2

I grabbed my *cherp*, the staff that had been given by Khufu as a symbol of my position, and tramped to the Great House to appease whatever new concern had overtaken Khufu. I would then search for Mentu, all the while fuming at the disruption to the order of my day.

The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Wearer of the Double Crown, Throne of the Two Countries, is a man who requires careful handling. Many years have passed since we were all princes in the house of Sneferu, Khufu's father. In those days, my noble father was brother and grand vizier to Sneferu, and Khufu and I divided the hours between our lessons and mischief-making. My best friend and overseer of constructions, the missing Mentu, was also one of our circle, as was my brother Ahmose. The years had made men of three of us, and a god of the fourth.

I entered the Great Hall of Pillars and paused at the back, inhaling the calming myrrh and frankincense that perfumed the room. I moved to the small shrine and poured a libation to Atum.

Twelve pillars stood between the king and myself, two rows of six and each thick enough that two men could not encircle them with their arms. Their carved reliefs, brightly painted, reached all the way to the ceiling, far above my head, and ended in fluted capitals reminiscent of lotus flowers. At the room's front, Pharaoh shone forth from his throne under the canopy. I stood and studied Khufu's interaction with the superintendent of the treasury to ascertain his mood. Pharaoh lounged across his throne, one arm draped over the carved sphinx armrest, idly twirling his jewel-handled flail. The superintendent bowed, then kissed the thick carpet at Khufu's feet.

Imperious mood today. Ground-kissing was usually undertaken at one's entrance, not exit.

The treasurer whirled and fled, nearly tripping over the scribe who sat cross-legged near the throne, papyri and ink on his lap.

"Ah, Hemiunu, you arrive at last!" Khufu waved me in.

I took a deep breath, then approached and inclined my head. Pharaoh wore his usual white skirt with the rounded corners, covered with another of fine pleated gold, but today he had added a broad belt with a metal buckle. His royal cartouche was delicately engraved in hieroglyphs on the buckle. Across his bare chest lay

the heavy pectoral, rows of square gold links with precious inlaid turquoise. He was a beautiful sight, my king, my Egypt. He was Horus on earth. And it was my job to protect him, even from himself.

Khufu sighed dramatically and threw his head back against his throne. The red-and-white-striped nemes framing his face slipped a bit, knocking askew the golden snake that reared at his forehead. The Keeper of the Diadem, whom Khufu kept ever ready for such wardrobe emergencies, hurried forward and straightened the headdress, then backed away, eyes downcast.

“The priests are angry,” Khufu said. “But the treasurer is happy.” He rubbed his eyes. “Why can I not make everyone happy, Hemi?”

I studied the carpet beneath his canopy. “It is your role to keep divine order, my king—”

He fingered the links of the gold pectoral on his chest. “The whole of Egypt is set in motion by my will, Hemi. The taxes are paid to fill my treasury, wars are undertaken to make my name great, buildings are erected in my honor.”

I nodded, familiar with his need to rehearse these facts.

“And yet, always there are the old counselors who served my fathers, the generals with their loyal troops, the priesthood with their religious power. I must gratify and placate and watch my back.” He slapped a hand on the armrest. “Does this sound like the duties of a god to you?”

“Even the gods—”

“And now this change you have insisted upon. The priests of On are arriving, furious about the dismissal!” Khufu stood and thrust a finger at me. “You could not understand, Hemi. Your men love you. I do not like to anger priests!”

I leaned against my staff. “This great project you have undertaken, Khufu,” I began in a soothing tone, “greater than even your father dared build, it requires all that the Two Lands can give. To move the center of worship here to Giza has consolidated your power and your wealth in one place—”

“But to declare myself Ra on earth . . .” He pointed to one of the pillars, with its carved relief of Amun bestowing favor on the king.

“Yes. These are the actions of a true god.”

The meatbearer approached, with a meal of gooseliver and beef on a golden platter. He set the food on the footstool before Khufu, whispered, “Life, Health, Strength!” and disappeared.

Khufu collapsed back to his throne.

It was complicated, our system of worship. Countless gods were assigned to all aspects of Egyptian life, but somehow it brought order to the land. The king would be Ra when he traveled to the west at his death. On earth, he was son of Ra. But to declare himself Ra now, before his death, was to pull support from every corner of Upper and Lower Egypt, brooking no argument. I believed it was necessary for the achievement of our mutual goals.

