

The Lost Years of Mehy

an eShort prequel to Miriam

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Follow the life of Moses (Mehy) from his military career in Nubia to the day he fled Egypt as a fugitive to Midian. As mere boys, Mehy and Sety led their troops into battle and narrowly escaped with their lives. Now Sety, son of Egypt's vizier, is made priest of his Delta estate, while Mehy, thought to be grandson of Pharaoh, is elevated to the second most powerful position in Egypt and assigned to oversee the southern-most fortress in Nubia. The vizier, already blaming Mehy for his son's battle injury, seeks to kill Mehy upon hearing of his promotion. Will revenge reach from the northern Delta to Egypt's southern-most fortress? Will Mehy's Nubian love bring him solace or pain? And will Mehy ever see his Egyptian mother or Hebrew parents again?



Chapter One

1303 BCE - Qantir Estate, Northern Delta

Miriam wiped the noble blood from her hands and wrapped Sety's son in fine linen. *Ramesses*—a babe that squalled like any other newborn offended by the cold, harsh world so rudely introduced. But his life would be vastly different than the Hebrew babes Miriam and Shiphrah usually brought into the world. His would flow with riches, ease, and power because he was a Ramessid, and Pharaoh Horemheb would likely transfer royal succession to their family.

Miriam stroked *Ramesses's* tiny fingers. *How many Israelites will this hand kill? Will it ever offer peace, or always grasp a sword?*

The ebony door burst open. "Do I have a son?" Sety, Priest of Seth, stood like the commander of an army at the doorway while poor Shiphrah hurried to cover the babe's imma and prop her up with pillows so she could greet her husband.

Miriam hurried to offer the babe to his abbi and bowed low after placing *Ramesses* in Sety's waiting arms. He stared at the wriggling child, a tender grin lighting his expression. "You are *Ramesses*, Son of Sety, with the divine spark that will make you pharaoh someday." Ignoring his wife, he looked at his ummi, Sitre, who stood beside her. "Do you think Abbi *Pirameses* will be pleased that we have named his grandson after him?"

Sitre's smile sent a chill up Miriam's spine. "*Ramesses* will be a name that echoes through the ages, my son. Let's find your abbi. The sooner we announce the news, the sooner Pharaoh Horemheb can transfer succession to our family."

The royals left the chamber without a word to the exhausted birth mother. The poor girl curled into a ball and wept. Miriam's heart seized...so the Israelites weren't the only people mistreated in Egypt.



There was another who would suffer at the birth of Ramesses. Miriam's brother, Moses, whom the Egyptians knew as *Mehy*. He'd been in Nubia now for eight years and was believed to be Pharaoh Horemheb's grandson—his only heir. Mehy had never married and had no sons to establish a royal lineage. Pirameses, Pharaoh Horemheb's general and best friend, now had three generations to provide a secure succession of Egypt's throne.

When Mehy was a young soldier, in need of Miriam's soothing songs before leaving for his first battle, he'd confided that Horemheb knew of her brother's Hebrew heritage and would die before allowing him to sit on Egypt's throne. Even then, Mehy suspected Horemheb plotted against him. Pharaoh Horemheb encouraged Pirameses to find Sety a wife while he was young, and assigned him as high priest of Seth in the safe surrounds of the Nile's northern Delta. Mehy, on the other hand, was sent to Egypt's farthest southern borders to quell unrest at Buhen Fortress.

What would happen to Mehy now that the Ramessids had secured their succession?

A flash of light, and Miriam flinched. Eyes closed, she saw Moses standing on a large stone amid rushing white waters, welcoming King Horemheb's caravan. Her brother was happy. Safe. She opened her eyes, and the room hadn't changed. Miriam exhaled, relaxing into the assurance of El Shaddai's visions.

Tuy still wept quietly in the corner, but Shiphrah cast a sidelong glance and leaned close. "Did you have a vision?"

Miriam nodded. "We'll talk later." Ima Jochebed and Bithiah—Moses's mothers—would also want to hear about it. Bithiah—Horemheb's daughter, who now lived among the Hebrews—understood the political dangers better than anyone. When Pharaoh Horemheb sent Mehy to Buhen, he said it was to keep Mehy safe because Pirameses blamed Mehy for Sety's battle injury.



Bithiah knew better. She'd grown up enduring her Abbi Horem's sick games. And when he conferred upon Mehy the title *Son of Cush*, making him equal in power to Pirameses, Bithiah recognized his taunting and told the others about it. "Abbi Horem expects to start a fight."

For eight years, they'd prayed fervently that Pirameses's vengeance wouldn't reach Mehy in Nubia. Now that the Ramessids had their secure line of succession, Horemheb would surely name Pirameses Crown Prince. Only one question remained: would Pirameses's new title satisfy his vendetta against Mehy—or intensify it?



Chapter Two

1302 BCE - Buhen Fortress, Nubia

Mehy watched the slow sway of Layla's hips as she exited his makeshift courtroom and cursed his vow to avoid women. But the pleasures of the female form couldn't erase the lifelong pain Mehya had suffered at the hands of three deceitful women. He would forgive Anippe, Miriam, and Jochebed, but he would never again trust any woman.

A bony knee planted in his back. His Medjay guard, Mandai, leaned over his shoulder. "You are the grandson of Pharaoh. You can have any woman you want. Why must you choose a Nubian slave?"

Mehy grinned. Mandai had earned the right to act more like a friend than a subordinate. The faithful Medjay had saved his mother's life and protected Mehya since his first day in battle.

Nassor, the guard on his left, also leaned down. "Should I have her delivered to your chamber, my lord?"

How could I be so careless as to let my interest show? Nassor would claim Layla for himself if Mehya didn't take her now. No woman deserved Nassor's violent attention. "Yes, Nassor. Bring her to my chamber after we adjourn."

He would brand her with his personal symbol and return her to her father's house. His stomach rolled. He must hurt her to save her—the same way he'd treated his sister Miriam and her friend before he left Avaris. Had their brands saved them from the slave masters' attention? Or had the marks kept them from marriage and kind husbands?

Sitting up straighter on his granite bench, he returned to something he could more readily control—the supplicants before him. "Your grievance has been heard," he said to the man whose



ox had fallen to its death in his neighbor's pit. "But it is not wrong for a man to dig a pit on his own land."

Mehy turned to the landowner. "However, neglecting to cover that pit is reckless and has caused the unnecessary loss of your neighbor's property. You will pay your neighbor for the dead ox, but you may keep the meat and carcass in return."

The men nodded to each other, and bowed to Mehy as they backed away. The next two petitioners approached, and Mehy reached for his goblet of watered wine and a handful of almonds. The sooner he emptied the tray, the sooner Layla would return to refill it.

He'd been stationed at Buhen Fortress for nine years, in the heart of Cushite tribal lands. The fortress came under siege by native tribes a dozen times during his first year. The language barrier alone seemed insurmountable, but with patience, like pouring honey on a cold desert night, the surrounding tribes realized the benefits of assuaging the good god Pharaoh and his appointed Son of Cush.

When Jad Horem sent Mehy to Nubia under the guise of keeping him safe from Pirameses, Mehy wasn't fooled. Jad Horem kept him alive because he was useful, and *Pharaoh* Horem had given Mehy three clear duties while at Buhen: "Send taxes north, increase trade, and protect our southern frontier."

Mehy had done all three, in dramatic fashion, and so far, no assassin had disturbed his sleep. Now tribes from every direction—Cushites, Medjays, and those from Temeh, Yam, and Punt—brought gifts and greetings to Mehy on their way to the central trading post at Yebu.

As the next petitioner drew breath to begin, Mandai lifted his hand, silencing him.

Mehy heard it too. Marching. Soldiers. He motioned for Mandai to lean close for a whisper. "How many do you hear?"



“A full brigade.”

