

Eloise Jarvis McGraw

# The Golden Goblet



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# The Golden Goblet

## *Chapter I*

THE stream of molten gold flowed smoothly from the crucible, reflecting in its surface the cloudless blue of the Egyptian sky. The boy Ranofer slowly tightened his grip on the two stones between which he held the crucible as he tilted it farther and farther, devotion in every careful movement of his hands and bare brown shoulders. Presently the last drop of flame-colored liquid had run without splash or bubble into the hollowed stone.

With a sigh of satisfaction the boy set stones and crucible aside, and wiped the sweat from his hands upon his cotton kilt. It was a good ingot; the goldsmith would be able to find no fault with it. Already the metal was setting, the brilliant red-yellow fading to scarlet, then to cherry. In half a minute it could be turned out and the mold oiled for the next pouring.

Dreamily Ranofer watched the colors dull. Splendid images drifted through his mind, golden forms and shapes, any one of which might be the destiny of this very small ingot that he, Ranofer the son of Thutra, had poured. It might become part of a wide and glittering collar, or the inlay on a fine dagger for some nobleman's tomb—or

better, a cup fit for Pharaoh himself, shaped like a flower and hammered to fragile thinness.

Well, perhaps not the cup, Ranofer admitted to himself after a little reflection.

It was only a small ingot, after all. Besides, such a cup as he had pictured could never come from this particular goldhouse. No one here had the skill to fashion it, not even Rekh the goldsmith himself. Only Zau, the greatest gold-worker in all Thebes, could make such a cup. Zau the Master could make anything. From his artist's fingers sprang objects of such wonderful beauty—cups, bowls, boxes, necklaces, daggers, great golden collars, bracelets, exquisite amulets—that Pharaoh himself would be served by no other smith.

To think I might have been his pupil someday, if my father had lived, Ranofer thought. He all but said he would accept me. *Ai!* If my father had not died! If I had never had to go and live with Gebu! If I had never even heard of Gebu!

The unwelcome picture of Gebu's face broke through Ranofer's preoccupation, scattering his daydreams and rousing him to present reality, in which Zau the Master had no place. He was aware again of voices, of the clang of tools around him in the mud-walled courtyard, and the sharp, hot odor of metal mingling with the soft afternoon breeze off the Nile. It was the month of Hathor in the Season of Growing, and the air was cool despite the heat from the hooded furnaces that lined the courtyard. Even Lord Ra, the sun, did not scorch and burn in this pleasant wintertime, but shed his radiant light beneficently upon the brown backs of the men bent to their work, striking blue gleams from their ink-black hair and snowy kilts,

glancing with blinding intensity off gold ingots and gold wire coils and the scraps and bits of gold that littered the low worktables. Instead of an answering sense of peace Ranofer felt only the sore and familiar longing for other days, when he could have rejoiced in a gentle sun and work he loved—when both his father Thutra and Zau the Master were a part of his life, a large part, and his half brother Gebu the stonecutter no part at all.

Do not ruin the day by thinking of Gebu! the boy told himself. Do you not see enough of him and his heavy hand at home? That ingot has set, and here you stand idle.

He turned the ingot out and tried to lose himself again in his tasks; but the thought of Gebu, like the ache of a tooth, was hard to lose. Besides, his tasks were those of a hireling; no matter how expertly he did them, he could not hope to progress to anything better, as even the most stupid apprentice did. No matter what illustrious futures he imagined for the ingots he poured, his own future remained the same—pouring more ingots, making charcoal, sweeping off the jewelers' benches—while others engraved the daggers and hammered the cups. All because of Gebu.

Why can *I* not be apprenticed? Ranofer asked himself for the hundredth time. Because Gebu does not wish it! But why does he not wish it, the pig, the son of Set the Devil? Why must he place me here in the goldhouse if I am never to learn anything?

No matter—it was useless to try to fathom the ways of that Accursed One. His reasons were his own, and to protest brought only beatings, as Ranofer had found out long ago. Here he was and here he would stay until Gebu ordered otherwise.

Ranofer picked up the ingot, which was now cool

enough to handle, and carried it to the nearby workbench on which the drawplate stood. It was a circular slab of stone, held upright in a vise and pierced with a ring of holes of diminishing sizes. One of the apprentices stood there drawing wire, his shoulder muscles bunched with the effort of pulling a greased, reed-slim ingot through a hole just too small for it. It would be slimmer yet when it had passed through the hole. Then it would be passed through the one just smaller, and so through every hole in turn, growing longer and slimmer all the time, until it changed from an ingot into wire. On the bench beside the apprentice lay a coil of wire, finished and ready for its last annealing. Beside the coil lay a row of three thin ingots waiting to be drawn. Ranofer added his own, the thinnest of all. Perhaps by evening it would be wire, rounded and tempered, ready to fashion into a linked collar for some lovely lady's neck. Somewhat comforted by the thought, he returned to oil his empty mold.