“And what of the project?” Khufu asked, tearing off a huge piece of meat. “Perhaps it is too much for you.”

“If the king would approve plans for the queen’s pyramid . . .”

“Is that why people are saying you are behind schedule?”

“Who has said this?”

“You know that everyone expected to me to name Ahmose vizier,” Khufu said, a slight smile playing at his lips. He popped the meat into his mouth and chewed noisily.

“Perhaps my brother should stick to collecting taxes and leave the building to me.”

Khufu laughed. “We are all still little boys, are we not, Hemi?”

Some of us are.

As if on cue, Perni-ankhu, the king’s dwarf and cupbearer, scurried into the room with a tall cup of the king’s wine.

“Ah, here is Perni, to dance for us.” Khufu clapped and took the wine from Perni. “Gladden our hearts, Perni. Hemi here is always much too serious.”

From a corner of the Great Hall, waiting there mute until summoned, a lyre struck up a lively tune. The dwarf clamped his hands to his waist, beneath his rounded belly, and did a sidestep away from us, then swayed his hips as he walked an unseen line through the pillars down the hall. The music picked up, Khufu laughed, and the dwarf kicked up his heels.

“He is so amusing, is he not, Hemi?”

“Of course, my king.”

“So formal today, Hemi. What is bothering you? Come, sit with me and share my meal.”

I am accustomed to these shifting moods of Khufu. I have learned to shift with him, in all things to support him. My very life is linked to his. Not only because of the past we share, but because

he is my king. Our ritual with the dwarf was familiar. I ever remain the tight-lipped vizier, and Khufu attempts to make me laugh.

Perni's dance took on a frenzied beat, and I sat at Khufu's footstool and pulled off a stringy section of gooseflesh, though it was not the hour I had established for my midday meal. I wished I could escape and track down Mentu.

Khufu patted my shoulder. "This is better, my friend. Like the old days, when we did not need to think of kingdoms and pyramids, eh?"

I smiled and looked away. "We have many good memories."

"Yes, many stories to be well remembered."

The silence between us spoke of one memory, not as good. I shifted my position on the stool.

Perni's dance ended with a rolling somersault to the foot of the canopied throne, and the little hunchbacked dwarf popped to his feet with a flourish.

Khufu pounded my back with a fist. "By Horus, I am going to send Perni home with you one of these days, Hemi, to lighten you up! You could not be so gloomy with Perni in your house!"

The dwarf bowed and skipped from the room. I followed his exit with my eyes, to the squared-off arch in the center of the east wall. The dwarf disappeared, and someone else took his place.

"Merit." Her name slipped from my lips before I could hold it back. My right hand suddenly grew restless, moving from my knee to the back of my neck, then resting uneasy again on my leg.

She wore a full hairpiece of long curls today, with red-beaded ends, held by a gold headband across her forehead. She needed no adornment. Framed in the arch of the Great Hall, her simple white dress fit narrowly enough to show the curves of her body beneath. The wide straps that reached from her chest to circle her neck were embroidered with red flowers. She had lined her eyes with green malachite and kohl, and they seemed wide enough to peer into a man's soul.

Meritates is a childhood friend, too. Only a childhood friend. It is true we shared many conversations, some laughter. Now she is Khufu's wife, for the good of Egypt.

Khufu saw her too and returned to his meal. Merit's eyes roamed my face for a moment, then she glided into the room like the cool Nile spilling over the barren desert. I wondered if Khufu too soaked up her presence like parched sand. Such thoughts are not good for a man in my position. They bring disorder.

Khufu chewed and swallowed. "Entertain us, Merit. I am feeling restless today."

Her eyelids fluttered. "Restless already? Did I not see Perni leave only a moment ago?"

Khufu tossed back his cup of wine, then wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Exactly. He has gone and now we are bored."

"You must be feeling better then?" Merit twirled her heavy silver bracelet, encrusted with jeweled butterflies. "Khufu has been alone all afternoon in his private rooms with a headache," she said to me.

The king waved a hand. "Yes, I am well. And bored."

The meatbearer appeared again, took the empty tray and cup, and bowed away. Merit settled in the high-backed chair beside the throne, very near to the footstool where I sat.

I stood and moved away.

"Music," Khufu said. "We need more music!"

The lyre began again, a tune that sounded to me like birds alighting on tree limbs.