Mehy breathed deep and waved away the petitioner, waiting for the soldiers to reach the double ebony doors that stood open to the outer courtyard. Unlike the bustling streets of Memphis, Egypt’s capital, or even the ever-growing estates of Avaris and Qantir, Buhen Fortress was a quiet post where officers and guards, their families, and slaves dwelt in relative peace.

Streets met at right angles in the center of the fort and divided the interior into units. There were administrative buildings, barracks, officer’s homes, granaries, bakeries, and several gardens. It was like a small town with an abnormally thick wall around it. Outside that thick wall was a dry moat, sharply inclined and lined with bricks. Semi-circular brick bastions were spaced evenly on a low-lying wall just above the moat with windows from which archers shot enemy soldiers who were caught in the moat.

The rhythmic footsteps drawing nearer weren’t the enemy—or at least, not *Egypt’s* enemy. Had they been sent for good or ill? Mehy’s heartbeat picked up the pace of their march. He stood.

A gilded palanquin appeared in the courtyard, and the occupant peering from within nearly felled him.

“Jad Horem?” He’d said it aloud, though only in a whisper. But even that could prove hazardous. He shook off his astonishment and shouted to the gathered throng as he fell to the granite floor, arms extended. “On your faces before the Son of Horus, beloved of Amun, chosen of Ra, jubilation of all Egypt, our good god and Pharaoh Horemheb.”

The marching drew nearer, and Mehy saw two sandaled feet halt a hand’s-breadth from his outstretched fingers. The feet were deep brown, not the Nubian black he’d grown accustomed to seeing. The sandals weren’t jeweled, but rather worn and dusty, like a man who had walked



many roads. Who was the king's new fan bearer? Mehy didn't dare look up until Pharaoh invited him.

“Rise, Son of Cush.”

At Jad Horem's gruff voice, Mehy was on his feet, standing at strict attention. Now he glimpsed the fan bearer, but didn't recognize him. Barely breathing, he kept eyes forward as the king paced a circle around him, inspecting, judging, measuring.

As if Mehy were a chariot horse at the market.

Jad Horem slapped Mehy's bicep and jostled his shoulder. “You've grown stronger since I last saw you. I thought Nubia would make you fat and lazy.”

Thought...or hoped? “I grow strong to serve my king.”

“Yes, well...” Jad Horem examined the modest courtroom and chuckled when he noticed Mandai and Nassor. “I see you've kept your old friends close. Good. Good. Every leader needs a mother and a monster.”

Mehy's gaze jerked to meet Jad Horem's. The man's smirk did not bode well.

The king stepped close and lowered his voice. “I sent Nassor with you because he's capable of the inhuman acts you couldn't stomach, and Mandai has been more loyal to you than my *daughter* ever was.” He spat out the last words.

Stepping back, Jad Horem sniffed and repositioned his mask of levity. “I've brought an old friend to meet you.” He motioned to his fan bearer and circled the stranger's shoulders like a brother.

Mehy met the man's gaze. He was massive—taller than Mehy and bulkier than Horemheb—but his expression held warmth and kindness.

“I am Jethro, a simple Midianite trader.” The man extended his hand.



“Not true!” Jad Horem slapped him on the back and then leaned in. “Watch this one, son. Jethro will take your best horse, and somehow make you grateful he did it.”

Mehy could only stare. Had he ever seen Jad Horem...chuckle? Was this one of his sick tricks? Mehya glanced around the courtroom, hoping no one would lift his head. Surely, Jad Horem was hoping to execute the first person that laughed.

“I’ll be sure to hide my prize horse.” Mehya smiled and offered a slight bow to Jad Horem’s friend. Best to tread lightly on this unsteady terrain. Mehya’s Egyptian ummi—the one who found him floating in a Hebrew basket on the Nile—had once told him Horemheb used to be a kind and compassionate man, but he’d turned into a monster when he couldn’t save King Tut or his wife from Vizier Ay’s murderous plotting. Vengeance had driven him mad.

The monster was all Mehya had ever known.

Mehya gripped Jethro’s wrist, accepting his friendship. “I’m honored to meet anyone the good god Horemheb considers a friend. You are most welcome at Buhen.”

The man gave a slight nod, but his gaze lingered as if searching for more.

Unsettling as Jethro’s probing was, Mehya had little time to ponder his motives. The dozens of guards and petitioners who waited, still in their penitent positions, were beginning to fidget. Turning to the king, Mehya prodded gently, “To what do I owe this most welcome but unexpected visit from the source of life and the festive spirit of our land?”

Jad Horem’s annoyance was quick and clear. “Rise! Get out, all of you!”

Heat rose in Mehya’s cheeks as his heart raced and palms grew sweaty. How could this man still reduce him to a quaking child with only a few words? Mehya bowed his head, waiting for the room to empty. He’d fought Medjay warriors, killed Cushite chieftains, subdued uprisings in Punt and Yam. Why couldn’t he withstand his grandfather’s bluster?



Because I watched him, when I was but a child, dismember men and behead an innocent woman.

And when Jad Horem discovered that Mehy's Hebrew heritage had been kept from him, Pharaoh Horemheb had sentenced both his daughter Anippe and her sister Ankhe to death. Ankhe became crocodile food, and Anippe would have joined her were it not for Mandai's courage to secretly defy the king's command. Mehy felt ill whenever he thought of the deception, but he was at least thankful Ummi Anippe was alive—even if she was now called Bithiah and lived among the Hebrews.

Mandai and Nassor closed the double ebony doors after the last person left the courtroom, then turned to face the nobles. The silence made Mehy's heartbeat pound louder in his ears.

Jad Horem spoke without preamble or apology. "I have named Pirameses my heir. Six months ago Sety had a son, which gives the Ramessids a reliable line of succession." He stepped forward and placed a hand on Mehy's shoulder. "You had to realize that by foregoing marriage, you forfeited your chance of becoming my heir."

He held Mehy's gaze, communicating more than words. Jad Horem had never forbidden Mehy to marry, not in so many words. Doing so would risk telling the world Mehy was Hebrew. But the pharaoh made it clear through subtle and not-so-subtle messages that Mehy must not marry nor produce an heir himself. It was the only plausible excuse for Horemheb to choose a different heir.

"I will serve the Ramessids as I have served you, Jad Horem." Mehy paused only a moment before adding, "If they let me live long enough to prove it."



A slow smile crept across the king's features. "You've grown smarter in Nubia." He raised a single brow, inspecting his grandson for a long moment before he spoke again. "Since you understand the world of kings and nobles so well, perhaps you can guess why I brought my friend Jethro to meet you."

Mehy turned to the Midianite trader, expecting the smug expression he'd grown accustomed to seeing on so many noblemen's faces. Instead, he saw only...what? Was it compassion...or pity on Jethro's face?

Before Mehya could venture a guess, Jethro himself explained. "I hope to become your friend, my lord. As governor of Nubia, you protect the southern trade routes, and it's obvious that the Nubian people have become loyal to you. I hold some sway with the Midianites and—"

"Jethro is Midian's high priest." Jad Horem clamped the man's shoulder, smiling like a jackal over its prey. "And he's nearly as rich as I am."

Jethro nodded politely. "The Son of Horus exaggerates—though I am the high priest of Midian and most of the incense and spice trades pass through my hands." He met Mehya's gaze and held it. "A trade agreement between you and I could be beneficial for us both. I need more ebony, ivory, and gold, and you need a reason for the Ramessids to keep you alive after Horemheb makes his journey over the horizon to the afterlife."

Mehy searched Jethro's features for any sign of deception—blinking, swallowing, a twitch. Nothing. Eyes clear, windows to an unfettered soul.

Mehy liked him immediately.

He extended his hand. "Tell me how much, when, and where you need the trade goods. Our Medjay troops will accompany the caravans to see them safely delivered."



Jad Horem grabbed their hands, trapping them in his firm grip, and stared at Mehy. Was that...desperation in his eyes? “I cannot undo what I did to my daughter, your ummi, but perhaps by securing your safety after my death, my heart will weigh lighter on Anubis’s scale, and things will go better for me in the afterlife.”