Too late he saw a familiar hunched figure emerging from the rear door of the shop, directly next the pouring table. It was Ibni the Babylonian porter, already bobbing and grinning at sight of Ranofer. Wishing Rekh the goldsmith would suddenly send him on an errand to the other side of Thebes, Ranofer turned his back on the man and reached for the oil jar. Ibni only edged closer, ducked his head even farther between his shoulders, and scrubbed his hands together ingratiatingly.

"Ah, greeting! And how is little Ranofer today?" he asked. His voice was like the sound of a badly made flute, and sibilant with his Babylonian accent.

"I am well enough," Ranofer mumbled.

"Indeed! This worthless one rejoices that it is so. And

what of my revered friend, your half brother and protector, Gebu the stonecutter? Is he also well?"

"Aye." Ranofer smeared oil into the mold, keeping his frowning gaze directly on his work. He could not have said why his dislike of Ibni was so intense. The man's servility disgusted him, and so did his cheese-white hands with their dirty nails, and the stained teeth he revealed in his constant grin. But it was more than that; there was something slimily questionable about the Babylonian that always sent prickles up Ranofer's spine. Why Gebu permitted his occasional visits to their house was a mystery Ranofer had never cared to probe into. Gebu and Ibni were certainly not friends. They were more like master and dog.

"And the honored Gebu, did he enjoy my little gift of date wine last week? Did he find it as tasty as ever, young Ranofer?"

"He did not say otherwise."

"What did he say, little one? Did he speak not at all when you handed the wineskin to him? For indeed you *did* hand it to him, did you not, in his own hand, as you have done before?"

"Aye, in his own hand, exactly as I have always done!" Ranofer threw an impatient glance at Ibni and encountered the sharp glint he had often surprised in the other's usually vacant eyes. It vanished instantly, and the Babylonian's smile spread wider than ever. Ranofer's distrust deepened accordingly. What does he want, the sneaking serpent? thought the boy. Aloud he said, "How can I remember what he said, now, nine days later?"

"Ah, well, it is of no matter. Doubtless my poor gift is not worthy of comment, though he honored me by en-



joying it. It is a humble wine, but of a good flavor. My wife makes it herself, from our own dates."

"I know!" snapped Ranofer, exasperated at hearing it for the fiftieth time. He knew, also, that Gebu never drank the wine, though he always seemed eager to get it. Invariably he waited until Ranofer was asleep, then in the night secretly poured it out on the pavement of the courtyard. Many times the boy had seen the brown stains next morning, still damp and faintly reeking of fermentation. There was something about the whole thing that was not what it seemed, something from which Ranofer uneasily turned his mind whenever he thought of it. It was not healthy, he had long since learned, to pry into Gebu's affairs.

Meanwhile, Ibni was finally coming to what Ranofer recognized at once as the point of the conversation.

"... aye, a very good wine, though humble. Now if you would grant me the smallest of favor, young Ranofer, pray tell your brother that I shall send him another little wineskin on the morrow, which I beg he will accept with my highest regard. Tarry a bit outside the shop tomorrow at sunset, and I shall put it in your hand."

Ibni took himself off at last. Stoppering the oil jug with nervous fingers, Ranofer watched him sidle past the wire-maker's bench to the big water jar, get himself a drink too brief to indicate real thirst, then go back through the rear door to his job of washing the raw gold. Ranofer was reminded of an adder slithering back into its hole.

He did not want that water, thought the boy. He had no errand in the courtyard at all, but merely invented one that he might find out whether I put his precious wineskin into Gebu's hand and tell me to wait for another tomor-

row. But why? What is so important about a little skin of wine? Why can he not simply hand it to me sometime during the day, instead of making a great secret of it outside the shop?

"Ranofer!"

The boy jumped guiltily. It was Sata, the First Craftsman, calling to him from inside the shop. Hastily he spread a scrap of clean linen over the mold and hurried across the courtyard.

The light dimmed and cooled as he moved under the overhanging thatch of palm fronds and into the long, three-sided shed. In a corner glowed two of the boxlike furnaces. On a low stool before one of them sat Rekh the goldsmith, using a pointed blowpipe to direct the heat onto a golden ornament he held carefully in copper tongs. Three apprentices leaned over him watching, unmindful of the chatter of the porters washing raw gold in the big vats at the back of the room, of the weigher calling out numbers to the scribe standing beside the balance scales, of the loud *ping, ping*, of the Second Craftsman's hammer upon a half-finished bowl. Ranofer lingered a moment. He too would have liked to watch Rekh work, to note his way with a blowpipe and how the flame must heat the bosses of the ornament, thereby adding a precious detail or two to his scant knowledge of the craft he had loved since babyhood. But Sata called again.

"Ranofer! Come here, boy! By Amon, I'll wager the snails would pass you by! Here, brush my table, and mind you lose not a grain of gold. I want the sweepings refined and poured again before the sun sets."