"Perhaps someday Hemi will play for us," Merit said softly, her eyes on mine.

"Hemi?" Khufu chuckled. "I should not like to hear the noise that would come from this grumpy vizier. No, he is all about numbers and equations and quarry stones, Merit. I do not believe there is a note of melody in him."

Merit raised an eyebrow at me, and I retrieved my staff, well worn and comfortable, and leaned on it. I hoped that Khufu would not begin again to accuse me of lacking in my duties. Not now.

"Do you think I can learn to dance like the dwarf, Hemi?" Khufu asked. He had gotten to his feet and thrust a toe outward, his hands on his hips. "Step, step, step." He laughed. "Does my talent rival Perni's?"

Merit covered her laugh with her fingers, as though Khufu were one of her boys and not a god. "Sit down, Khufu," she said. "You are being silly."

Khufu yanked the nemes from his head and tossed it onto the footstool. "Faster!" he yelled to the lyre, then danced a circle around me. Despite myself, I felt a smile tug at my lips.

Khufu hopped onto his throne, his head nearly brushing the canopy suspended on four carved wooden pillars. He kicked out one foot, then the other, and I half expected him to try a backflip off

the throne. Instead, his foot caught on the armrest, and he careened off the side.

Without thought, I darted between them and absorbed his weight.

He would have fallen on the queen. Hurt her, perhaps. The metal buckle engraved with his cartouche dug into the skin of my forearm.

Merit was there, hovering over the two of us, her honey-sweetened breath warm at my ear, the elegant line of her jaw close to mine.

“Our Hemi,” she said, low and soft. “Like the pyramid he builds. Always solid and dependable, always protecting.”

I righted Khufu, who still laughed and clapped with the music. A slave appeared with a wide palm leaf fan, to cool the king.

I turned to Merit and lowered my head.

“My life is yours, my queen.”

She smiled and laid a cool hand on my scraped arm, but her touch burned like fire and caused me more pain than the scrape itself.

“So serious, Hemi,” she said. “I am only your old friend, Merit.”

Yes, only my childhood friend.

The musician faltered at some noise at the entrance to the Great Hall.

The three of us turned our attention there. Khufu’s chief servant, Ebo, strode in, his face solemn.

“Your Majesty,” he began, “Beloved of—”

“What is it, Ebo?” Khufu leaned forward.

“I have evil news, my king.” His eyes strayed to me. “It is Mentu-hotep, Overseer of Constructions.”

My hand tightened on my cherp. I stepped forward. “What of him?”

“He has been found dead. Murdered.”

Khufu jumped to his feet, and Merit gasped behind me.

“Where?” I asked, fingers digging into the wood. “How?”

Ebo held out his palms. “No one knows who has sent his *ka* to the west. His body was found in the royal slaughterhouse.”

The carved columns of the palace hall seemed to tilt, then right themselves. My breath caught, then surged in my chest. My hands felt slick on my staff.

I looked at Khufu. “I will go,” I said.

His eyes told me that he too felt the bond of the day we did not speak of. "We will both go."

Chapter 3

We departed from the Great Hall with haste. Pairs of slaves ran ahead to line the lofty passageway on bent knees with hands outstretched and palms on the floor. We did not wait for the king to be announced, but whispers of “Life, Health, Strength!” followed us through the corridor.

The sun was beginning its descent in the west, and it threw long shadows of the palace over the road. The temple lay two thousand cubits to the north, below the pyramid, and would someday serve as the place of Khufu’s mummification. For now, newly appointed priests of Ra served there, and the slaughterhouse stood nearby, between the workers’ village and the temple, ready for its double duty of providing meat for the workers and sacrifices for the temple. A sedan chair waited to lift Khufu to the shoulders of more slaves. I chose to walk alongside.

Khufu’s headservant, Ebo, accompanied us, as he had done for so many years when we were young. Our destination this day was not so pleasant, however, as the many hunting and fishing trips we had taken together in our youth.

“Who found him?” I asked as we hurried along the road.

Ebo turned to me. A white scar slashed his dark forehead, the cause of which had always been unknown to me. “I received word from another slave, my lord.”

Thus far I had refused to let Ebo’s announcement penetrate to my heart. It was impossible that Mentu had crossed to the west. Only last night we had been together. Only Mentu understood. About the past, about Merit. About my brother. And my father. I would not believe he was dead until I saw with my own eyes.