Mehy could do nothing but nod. Jad Horem must never know that Mandai disobeyed his order to kill Anippe. Were he to discover she still lived, she could too easily become a bargaining chip in the games pharaohs play.



Chapter Three

1295 BCE – Buhen Fortress, Nubia

Mehy relaxed in the ancient barbican of Buhen, his feet propped in the narrow windows, where archers had defended this fortress for centuries. Mandai stood beside him, as usual, but was leaning against the wall, snoring softly.

Mehy grinned. Only a Medjay could sleep standing up.

His friend was getting older. Gray hairs now outnumbered black on his head, and his body of iron had turned to clay—fragile and worn.

“Why is it so quiet, my friend?” Mehya whispered, careful not to wake him.

“It was quiet until you spoke.”

Unable to contain a smile, Mehya ignored the comment. Mandai’s muscles had weakened, but his hearing was sharp as ever.

Rising from his ebony chair, Mehya leaned over the wall to see the fortress gate below and the steep, brick-lined moat that surrounded Buhen to deter advancing enemies. The retractable bridge was extended across the chasm each morning to welcome traders, but it had been nearly three weeks since anyone had ventured from Yebu. Why? Buhen was remote, to be sure, but Mehya had never known three weeks without a merchant’s visit in the nearly twenty years he’d been governor.

“May I serve you, my lord?”

At Layla’s voice, Mehya turned from his melancholy to find her carrying a tray of bread, fresh fruits, vegetables, and a pitcher of date wine. “Only if you’ll join us.” He motioned for Mandai to sit. Layla had brought three cups.



Her easy smile helped him forget the absent merchants. As she laid out their meal on the floor of the barbican, Mehy took note of the branded scar on her forearm.

He grasped her arm and ran his thumb over his personal mark. “I’m sorry I hurt you.” An awkward silence settled between them. Mehy kept his head bowed. What had possessed him to speak to her so?

She placed her hand over his. “It has protected me—and given me purpose.”

He looked up then and found her eyes glistening. “But I should have sent you back to your family. They might have found you a husband.”

Surprise lit her features. “I’m happy you didn’t send me back. I would have been disgraced. And I don’t need a husband.” She bowed her head then, as though suddenly bashful. “You keep me safe. That is enough.”

So many times in the past eight years, Mehy had ached to hold her. To love her. But never more than at this moment.

Mandai took a step behind her and cast that fatherly look at him. When Layla first served at the fortress, he’d warned Mehy not to get involved with a Cushite slave, but as the years passed, Mandai had grown fond of Layla and become a tenacious matchmaker. To no avail.

Mehy couldn’t—wouldn’t—give his heart to any woman.

“You are safe with me, Layla.” Mehy cleared his throat and reached for a piece of bread. “Always.”

“Thank you, my lord,” she said quietly, pouring the wine.

Mandai settled across from Mehy, averting his gaze. He would no doubt have plenty to say when Layla left.



“So what do you make of our quiet three weeks?” Mehy directed the question at Layla. Perhaps she’d heard something from the villagers.

Her face grew somber. “Merchants from the north must come soon. Look at all this food.” She pointed to the melon, cucumbers, lettuce, and dates. “Harvest is upon us and every field is ripe. The villagers must trade their produce for grain and supplies to sustain them. If the merchants don’t come soon, everything will rot, and they’ll have nothing left to trade.”

Such passion, such concern for others...

And she was right, of course. The fortress would survive because they could send a skiff of soldiers up the Nile to Thebes and barter for more supplies, but what about the Nubians? Their land was their livelihood, and though they’d resented Egypt’s intrusion at first, they’d now become dependent on their trade.

“They’ll come.” Mehy spoke with more surety than he felt. “I’ll send a skiff up to Yebu today to investigate. If Nubia’s main trading hub doesn’t know what’s happening in the north, we’ll send a unit of my best soldiers to Thebes to get answers.”

They finished their meal to the lovely sound of Layla’s songs, another of her traits that reminded him of Miriam.

As the melody ebbed, the dissonant shout of the watchman rang out. “Royal skiff approaching from the north! Royal skiff approaching from the north!”

Mandai lifted a single brow and locked eyes with Mehy. “I’d say we’re about to discover why it’s been so quiet.”



Mehy stood at the quay, waiting to meet the royal visitors, Mandai at his right and Nassor at his left. The high wall around Buhen was lined with soldiers, servants, and their families, who also awaited these visitors and the news they would bring.

The Nile's first cataract of large, smooth river stones necessitated docking larger boats at Yebu and skiff-sailing for any travel farther south. The river's sinking levels had slowed the white-water rapids at Buhen's second cataract, but the oarsmen still pulled hard against the current, making their progress slow and giving Mehy ample time to assess the boat's occupants.

Jethro was easy to distinguish, his height and bulk setting him apart, but Mehy didn't see anyone else wearing a robe. The others aboard appeared to be Nubians, dressed only in loincloths, backs glistening in the midday sun.

Jethro should have arrived earlier with his spices, herbs, and grain. Since Jad Horem had introduced them eight years ago, he'd been as predictable as the rising and setting sun. So why the delay this year?

The skiff drew nearer, and Mehy's observations were confirmed. Jethro was alone with twelve oarsmen—and the boat carried no supplies. He wasn't here to trade. Why would he come without—

Mehy staggered back, his stomach rising to his throat. Only one thing would shut down trade in Egypt. *Jad Horem is dead*. The beginning of mourning was the end of trade for seventy days.

Mandai gripped his shoulder. "They have sent a friend to tell you bad news. This is a good thing, Azizi."

Emotion tightened Mehy's throat. Mandai only called him *Azizi—precious one*—at especially tender moments. He'd been more of a father to Mehy than anyone on earth. Much



more than Jad Horem had ever been. With a fortifying breath, Mehy raised his hand in greeting as the skiff reached the quay.

Jethro offered only a tentative smile and climbed out of the skiff, grasping Mehy's arm immediately. "I bring sad news, my friend. May we speak in private?"

Why wouldn't Jethro announce Pharaoh's death here? "Of course. Follow me." Mehy led the way to his private chamber within the secure walls of Buhen. They went through the gates, past the courtroom, granary, and temple, across the main courtyard, and finally entered Mehy's private chamber. Layla was waiting with two glasses, a pitcher of dark beer, and her special date bread.

Mehy motioned to a fine tapestry in the corner covered with large pillows. "Please, my friend, sit down." Nassor and Mandai took their positions at the doorway—ever near but not intrusive.

Jethro's features were drawn. He appeared wearier than his years. "Your Jad Horem, like the sun-god, has set below the horizon."

Mehy lifted his hand. "I need no fine words, Jethro. The gods were created by men to soothe their troubled minds." He reached for his glass of beer to wash down the lump in his throat. "Jad Horem is dead. I know what is expected of me. We can leave for Thebes tomorrow. At the funeral, I'll be named the 'Beloved Son' and will be responsible to provide a meal for him annually in the Valley of the Kings and—"

"No, Mehy." His stricken expression was more frightening than his silence.

"No? What do you mean no? Which part?"

"You will have no part in Pharaoh Horemheb's funeral—or his afterlife."

The awful words hung between them. Shocking. Eviscerating.



Jethro continued. “Pharaoh Pirameses forbids you to attend the funeral. The only family names listed on Horemheb’s stela will be his wives—Amenia and Mutnodjmet.”

“What about Ummi Anippe?” Mehy leapt to his feet, towering over Jethro. “She was adopted, yes, but he loved her to the end. He said—”

“I know.” Jethro offered his hand. “I know, my friend. Pharaoh told me about Anippe, his regrets about the way he treated her—the way he treated you.”