We passed the pyramid on our left, still busy with laborers adding to its courses. My eyes strayed there despite our errand. I could never cross the plateau without a loving glance at its perfect lines, as though my own child stood tall to impress me.

We reached the slaughterhouse, a flat-roofed structure with a narrow doorway. An angry bellow tore through the building.

“They are bringing down an ox,” I said to Khufu behind me. “There can be no murder here. They would not—”

Ebo pointed through the door. “His body is in the back.”

Khufu shoved past me, and I realized that Merit had followed behind us. I lowered my staff to bar her entrance, and her eyes flashed at me.

“Not in here, Merit. Remain outside.”

Her nostrils flared. “He was my friend too, Hemi.”

“Come!” Khufu called to the two of us from the slaughterhouse entrance.

We crossed under the lintel, into the dusky gloom, to a sight that would have been comical were it not so gruesome. Two slaughterers were bringing down a brown bull, one beefy man attempting to wrap a rope around its forelegs, and one wiry and quick who rose upon the bull’s back, twisting at its horns and trying to keep his seat.

The building was filled with the buzzing of flies on carcasses that hung from hooks, their lifeblood draining into a mud-packed floor already stained by the exsanguination of countless others. The place smelled of blood and excrement, and the faintness that swept past my eyes angered me. The ox’s tail whipped against its backside, and flicked sweat across my cheek.

I swiped at the wetness and shouted to Khufu over the animal’s groans. “Could they not wait until our business here was concluded?”

The larger man heard me, realized who it was that stood before him, and thrust without regard to safety between the bull’s legs. Another moment and the bull was on the ground, his hind and forelegs lashed.

The wiry man dismounted and bowed low before Khufu. “A sacrifice for your accession festival, your Majesty, Chosen of Ra.” His booming voice mingled with the terrible moan of the ox.

I scanned the slaughterhouse for any sign of Mentu, half-expecting to hear my friend’s laughter at the joke he had played.

The beefy man stepped to the ox’s head, a flint knife in one hand and a basin in the other. “For his Majesty, Son of Ra!” he shouted, then slit the throat of the ox at the tender place where the vessel carried blood to the head. The bright red fount spurted, then poured into the basin, and the ox gave a last groan and lay still.

I jumped back. I could hear Merit’s deep breathing behind me as I fought to remain on my feet.

The slaughterers stood before Khufu now, smeared with the bull’s blood, happy smiles upon their faces.

“Well done, men!” Khufu raised a fist.

I stared at him and found there the same expression prompted by Perni’s dancing. “We were told that someone—a

man—has been killed here,” I said. A sweat had broken over my forehead and back, and my neck crawled with it.

The ox-killers nodded, and the muscular one pointed to the back. “We found him back there.”

I pushed past Khufu and circled the bloody mess in the center of the room. “And you felt no need to cease your activity?”

The smaller man’s glance jumped to his companion then back to me with confusion. “The priests await the sacrifice for the festival.”

I waved a hand at their single-mindedness and pushed into the darkness of the back of the slaughterhouse. “Bring a torch,” I called to Ebo. He and Khufu were at my side a moment later, the torch illuminating the dark corners. Merit pushed up between us, and we stood in a line, looking down upon the body of my fallen friend.

I could not take it in all at once. Mentu’s familiar face stared up at me, his crooked-toothed smile still intact, the large ears that had provoked teasing as young boy, the deep-set eyes that knew how to show sympathy. He was still the same Mentu, and I thought for a moment that his ka had not fled.

Then I saw the gash. From right ear to left shoulder, his throat had been cut. His hands had been bound. His feet as well. He had been treated no better than the bull. Cut with a flint knife and left to bleed into the dust. I could do nothing but stare, and the blood seemed to drain from my own body.

Khufu whispered beside me, in a voice hollowed by fear, “By the jackal-headed Anubis, what has happened here?” Merit wept softly beside him, fingers pressed to her lips. I wished to comfort her, but she was not my wife.

I knelt to untie Mentu’s wrists with trembling fingers, an attempt to restore some dignity to my friend. His bloody hands must have tried to stanch the flow.

“He has been cut,” Khufu said.

“Yes. Clearly.”

“No,” Khufu said and squeezed my shoulder. “His hand has been cut.”

I stayed my hand at the bindings. Mentu’s wrists had been lashed together, but there was no mistaking the mutilation.

The forefinger of his left hand was missing.

“No!” It was Merit who cried out, but we all felt the impact. A person’s body must be whole to travel to the west and join the council of the gods.

This was worse than murder.

This was eternal damnation.

Some men, in the midst of grief, find themselves unable to control their spirit and display a certain chaos of emotion that is unseemly. I have never struggled with this tendency. Instead, now I felt a tightening inside of me, as though the strips of linen wound tightly around a corpse were wrapping themselves about my heart, the black resin hardening. I welcomed this feeling, as it would make me impervious to pain.

I backed away from the body. “Who would have done this? Mentu was not a man with enemies.”

Khufu studied Mentu’s body, then focused on Merit, who wept violently now. “No. But it seems he had a good friend in my wife.”

I searched my king’s face, unable to read the emotion there.

Khufu turned the Great Wife away, at last, and circled her with his arms. “We will have the finest physicians attend to him,” he said in soothing tones. “They will fashion another finger, attach it well. He will be whole when the seventy days of purification are accomplished. I promise you, his ka will rest with the gods.”

A glint on the floor a few cubits away caught my eye, and I directed Ebo to bring the torch closer. I moved toward it on wooden legs. “What is this?”

Ebo answered. “It was found on his body. Those that found him removed it to see if he still breathed.”

In the dust at my feet lay a golden mask, the likes of which is rarely seen outside a pharaoh’s tomb. I laid my staff on the floor and lifted the mask. It was fashioned as the face of a man, with bright blue inlaid lapis lazuli eyes and red painted lips. The craftsmanship was exquisite, the heavy Nubian gold pounded smooth and the details intricate.

“Found on his face?” I asked.

Ebo nodded. I turned the mask over, looking for the artist’s mark, but found only a glyph for Anubis, the god of the underworld.

I bent to reposition the mask on Mentu’s face, grateful to see that it covered much of the wound on his neck. I touched the forehead with my fingertips and closed my eyes. “I will find the one who did this to you, my friend. I will make him pay.”

“Come,” Khufu said. “Leave him to the priests and embalmers. You have important work to attend. The project awaits.”

I paused to steady my voice, then squared off against the king. “I cannot allow his killer to remain unjudged.”

Khufu put his hands to his hips and lifted his head. “Justice will do nothing for Mentu. And I cannot spare you from the building project to chase after a mystery.”

Merit’s eyes darkened and a crease formed between them, but she said nothing.

“He was my friend,” I said.

“And also mine. But as one of your chief overseers, his crossing to the west will endanger the timetable of the project even further.”

“Do you care for *nothing* but the pyramid?”

In the dim light I saw Khufu’s eyebrows lift in amusement at the accusation I’d heard directed toward myself. He nodded toward Mentu’s body. “We never know when the gods might require our presence. And what of Egypt, if I should be called before my tomb is ready?”

Behind us, the slaughterers had begun hacking up the ox’s carcass. Death seemed to hover in this place, ready to alight on any of us.

Khufu was right. The House of Eternity I built for him was, in some way, a guarantee of eternity for all of us. As the king went, so went all of Egypt.

Still, Khufu’s refusal to pursue justice in this matter troubled me. Mentu’s death had brought a disruption to ma’at, that principle of justice and divine order that held all of Egypt together. This also was important.

I raised my chin like a faithful soldier. “I will not fail you,” I said.

He gave me a quick smile, as though he knew I would not refuse him, and turned away.

My gaze slipped back to Mentu. Last night had been good-bye, though neither of us knew. *And I will not fail you either, my friend.*



If there were a way to keep crews working through the night on this great project we had undertaken, I would have done so. But the desert at night is as black as the soil after the flood waters have gone, and men fear darkness as much as they love their sleep. As it was, I spent a restless night, tossing in my bed, with images of Mentu's lifeless eyes, oxen blood, and the half-finished pyramid chasing through my meager dreams.

Midway through the night, I finally rose and applied myself to a design I had been drawing in my leisure—a corral of sorts for the masons' tools when they laid them aside on the pyramid. Of late, chisels and drills had been slipping over the edge, injuring laborers on the ramps below. Men of Egypt, even common workers, were not expendable to my mind.

I finished the drawing and rolled the papyrus. The sun god had not yet been reborn in the east, but I undertook my morning rituals and then headed for the workmen's village. It was time to find answers. And to find justice for Mentu, regardless of Khufu's instructions.