Mehy slapped Jethro’s hand away and turned his back. Did this Midianite think he could soothe years of betrayal with a simple handshake? “If I can’t go to the funeral, when can I visit Jad Horem’s tomb?” The silence turned him around. “Jethro, when can I visit Jad’s tomb?”

Jethro dropped his gaze, fidgeting with the tassel on his sleeve. “Pirameses and Sety have begun work on their royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings, but they refuse to disclose the location of Horemheb’s tomb. The public funerary procession will conclude at Luxor, and a private ceremony at Horemheb’s tomb will take place at a later time and place—unannounced. Sety has been named ‘Beloved Son’ and will provide for Horemheb’s needs in the afterlife.”

Mehy fingered the bejeweled dagger on his belt. It would be so easy to resume his persona of *Seth reborn* right now, the monster Pirameses had taught him to be during Mehy’s military training. He could dismember Jethro in moments and send him back in pieces to Pirameses. Perhaps that’s what the new pharaoh wanted so he could invade Nubia with Egyptian troops and prove Mehy incompetent after all. There were two major problems with that plan. Mehy wasn’t Seth reborn—that was Nassor’s job. And he could never kill his friend.

He stepped closer to Jethro, and Mandai moved to intercept him, eyes fixed on Mehy’s dagger. Mehy surrendered his hands in the air and noticed both Mandai and Jethro relax.



Mehy grabbed a cushion and sat down across from the Midianite. “What exactly am I supposed to do now?”

Jethro eyed the dagger. “Perhaps I should take that before I say any more.”

Without pause, Mehy reached for the blade and handed it to the Midianite. “If I want you dead, Nassor will do it. He’s honed his skills to an art.”

“Well, that makes sense.” Jethro set aside the dagger and rubbed his face, appearing wearier even than when he arrived. “Sety wants to make Nassor his personal guard.”

Mehy cast a disbelieving glance from Jethro to Nassor, and then to Mandai. “Sety doesn’t even like Nassor. Why would he—”

Jethro lifted his hand to halt the protests. “As soon as the funeral is over, Pirameses plans another march into Canaan against the Hittites—with Sety leading the campaign.”

“That’s ridiculous!” This was madness. “Sety has been in one battle, when we were children, and he was nearly killed. Nassor has seen few battles himself. Why would Pirameses send his only son into harm’s way with an inexperienced bodyguard?”

Jethro shrugged, lifting his hands as if his wrists were tied. “I’m just the messenger, but Pirameses has promised to send huge shipments of supplies to Buhen and to the villages of Nubia to show his good faith.”

“His good faith?” Mehy shot an accusing glare at Nassor. Could it be? Had the man he thought a friend been sending secret missives north? No, Nassor seemed as surprised as the rest of them. “I have no faith in Pirameses, little more in Nassor.”

“Master Mehy, I—”

“Silence!” Mehy aimed an accusing finger in Nassor’s direction. “You have no idea how to defend Pharaoh on a battlefield. Don’t pretend otherwise.”



Another awkward silence descended, but Jethro pressed. “Regardless, I’ve been ordered to return to Thebes with Nassor—by next week.”

Mehy’s whole body shook with rage, but he kept his head bowed. If Nassor wore a satisfied grin, he’d kill him. Pirameses had won. No doubt, Mehya would soon die in his bed at the hands of an assassin. Sety would oppose it since he and Mehya had been friends since childhood, but Sety had never been able to defy his father. Perhaps that’s why Pharaoh was sending his son to Canaan—to feign innocence when Mehya ended up dead.

The sound of sniffing pierced through his self-pity, and Mehya noticed Layla curled up in the corner, crying. When their eyes met, she tilted her head, and the compassion in her eyes nearly choked him. He looked away, finding Mandai’s gaze on him as well. The warrior raised his chin—silently urging strength and courage.

With a deep sigh, Mehya squeezed his eyes shut. *These people are my world now, not Pirameses, not Sety.* What did it matter if he never saw Egypt again? He lived in a fortress surrounded by loyal friends and Nubian soldiers.

Let Pirameses try to come for him.

He stood and closed the distance between himself and Nassor. “Safe travels, soldier.” He offered his hand.

The man wrapped his wrist with a strong grip. “Thank you, Commander. I’ll make you proud.”

Mehya squeezed his arm firmly. “You’ll be guarding the next pharaoh. Make sure you do.”



Chapter Four

6 Months Later - Qantir Estate, Egypt's Delta

Miriam reached for a fresh damp cloth to cool Pharaoh Pirameses's fevered brow. How could a man become so weak in just two short weeks? His symptoms began with vomiting, headaches, and a slight rash, but progressed to seizures and, six days ago, paralysis. Shiphrah and Miriam were summoned to the Qantir estate since none of the Egyptian physicians had traveled with the king from Memphis. The grand villa was under major renovations and would one day rival the palace at Gurob, but one look at Pharaoh Pirameses, and the midwives knew he wouldn't live to enjoy it. They suggested a messenger retrieve Crown Prince Sety from Canaan right away.

Miriam replaced the warm cloth with a cool one on his brow—his fever raged so high, she could feel the heat from where she stood. Pirameses had lost consciousness two days ago. Now, his lips were swollen and cracked. The strong and proud King of Egypt, who'd sailed into the Delta just over a month ago, could never have guessed his life would be cut short so abruptly.

He'd arrived from Memphis when the Nile was at its peak to oversee the renovations on the new capital city before the annual noblemen's festival. He'd confiscated Mehy's Avaris estate, making it a part of Sety's inheritance. Why save Avaris for a master who would never return? Miriam had heard from one of the bricklayers that Pirameses vowed Mehy would travel to the afterlife from Nubia.

Builders, bricklayers, sculptors, and gardeners worked day and night to create a luxurious noblemen's hideaway rivaling the Fayum Oasis, where King Tut had hosted his annual hunts. Miriam and Shiphrah had treated more slaves for heatstroke and dehydration in the past month than in a full year before the new project began. Pirameses was anxious to show off his progress,



but shortly before his guests were scheduled to arrive, the king fell ill. His wife Sitre accused him of trying to ruin her reputation, insisting they'd be the social laughing stocks of Egypt. At the sight of Pirameses's first seizure, however, she agreed to turn away their guests.

A kitchen slave entered with a bowl of broth, the tap of her sandals the only sound in the king's stifling chamber. Shiphrah soaked the tip of a linen cloth and then dabbed it across the king's lips to offer some nourishment with the moisture.

"Give me that, you fool." Sitre leapt from her corner chair and grabbed the cloth from Shiphrah's hand. Rubbing coarsely, she ruptured the king's fragile lips. Noticing blood staining the cloth, she covered a sob and threw the cloth at Shiphrah. "My husband must live until Sety returns. Do you understand? He cannot die until the next pharaoh is present to receive his ka!" She ran from the chamber. Silence returned.

Slowly, Shiphrah bent to retrieve the soiled cloth and reached for a new one. With practiced calm, she dipped it in the warm broth. Miriam kept her head bowed and rotated another cool compress onto the king's forehead.

Pirameses's personal guard stepped from the shadows to the king's side. "Will he live to pass on the divine spark?"

Shiphrah exchanged a wary glance with Miriam. "Have you received word from Prince Sety? When will he arrive?"

"The royal messenger said his barque should dock by nightfall."

Miriam held her hand above the king's nose and mouth and felt barely a flutter of breath. She lifted her eyes slowly to meet the threatening gaze of the guard. "I hope Prince Sety arrives sooner than that."



Miriam inhaled a steadying breath and exhaled slowly. Calm. She must remain calm. Why had Sety summoned her to his private chamber? Only moments' before Pirameses's death, Sety had arrived. He'd rushed into the chamber and fallen over his abbi's body, weeping. The high priest of Seth was present to guide the king's divine ka to the crown prince, ordaining Sety the next pharaoh.

Miriam had watched from the corner. The man who had been Pharaoh Pirameses was now nothing more than wasting flesh. There was not now, nor had there ever been, a divine spark to transfer. She rubbed her temples, tension growing again. Had she somehow revealed her thoughts in her countenance? Is that why Sety summoned her—to beat her, or worse? Would she be accused of blaspheming the very gods that gave the royal family its power? *El Shaddai, make me a strong witness for You no matter what comes.*

Wiping her hands against her robe, she dried her sweaty palms and approached the guarded chamber of her new king. A guard struck the door with his spearhead, then opened it without hesitation. Miriam took three steps and hesitated to let her eyes adjust. The chamber was dark except for a few small lamps burning in the sitting area. Two men waited in an open courtyard that still glowed amethyst in the waning light of dusk, looking over the Nile. One man was seated on an elaborate ebony chair—more like a small throne. One soldier stood at his right, holding a torch. A soldier Miriam knew.

Nassor.

He looked over his shoulder, eyeing her from head-to-toe, a cold sneer fixed in place. The years hadn't erased his hatred, nor were Miriam's memories blunted of the beatings he'd



inflicted on her and countless Israelites when he was estate foreman at Avaris before he accompanied Mehy to Nubia.

No one grieved his absence.

“Come into the light where I can see you.” Sety’s voice was gravelly, weary.

Miriam hurried to kneel before the new king, who looked older than his thirty-three years.

“How much do you know about treating battle wounds?” He uncovered his left leg, propped on a stool, revealing a festering gash nearly the length of his shin. “I was already on my way back to Egypt when—” His jaw muscle danced in the absence of words.

Miriam scooted closer to inspect his leg, and then lifted her gaze. “Nassor, bring the torch closer. I need more light.”

“So, you do know my guard. He told me you could help us.”

Amusement laced Sety’s tone, stealing Miriam’s attention. “Shiphrah is the chief midwife, my lord. I can tend the wound tonight, but she’s the one that should—”

Sety leaned over and grabbed Miriam’s arm like a vice, drawing her closer. “You must help me with Mehy.”

Fear and confusion warred within. “I...I don’t understand.” Miriam looked at Nassor and back at the new pharaoh. “Master Mehy is in Nubia—isn’t he?” She searched Sety’s eyes and saw the frightened child she once knew, the boy who placed second to Mehy in military training, and who even now measured a head shorter than Miriam’s brother. The king released her arm, and she fell backward at his feet.

“Mehy will return here after Pharaoh Pirameses’s crossing-over ceremony.” He turned away. “Nassor says he will not leave Nubia willingly.”



Miriam's heart broke. Why wouldn't her brother want to come home to Avaris, to his family? When Sety remained silent, seeming deep in thought, she voiced a safer question. "How may I help, my lord?"

Instantly, his eyes returned to her—leering, judging. "Nassor says you were Mehy's favorite, that he called for you often before he went to battle." Sety grabbed her arm again, exposing Miriam's concubine brand. "I suppose you could have been beautiful—years ago."

He shoved her away like a filthy rag. Miriam's cheeks flamed, and she bowed her head. Better they think she was Mehy's concubine than to know she was his sister—and that his Hebrew name was Moses. All those nights he'd summoned her to sing, she'd sung the songs of El Shaddai, giving him strength and courage for the battles ahead.

Sety hovered over her and tilted her chin with a single finger. "He's taken another woman, you know, a Cushite who sings almost as well as you."

Miriam tried to hide her surprise. Mehy had vowed never to give his heart to a woman.

Sety noted her agitation and sat back in his chair. "You're jealous. Good. Because from what Nassor tells me, he will mourn her loss. You must make him forget what she could have meant for his future."

"His future?" The words slipped out before Miriam could stop them.

An unbearable pause accompanied Sety's cold stare. "If Mehy's Cushite were to give him an heir, he would gain even more loyalty from those savages in Nubia. He could build an unstoppable force that could threaten my throne—or my son's throne. That's why Ramesses will marry his sister, Henutmire, and begin bearing children as soon as the gods favor it. We must build the Ramessid royal line quick and strong."

"But, my lord, Mehy would never—"



The back of Sety's hand connected with Miriam's cheek. Sparks dotted her vision as the new king leaned within a handbreadth. "You have no idea what *Mehy* would do. I will summon him to my abbi's crossing-over ceremony at Luxor, and while he is celebrating my ascension to the throne, Meh'y's precious Nubians will be dispersed to gold mines in Punt, copper mines in Sinai, and building projects throughout Egypt proper. My guards will escort him to his quarters here in the new capital of Egypt, Rameses—the city named after my son. And you will be waiting in his chamber to soothe what will surely be his very bad temper."

Miriam's head swam—from Sety's blow, but also from the grief that Meh'y was about to bear. Her little brother had experienced so much pain in the name of political expediency. How much more could he endure?

El Shaddai, strengthen Moses for the days to come, and give him wisdom to overcome Egypt's political intrigues.

Miriam felt the calming peace that accompanied her prayers and lifted her gaze to the new pharaoh. "I will do as you say, my lord." She laid a gentle hand on his foot. "Should we send a messenger to my longhouse for supplies to dress your wound? Or shall I go myself?"

Sety's bluster fled, and the little boy returned. "Stay with me. Nassor can go. He's worthless as a bodyguard anyway. Meh'y tried to warn me, but I didn't listen, and this wound is the result." He waved the big guard away with a flick of his wrist. "And send a replacement to guard my chamber. I don't want to see your face again, Nassor."

Miriam waited in Meh'y's lavish chamber while chants and cheers welcomed home the Delta's long-lost hero. His estate had been absorbed into Pharaoh's new capital city, but Meh'y's



reputation as the conquering Son of Cush garnered him fame equal to the insecure pharaoh's. It was a dangerous honor.

A royal messenger had arrived two days ahead of the king's barque with instructions that Miriam should be taken to the royal residence and prepared for Mehy's arrival. She was bathed, oiled, painted, and clothed in the most luxurious linen gown she'd ever seen. The beadwork alone could have been sold to feed three longhouses full of slaves for a year.

The shouting outside grew louder, closer, and Miriam's heart beat faster. She hadn't seen Moses for eighteen years—and he'd never seen her in anything but a rough-spun robe. As a young man, his temper had often been quick and uncontrolled. Would he think she'd come to his chamber willingly to coerce him?

El Shaddai, let him feel my love as a sister. Remind him of Bithiah's love and Ima Jochebed's love too.

The iron latch on the door clicked, and Nassor marched in, staring at Miriam like a hungry jackal. She turned away, her cheeks flaming. The door slammed shut, and she heard a slight gasp that drew her attention.

"Miriam?" Her brother stood like a statue, rooted to the floor, mouth gaping. His first battle scar—the one on his left shoulder—was now one of many on his chest and arms.

Oh, the pain you've endured, dear one.

"Mo—" She stopped before his Hebrew name passed her lips. "Master Mehy. Welcome home." Falling to her knees, she stretched out her hands before her, an act of complete submission. And then she waited.



Two pair of sandaled feet passed her without a word, but Miriam remained splayed on the tile floor. The sound of jewelry clanging into a metal dish and splashing water from the basin assured her Mehy intended to relax and remain in his chamber.

“Leave us, Nassor.” Mehy’s command left no room for discussion. Nassor stormed past Miriam and slammed the door behind him.

“Get up, Miriam.” His voice held no warmth, and when she turned to face her brother, she saw only an angry Egyptian master. “Why are you here?”

She ached to say everything her heart had pondered for eighteen long years. *Because you’re my brother, and I love you. Because Ima Jochebed and Bithiah want to know you’re safe and well. Because you’re finally home, where you can learn to know El Shaddai, the God of your father, Amram.*

Instead, she spoke as the Hebrew slave she was. “Nassor told Sety that I was once your favorite concubine, so Sety had me brought here to help you forget the Cushite you loved.”

Mehy choked out a sardonic laugh. “Sety, my thoughtful friend.”