The village spread only a few thousand cubits south of my own home on the royal estate and could be reached on foot. We were all connected, the people who had undertaken the Horizon of Khufu. I walked the path with my staff at my side, poking angry holes in the soft sand.

Few people understood the scope of my project. It was left to me to chart the twenty-year course of the work. We were five years in, and only slightly behind schedule. A harbor had been excavated at the edge of the desert, to bring the Nile water and ships from Tura, from Aswan and Nubia, carrying all manner of wood, stone, and gold for the project. The village had been built to house the labor force—forty-five streets intersecting in a lovely grid of sixty symmetrical blocks, like two enormous Senet boards laid side by side. The valley temple at the edge of the harbor was already in place, and the mortuary temple at the base of the pyramid would be finished after the great structure was complete, as would the causeway that would connect the valley and mortuary temples. There were still the queens' pyramids to be built, the boat pits, the many flat-topped mastaba tombs for officials and nobles. A true city of the dead.

I passed the wheat and barley fields and the pens of cattle and goats kept outside the wall. The stone wall, about my height, enclosed the village, and I entered through the main gate on the

south side. Even from inside the wall, the pyramid overlooked all we did, waiting to be made whole. More than ten thousand lived in this village which had been called Hotep-Khufu—“Khufu is satisfied.”

By Horus, it is I who will be satisfied. But not today. Today, disorder had been brought to my village, and I would root it out.

It took me some time to walk to the top of the village, where the wealthier homes of the project administrators, including Mentu’s, lay in the cool shadow of the north wall. The streets filled slowly as the town awoke. Old men took their places on benches outside their homes, and children ran past, with shouts and jeers as their games of tip-cats began. A stick fell at my feet, and a child yelled to me to toss it back. I flung it at the boy, still young enough to run naked in the street, and he shouted his thanks and used his own stick to knock it skyward toward his friend.

Serenity had fled from Mentu’s house, however. Here, no one sat outside and no children played. Instead, the sounds of a family in mourning washed over the street. I stood outside the door and braced myself for the ordeal, then passed under the lintel.

I had been here many times, just two nights ago when my friend and I had passed the evening in conversation and wine. I took the central passage through the house, until I reached the four-pillared hall where Mentu had entertained guests. Beyond this room lay the open courtyard with its shaded colonnade and squat palm trees.

My entrance drew attention, and the wailing increased. I bowed my head to Hasina, Mentu’s wife, where she sat on the ground. My presence seemed to cause her fresh grief, as though the sight of her husband’s friend made his absence more bitter.

Mentu’s children huddled around their mother, some too young to understand their loss, some old enough to feel anger at the gods. A brazier burned hotly at the side of the courtyard, incense for gods who did not seem to care.

“Hasina,” I said. “I grieve with you in the loss of Mentu.”

She squinted at me from where she sat. She was a heavy woman, and her kohl-smeared cheeks quivered, her eyes accusing. “He cared nothing for his own life, only this pyramid you are building together!”

“He cared for you, Hasina. And the children—”

“Then why did he stay out, night after night? Nothing but work! It is not safe out there in the darkness. You should not have allowed—”

“Mentu made his own choices, Hasina.”

She shifted her ponderous weight and struggled to her feet. I took a step backward. The children cleared a path as she lurched toward me. “How could you let this happen, Hemiuni?” Her fists pounded my chest, yet I remained still under the blows, feeling they were justified. Her children pulled her away, but she dug her fingers into my arm. “Who did this?” she cried. “Who took him from us?”

“I came to ask you the same, Hasina. Who had reason to harm Mentu? He was not a man to make enemies.”

“No.” Her sobs echoed against the courtyard walls. “No, everyone loved him. You loved him. He loved you.”

I smiled, a narrow-lipped smile that held my emotions in check.

“You should not have insisted he accompany you home, Hemi.”

“I did not even know he walked the desert. When I saw him last, he was safe here at home. We said goodnight, and I returned to the royal estate.”

She swiped at her eyes. “No, he came to me in my chamber and said that you requested he walk with you to your home.” Her voice sharpened. “You know he could never deny you anything.”

I frowned. “I went home alone, Hasina.”

“When I did not see him the next morning, I thought he had left early for the worksite.” She broke out in a fresh round of wailing, and I pried her fingers from my arm.

“I will find answers, Hasina. I promise. Mentu will have justice.”

She dropped to the ground again, and her children formed a circle around her, a shield from the truth. But what was the truth? Why had Mentu lied to his wife, and where had he gone after I had left him two nights ago?

I escaped the house and ran to the central streets of the village, to the square where the leisure of old men and children fostered gossip.

As expected, the square teemed with people. There a group of white-haired men huddled around a game board of square blocks, tossing clay pieces and grunting at each other’s good fortune. I slid onto a stone bench beside one of them. Their game

paused, and one toothless man squinted up at me, wordless. Non-chance seemed absurd, but I knew better than to begin with questions.

“So whom do the gods favor today?”

A puckered man at the end of the bench wheezed out a laugh. “We will be favored when our bodies are renewed to live again.” He coughed. “Here, we merely spend our days waiting.”

I nodded as though I could sympathize and joined them in watching those who milled about the square. My presence drew glances from able men who should have been working, which led to furtive dodges into cross streets and alleys. These men could come up with a hundred excuses to be absent from the project, but the scribes kept careful attendance, and one could not escape their duties for long. Still, today there seemed to be an inordinate number of men at leisure.

“You have heard about Mentu?” I finally asked, still watching the square.

Grunts were returned to me.

“I seek justice, but I know of no enemies who would wish him dead.” I turned and eyed each of the men. “Do any of you know who would want to send him to the west?”

My question was met with shrugs and averted glances. The talkative one on the end leaned forward. His watery eyes wandered over me, and a spindly finger stirred the hot air before his eyes. “Leave justice—and questions—to the gods,” he said in a reedy voice. “There is nothing here that will bring good.”

I frowned. “What do you know?”

His shoulders hunched again, and he seemed to retreat.

A hand on my shoulder startled me. The supervisor of designs stood beside me. “Grand Vizier, there is a problem with the new design. Itennu is fuming that your drawings for the upper corridor are off by two seqeds, and the corbelling will be faulty. He asks that you come immediately.”

I growled. The old men were too slow to give up their secrets. “I will come soon,” I said to the supervisor. “Tell Itenna to push forward.”

The men had returned to their game of Senet while I was distracted. “A man discovers divine truth and order by asking questions,” I said. “Why do you tell me to stop?”

One looked up, but his eyes moved to something behind me. I turned to find Chuma, one of Khons’s supervisors.

“What is it now?” I stood and stared him down.

“The Aswan granite shipment, Grand Vizier.”

“Yes? What of it?”

“It has arrived.”

I exhaled loudly and closed my eyes. “What concern is that of mine? Can no one do his job without my holding his hand?”

Chuma cleared his throat. “Mentu-hotep usually receives the shipments and instructs the laborers as to where to place the granite.”

I tried to roll the tension from my shoulders and looked away. Another man of working age passed through the square, saw me and scurried for cover.

“Why are so many men about?”

Chuma followed my gaze. “The Victorious Gang and the Enduring Gang are not working.”

“What? Why?”

Chuma shrugged. “Without Mentu, the supervisors are waiting for instructions. The men have no assigned tasks.”

“This is madness! The incompetence and—” I clamped my jaw closed. At a time when we should be increasing our pace, the work had come to a standstill, unable to move forward without Mentu. A fresh pang of grief stabbed at me. I slapped Chuma’s shoulder to erase the sting of my accusation. “Tell the ship’s captain to begin unloading the granite at the harbor. I will be there immediately.” *And I’ll have a few things to say to the supervisors who decided to declare a holiday.*

Chuma half-smiled in understanding.

I turned back to the old men and gripped the edge of their table, with a nod to the red-and-white Senet board. “I have no time for games, as you can see. What do you know of Mentu?”

Most of them studied their hands or twirled game pieces in gnarled fingers. My friend on the end of the bench did not fail me.

“You ask questions that will bring harm, not good,” he said. “You must leave it alone.” His cloudy eyes turned upward to mine and they cleared, focusing on me with the intensity of the desert sun. “For the good of Egypt.”

I could have pushed him further, though I suspected I would get nothing more. But there was no time. I glanced over the village wall to the half-finished pyramid in the west. Plans must be revisited, granite shipments directed, lazy men put back to work.

The Horizon of Khufu must be my one and only focus. Without my complete attention, the project would falter.

Perhaps, as the old man said, I must leave questions of justice to the gods.

Surely Mentu would understand.