“No, my lord. He is not your friend.” Miriam lifted her chin and met her master’s gaze. “Sety feared your Cushite woman might bear you a son through whom you could secure enough power to contest his throne and his son’s after him. It’s the same reason he dispersed the Nubian troops to the mines in Sinai and Punt—and brought some here as slaves.”

Mehy’s granite expression never changed. “Why should I believe you now, when you lied to me for the first half of my life?”

Instant tears stung Miriam’s eyes. “I...I didn’t lie. I just didn’t tell you I was your sister.” He stared, unflinching, for what seemed an eternity. *El Shaddai, please soften his heart. He needs You. He needs a family who loves him.*



“If you ever lie to me again, I will kill you with my own hands.”

Relief washed over her, and she squeezed her eyes shut. *Thank You, El Shaddai. That’s a beginning.* Without permission, she rushed closer and fell to her knees before him. Looking up into his eyes, she couldn’t stop her tears. “I’m sorry your heart is broken.”

The harshness of his features softened, and he cupped her chin. “I will miss Layla, but she was not my concubine. She sang the songs of her tribe for me—much like you sang of El Shaddai. When I heard Pirameses had died, I suspected Sety would recall me to Egypt, so I protected Layla by giving her to a Midianite trader named Jethro. He’d always been fond of her. I suspect he might take her as a wife.”

Miriam’s heart filled to overflowing. “Your wisdom was an answer to my prayers. I asked El Shaddai to give you wisdom beyond Sety’s plotting, and He did.”

He offered a condescending smile and helped Miriam to her feet. “You serve your god, Miriam, and I’ll serve mine.” He unsheathed his short sword and let the midday sun gleam off its blade. “Seth is the only god that serves a Ramessid in battle.”

“You’re not a Ramessid, Moses.”

He lifted an eyebrow and pointed the sword at her. “That’s a detail no one needs to know.”

Miriam carefully nudged the blade away. “El Shaddai kept you alive in a basket on the Nile, and He still has a plan for your life—*Moses*.”

He sheathed the sword and gave a derisive snort. “Well, Sety’s plan for my life is easier to discern. Libya is threatening revolt on the western border, so he’s leading troops against that rebellion, while I resume the campaign against the Hittites in Canaan.” He cleared his throat and turned away suddenly. “It’s the first battle I’ll fight without Mandai at my side. I suppose I’ll



take Nassor. I certainly can't leave him here. He's already beaten two slaves so badly they couldn't keep working."

"Will they recover?"

Miriam's question turned Mehy around, regret instantly apparent in his eyes. "I sounded like the other Egyptian masters, didn't I? Caring only about the work getting done."

Miriam didn't answer. None was needed.

"I just meant it would be safer if—"

She stepped close and laid a hand on his forearm. "So you left Mandai in Nubia? Was he unwell?"

"He said he was too old to make the journey, but before I left he made me promise to pray to El Shaddai before every battle." He offered a sad grin. "After all these years, he still remembered the one god you and Mered nagged us about."

Then, as if a torch lit in his eyes, Mehy's countenance changed. "Is Mered still the chief linen keeper? Is Ummi Anip—I mean *Bithiah*—is she still..."

"Yes, and yes." Miriam thrilled that her brother was finally emerging from the thick crust of Egyptian granite.

For the remaining hours of daylight, she mended Moses's heart as neither concubine nor midwife, but only as his sister could.



Chapter Five

1290 BCE - Capital City of Rameses, Delta

The air was heavy and damp, the heat oppressive. Mehy had been walking along the shoreline since sunrise on land that had once been his—land the Ramessids stole to make their capital city.

“Is this how pharaohs reward success?” he asked a red-billed ibis standing nearby. The bird fluttered away.

If only he could do the same.

For more than three years, he’d led Egypt’s troops deeper into Hittite territory, claiming Syrian land all the way north to Tyre. Pharaoh Sety’s successful campaign in Libya ended in time for him to drive his chariot to victory on the final march against Tyre, securing for himself all the glory of the empire. He’d magnanimously bestowed to Mehy the title *Supreme Commander of Egypt’s Armies* and entrusted him with the honor of Crown Prince Ramesses’s military training. It was a demotion, considering Mehy had been second in command to Pharaoh Horemheb only five years ago, and this new role was little more than a glorified wet nurse. Of course, Mehy could not decline. No one offended Pharaoh Sety and lived to repeat the error.

Turning toward what was now the industrial section of the burgeoning new capital, Mehy shaded his eyes from the blazing midday sun. There, under a lone palm tree, sat his old friend Mered, the linen keeper. His heart warmed and his feet gained new purpose.

Mehy raised a hand in greeting as he approached, and Mered shielded his eyes, squinting to see. He’d become an old man while Mehy was away. His hair was still well manicured and cut in the Egyptian style, but it was pure white and thinning. When he finally recognized Mehy’s approach, his smile was as inviting as ever—though he was missing a few teeth.



“Master Mehy! Come join me. I’ve got plenty of goat cheese and bread to share.”

Mehy chuckled at the irony—at least Mered had a home, a family, and a goat of his own. Mehy had nothing. He accepted a piece of bread with a generous dollop of cheese on top.

“Thank you, my friend. It’s been a long time since we’ve talked under your favorite tree.”

“Indeed, and your face shows the same strain as the first time you told me you were going to battle.”

Mehy smiled, but turned his eyes toward the quay, unnerved that this man could still read him so easily. He bit into the bread and cheese, savoring the robust flavor. “This is very good.”

“Bithiah made it.”

Mehy’s sudden gasp sucked a small piece of bread into his windpipe, causing him to choke and sputter.

Mered slapped his back repeatedly, concerned and yet laughing. “I should have warned you, Master Mehy. My wife has become a fine cook.”

The unavoidable tears from choking gathered as Mehy tried to regain his voice, but he was suddenly thankful for them. They masked the real tears that sprang up unexpectedly at the mention of his Egyptian mother. “Is she well—this wife, Bithiah?”

Mered smiled and nodded. “She is. Amram and Jochebed are also well. Miriam still lives with them to care for Amram, who has the falling sickness. We all share a longhouse together, you know. We pray for you every day, Mehy.”

A sudden warmth shot through him unlike anything he’d ever experienced. Had he been in the sun too long? He rolled his shoulders and blinked several times, hoping the feeling would abate, but it came with a yearning in his gut, a longing to protect these people.



“Mered, you need to stop working at the linen shop, and tell Bithiah to stay in the slave village. And Miriam must stay away from the royal residence and industrial buildings.” Regret seized Mehy’s chest at the decision he’d made last night, a decision he couldn’t reverse now. “Nassor will remain here when I go to Sile Fortress to begin young Ramesses’s military training. Though Nassor proved his integrity on the battlefield and he’s promised to act responsibly toward the slaves, I want you, Bithiah, and Miriam to stay away from him.” Mehy wiped his hands down the length of his face. “I must protect the people I lo...”

He let the words die.

Mered stared into the distance, remaining silent for a long while. “We love you, too, Mehy. More than you know.” He choked out the last words and cleared his throat before speaking again. “My firstborn son, Jered, has taken over most of my responsibilities at the linen shop anyway. He’ll be happy to be rid of me.” He turned then and held Mehy’s gaze. “Amram and Jochebed love you, too, son. They risked their lives to save yours. You should see them. You are bone of their bones and flesh of their flesh.”

The warmth shot through Mehy again, but he couldn’t—he wouldn’t—make that promise. “I’ll think about it.”

“You will sit at your oar until we dock at the quay.” Mehy shoved Prince Ramesses down on the skiff’s wooden bench for a second time. “I assure you, we will allow you to disembark first.”

The boy—barely over thirteen inundations old—stared daggers at his trainer. “If I miss the birth of my first child, you will pay with your own blood, Mehy.”



If the circumstance hadn't been so tragic, Mehy might have laughed. "Sety sent for you because the midwives said your sister-wife was nearing her time. That doesn't mean—"

"You are to refer to my father as *Pharaoh Sety*."

"Your abbi is my oldest friend, and you will refer to me as *Commander*."

The little jackal let go of his oar, sending it to the depths of the Nile and crossed his arms, forcing the other oarsmen to dock the skiff. Without awaiting permission, he bolted from the boat and ran to the royal residence.

"Good riddance." It would be a relief to be rid of the brat for a few days. Mehy said good-bye to his men and trudged up the long hill to his private chamber in the guest wing.

Nassor waited at his door and followed him into the chamber. "Welcome, Commander. What kind of entertainment might I arrange for you this evening? Musicians, dancers? Or perhaps a more private welcome? If I remember correctly, you like Hebrew women."

Mehy grew more weary hearing the list of empty activities. "What I really want, Nassor, is to talk with a friend." He turned to find Nassor beaming. "Send a messenger to the slave village and bring Mered to my chamber."

"The old linen keeper?" Nassor's words dripped with disdain, and Mehy realized he'd torn open old wounds. Nassor had always envied the relationship he and Mered enjoyed. Why had he even mentioned Mered's name?

He gripped Nassor's shoulder and leveled his gaze. "I thought Mered might give me advice on how to deal with Prince Ram since he put up with me as an unbearable thirteen-year-old." He paused as if an idea just occurred to him. "Perhaps you'd be the better choice though. You've witnessed Pharaoh Sety parenting his two daughters here in Rameses. How do you think he would wish me to manage his son?"



But Nassor's countenance remained stony and aloof. "I'm sure I have no idea, Commander. I've never had children of my own, nor do I intend to."

"Nor I, my friend. Nor I." Mehy slapped him on the back, trying to end the conversation on a happier note. "Perhaps after a late meal you could send in a few musicians to soothe me to sleep."

"Of course, Commander. I'll arrange the meal and the musicians to arrive after sunset."

"Thank you, Nassor. You may go." The big guard turned toward the door, but Mehy stopped him. "There's no need to mention my frustration with Prince Ramesses to anyone. Understood?"

He smiled, nodded once, and slipped from the chamber.

The fiery golden sun had barely touched the hills when Mehy decided he could endure it no longer. A nagging dread had burned in his gut since he'd mentioned Mered's name to Nassor. If he left now, he could check on Mered in the slave village and return before the musicians and his evening meal arrived. Could he remember which longhouse belonged to Mered and Bithiah? He'd only been there once, the first and last time he'd seen his Egyptian ummi in her Hebrew life. He strapped on his short sword just in case he encountered a jackal or hyena at dusk.

The bustling town was bedding down for the night. Market booths were closed, and only the linen shop, bakery, and brewery remained open through the night. The jewelry makers, sculptors, and other fine craftsmen were packing away their supplies to return home.

Mehy decided to walk along the shoreline to avoid people. He knew few of the slaves anymore and didn't wish to engage any royals or noblemen. He found himself wishing to be alone more and more these days. Midway between the industrial area and the slave village, he



noted a disturbance in the tall papyrus strands ahead. As he drew nearer, he saw two men fighting—and then saw Nassor. He was beating someone... was it a nobleman? Nassor's large fists pounded a white-haired man dressed in fine linen.

He's beating Mered!

With the stealth and speed of a leopard, Mehy advanced on the unsuspecting brute and cut Nassor down with a single stroke of his sword. It was quick and merciful. Mehy stood over the grisly scene and cursed his mercy. Mered lay unconscious, his face so badly beaten he was barely recognizable. Nassor deserved far worse than he'd gotten, and the Hebrews deserved Mehy's protection.

Warmth surged through him again, and this time he welcomed it. Perhaps this El Shaddai was real and did have a plan for him. Right now, the plan was to get Mered safely back to his family.

Looking this way and that, Mehy made sure no one had heard the commotion or seen him kill the guard. The papyrus had hidden them from the city's main thoroughfare, and most of the workers and guards had already gone home for the night. Mehy used his sword to dig a shallow grave in the sand to hide Nassor's body until dark. The crocodiles would dispose of it after that.

Mered moaned when Mehy lifted him.

"You're going to live, my friend. Miriam will take good care of you." He ran as fast as he dared along the uneven shoreline, keeping watch for night predators stalking early prey. When he cleared the papyrus and emerged at the slave village shaduf, only two women worked the lever to raise the bucket of water.

Mehy shouted as he approached, "In which longhouse does Miriam the midwife live?"

"That first one. Over there." The woman's hand trembled as she pointed.



Why was she still afraid of him? Couldn't she see that he was helping Mered?

Mehy veered into the alley between the first two longhouses, his heart constricting within him. Would the Hebrews accept his help if he offered?

“Miriam!” he shouted, hoping his sister would pop out of a doorway. Several heads looked out from behind curtains and quickly recoiled when they saw Mehya. “Miriam, help me. Please!” He didn't care if every Hebrew heard him beg.

Finally, a familiar face emerged from a doorway three doors away. *Ummi Anippe*. Gasping at the sight of her, Mehya hurried toward the door. The woman now called Bithiah waved him in and closed the curtain behind them. “Lay him here, on the sleeping mat in the corner. Did Nassor do this?”

“Yes. How did you know? Where's Miriam?” Mehya laid Mered on the woven reed mat and stepped back as another woman arrived with bandages, herbs, and a bowl of water. It was Jochebed, his wet nurse—his birth mother.

Memories overwhelmed him. Stories she told him. Games they played. He glanced around the house these women shared. The room was barely larger than Mehya's bathhouse, but it was neat and so clean he could have eaten off the packed dirt floor.

“Mehya, did Nassor do this?” Bithiah shouted this time, drawing him back to the awful reality.

“Yes. I told Nassor that Mered was my friend, and he...he...” Mehya covered his face.

A tender touch drew his hands away. Jochebed's eyes were as kind and gentle as ever, dismantling what little control he had left.

“It's my fault. I'm sorry.”



“No, my sweet boy. Nassor came here and took Mered away. El Shaddai used you to answer our prayers and save him.”

He looked past her to Ummi Anippe. Surely, Mered’s wife would blame him. But she looked over her shoulder, tilted her head, and smiled. “How can I ever thank you for saving him?”

Mehy couldn’t speak past the lump in his throat. How could these people forgive so freely? Love him in spite of what he’d done—and hadn’t done?

“Where...is Miriam?” He choked out the words.

Jochebed moved to Mered’s left side and began tending his wounds, freeing Bithiah to answer. “She’s at the royal residence with Shiphrah, waiting for Princess Henutmire to deliver her first child.”

Mehy squeezed his eyes shut. Of course, Sety still trusted the Hebrew midwives more than the Egyptian physicians for births.

The Hebrew midwives.

Shiphrah and Mered’s first wife, Puah, saved hundreds of Hebrew newborn sons by defying King Tut’s order forty years ago, and if Amram and Jochebed hadn’t placed him in a pitch-covered basket on the Nile, he would have been among the hundreds of babies that died. The sudden urge to meet his Hebrew father nearly felled him. “Is Amram here?”

Bithiah exchanged a tearful smile with Jochebed, and then pointed Mehya toward a tattered woolen cloth hanging in an adjoining doorway. “He’s beyond that curtain. He’ll be happy to see you.”

Hesitant, Mehya lingered over Bithiah’s shoulder, looking down at Mered’s swollen face. “Will he...”



“Yes, Moses,” she said quietly. “He’ll live.”

Moses. The name had never sounded so right.



Chapter Six

The Next Day

“I’m sorry, Pharaoh Sety. Your grandson was too small to survive.” Shiphrah held the tiny infant out to the king. Prince Ramesses turned away from his firstborn son’s body, still visibly shaken by the news given them moments ago. Sety signaled the priest of Seth to take the babe from Shiphrah’s hands. Miriam had no idea what he would do with the body—nor did she want to know.

Sitre stood between Sety and Ramesses, fuming. “If you would have sent for the royal physicians from Memphis, Sety, they could have saved him. But no! You chose these Hebrew imbeciles to deliver Ramesses’s first son.”

“These *imbeciles* save more newborns in one year than my physicians have delivered in their combined years of experience.” Pharaoh loomed closer, moving his mother back a step. “Since you can’t keep quiet, you will join my wife in her chamber. Should my guards escort you?”

Sitre turned in a huff, refusing to be dragged away like Queen Tuy in her grief. The sound of Sitre’s jeweled sandals slapping the sandstone tiles echoed in the hallway.

Shiphrah returned to help Miriam care for Princess Henutmire, and they shared a knowing glance. What did these Ramessids expect when a twelve-year-old gave birth? She was still shaking all over, poor dear.

Miriam found another blanket and covered her. “You’ll feel better soon, Princess.”

The girl cried silent tears. She’d made no sound during the whole ordeal. Perhaps she was afraid Sety would banish her as well.



Another commotion at the doorway stole Miriam's attention. She heard Mehy's name in whispered tones on the lips of a guard from the linen shop.

"Commander Mehy came to the shop this morning and found the new linen keeper and his brother fighting. When he tried to stop them, the older of the brothers said, 'Who made you our ruler and judge? Are you going to kill one of us like you killed Nassor?'"

"Has anyone seen Nassor this morning?" Sety asked.

"No, my lord. His bed wasn't slept in."

Prince Ramesses nudged his father's shoulder. "I told you, Abbi. Mehy can't be trusted. He's setting himself up as leader of the Hebrews, trying to stir a revolt like he did in Nubia."

Miriam watched the shadow of suspicion darken Sety's features. "Take your six best men, soldier. Make a thorough search of the grounds for Nassor. If he's not found, arrest Commander Mehy when he steps out of his chamber to attend tonight's feast. I'll at least give him a hearing before I take off his head."

Shiphrah continued her ministrations with Henutmire but reached for Miriam's hand and squeezed it. From the look on her face, she'd heard the threat as well. How could one of them get away to warn Moses?

"My lord." Shiphrah gained Pharaoh Sety's attention. "Your daughter's bleeding hasn't stopped. We need more herbs from my longhouse. May I send Miriam? She knows exactly what I need and where it is."

"Yes, yes, of course. Whatever my daughter needs. Get it." Sety waved Miriam away. "And be quick about it."

Hurrying from the room, Miriam looked behind her. A guard followed. She couldn't go to Mehy's chamber now. Instead, she ran toward the longhouses, her mind working faster than



her feet. Had Mehy really killed Nassor? Mered's son, Jered, was the new linen keeper, and he often fought with his brothers. But how would he know anything about Mehy and Nassor? And why would Jered speak so brashly, where an Egyptian guard could hear him?

By the time she reached the longhouse, she was exhausted and her confusion matched her fear. She shoved aside the curtain but stopped abruptly when she saw Mered lying on the mat—unconscious.

Bithiah gasped. "You're home! How is Henut—"

"Did Mehy do this?" Miriam pointed at Mered.

Jochebed emerged from the adjoining room. "Of course not. Nassor did it." Ima exchanged a measured glance with Bithiah. "And Mehy killed him."

Miriam's eyes slid shut. So that was it. Jered blamed Mehy for the attack on his abba Mered, so he lashed out with angry words in front of an Egyptian guard.

Heavy footsteps sounded outside their doorway. Miriam pressed her finger against her lips and motioned for Ima Jochebed to huddle close to Bithiah so she could share her news.

"Pharaoh Sety was told of Nassor's murder by a guard from the linen shop. Sety plans to kill Mehy tonight at the banquet."

Bithiah covered a gasp. "Abbi Horemheb executed his enemies at an evening feast when Sety and Mehy were little boys. If he plans to reenact that scene..." Tears welled in her eyes. "Miriam, you must warn Moses."

"I have to return to Princess Henutmire with more herbs, so one of you must go."

Ima Jochebed and Bithiah exchanged wide-eyed glances.

"You might be recognized," Ima Jochebed said to Bithiah. "I am the better choice."



Miriam rushed over to her baskets of herbs to collect the acacia leaves for Henutmire's tea. She found two empty baskets for Ima Jochebed—one small, one larger—and motioned her over. "Cover the small basket with pitch, like we did when Moses was a baby. Put it inside the larger basket and cover it. Take them both to Mehy's chamber. Tell his chamber guards that you're delivering jewelry made by your husband for the commander to wear at tonight's banquet. With El Shaddai's help, the guards will let you in without searching the baskets."

Fear sparked in Ima's eyes, but she bobbed her head. "What is the pitch-covered basket for?"

"Tell Moses to fill it with everything he'll need for a long journey—a fine robe, sandals, and plenty of deben to purchase passage in a merchant's caravan. Tell him the guards are waiting outside his door to arrest him. He'll know how to escape, but I suspect he'll swim part of the way, and the pitch-covered basket will preserve his supplies."

The night was clear and cool, and the moon shone bright through Mered and Bithiah's window. They lay together on the sleeping mat, Bithiah's arm protectively over her husband. Mered had awakened briefly after the evening meal. It was a good sign. He would recover.

Shiphrah and Miriam had returned from the royal residence before the evening feast—before the trumpets announced Commander Mehy's escape. Within moments, guards searched every longhouse in the slave village. They found nothing.

El Shaddai, keep my brother safe.

Would she always say that prayer for Moses? Would his life ever be free of danger? Miriam wrapped her arms a little tighter around her favorite nephew. Aaron's third-born son, Eleazar, had come to visit. He always seemed to know when she needed comfort. A precocious



seven year old, he gave his grandparents and Miriam more love than Aaron ever had. She kissed the top of his head and stroked his curly dark hair, careful not to wake him.

Sudden footsteps outside her window sent her heart into an erratic rhythm. A dark figure slipped around the curtain and loomed large in the room. Miriam gasped, waking Eleazar. The boy started to scream, but Miriam covered his mouth just in time. “Shhh, it’s your dohd Moses.” Miriam scurried to her feet.

Bithiah woke too. “You’re safe!”

Moses dropped the pitch-covered basket and wrapped her in his arms, holding on like a lifeline.

Ima Jochebed emerged from the adjoining room, and Moses released Bithiah. Eyes glistening, he reached for the basket and brushed Jochebed’s cheek. “Everything inside is dry. It appears your baskets have saved my life a second time.” A hug for his Hebrew ima brought more tears.

“You must leave right away.” Miriam’s whispered words fell like boulders, heavy and hard.

Abba Amram appeared at the doorway, and Ima Jochebed hurried over to steady him. “She’s right, my son,” he said. “It’s not safe for you here—or for us to have you here.”

Moses nodded, his jaw muscle working. He couldn’t seem to get out any words. The tears in his eyes said all they needed to know.

An awkward silence settled over them until little Eleazar tugged on Moses’s sleeve, inviting him close for a whisper. “Pharaoh can’t stay mad forever. El Shaddai will bring you back to us.”



The child's simple words offered hope, and Moses kissed his forehead. "I'll come back, son, but I doubt El Shaddai will have anything to do with it."

A bright light blinded Miriam for a moment. Then the sound of rushing waters and a gentle whisper: *You are mine*. She opened her eyes as Moses worked his way around the family circle, saying his good-byes. Her chest ached with yearning to speak the words aloud. Was the message for her brother?

Moses lingered at the curtained doorway and held Miriam's gaze. "I thought your god might use me to rescue the Hebrews from bondage. I was wrong."

Her tongue felt thick, as though stuck to the roof of her mouth. Why couldn't she just say it? *El Shaddai said, "You are Mine."* But something stopped her. Instead she tried to smile and held Eleazar close. "Who can know what El Shaddai plans for each of us?"

Moses nodded once and was gone, fading into the night like their dreams of deliverance.