"Aye, *neb* Sata."

As the First Craftsman moved away, scowling as usual,

to set a finished collar upon the shelf, Ranofer hurried to the low worktable. A woven grass mat was spread on the ground before it. No one but Rekh used a stool. Dropping to one knee and sinking back on his heel in the habitual pose of the goldworker, the boy took up the hare's foot and began to sweep gold dust, scraps, clippings and bits of wire from the table top into the sheepskin that hung beneath its scooped-out front edge. There was more gold to be recovered from these leavings than one would suspect. He had poured that slim little ingot, now lying yonder in the courtyard beside the drawplate, from just such sweepings as this. Presently he would be pouring another.

"I have finished, *neb* Sata," murmured the boy. He scrambled to his feet, and unhooking the sheep hide from the table, emptied its contents into an earthen bowl. He had returned the hide to its place and was starting for the courtyard with the bowl when the deep, gentle voice of Rekh the goldsmith stopped him.

"Wait, Ranofer. You have forgotten to weigh your gold."

"Weigh it? I have nothing but the sweep here, *neb* Goldsmith."

"Nonetheless, it must be weighed. Did you not hear my orders this morning when—nay, I remember, I had sent you into the Street of the Potters to fetch those crucibles." Rekh sighed, arose from his stool and limped across to Ranofer, still holding the golden ornament in his tongs. His heavy face was worn but kindly as he looked down at the boy. "Know then," he said, "that our weights do not tally properly at the end of each week, nor have they for some months. Gold has been missing, in such

small quantities that for long we blamed the scales. But it is not the scales."

Deeply shocked, Ranofer stood with the bowl forgotten in his hands. "Gold missing?" he repeated. "A thief in the night, *neb* Goldsmith?"

"Nay, the guard's eyelids never close, and the storeroom seals are unbroken. It is someone in this shop who is robbing me."

"In the shop? But how? How could he—"

"There are many ways to conceal a lump or two of gold, Innocent One," put in the Second Craftsman gloomily.

"Aye," agreed one of the apprentices. "I have heard of men hiding small ingots in their mouths."

"Or under their sandal straps," said another.

"Or in a loaf of bread."

"There are as many methods as there are thieves," Rekh said wearily, "and we must discover the one which is plaguing us. The first step is to keep daily account of every grain, even the sweep. We shall catch him before long."

Ranofer was standing like an image, a sharp suspicion in his mind. Who in this shop would steal gold—who was treacherous enough, low enough—save Ibni the Babylonian? It was only too easy to picture his white, moist hand with its filthy fingernails reaching out stealthily, but there was no way to prove such a suspicion.

The goldsmith's hand grasped Ranofer's shoulder and shook it gently. "What ails you, boy? Are you asleep, or struck dumb?"

"I—I—neither, *neb* Goldsmith." Ranofer hesitated, his troubled eyes on the man before him. Rekh was an unimpressive figure, similar in build and feature to a hundred other men, with a suggestion of paunch and a foot maimed

long ago by spilled molten metal. The falcon ornament held in his tongs was no better than half the goldsmiths in Thebes could fashion. He was no genius like Zau, no artist like Thutra the father of Ranofer. He was only an honest and kindly artisan, just now saddened by treachery.

"Nothing ails me, honored Master," murmured the boy. "I only wonder what evil one could find it in his heart to rob so good a man."

Rekh's homely face relaxed with pleasure. He was not accustomed to being called "honored master" by even his lowliest hireling. "Do not trouble your head about it, Ranofer. But make certain to weigh your sweep, that we may make this robber's task too difficult to continue. Now—" Rekh frowned suddenly, explored the boy's bare shoulder with his fingers, then turned him about. "What is this? Another stripe on your young back? Nay, two of them! Who is it beats you, boy? Only last week—"

"It is nothing, no one!" Ranofer shrank hastily out of his grasp. "Your pardon, *neb* Rekh, I will weigh the sweep now."

Scarlet with shame, he dodged around the Second Craftsman's workbench and hurried to the scales. With eyes on the floor, he waited while the weigher sang out the measure to the scribe, then took his bowl and hurried out, leaving Rekh still frowning after him. His shoulder had begun to throb and smart from the goldsmith's touch, like a sleeping devil roused to angry wakefulness, but the greatest pain was in his mind. It was humiliating beyond measure to have attention called to those welts, lying there across his back like the mark of the slave. Might the crocodiles eat that Gebu! Now they had all seen—everyone in the shop—and no doubt were scorning him for a poor

sort of creature, cringing and puny, unable to defend himself.

Then there was Ibni. Heavy as a yoke, responsibility settled over Ranofer's mind. He was convinced Ibni was the thief, though he could not say why. Ladling water into his bowl of sweepings from the big water jar, he wondered how he could prove it. The slimy creature might carry gold anywhere—in his mouth, under his sandal strap, in a loaf of bread. Imagine, gold in a loaf of bread!

Or in a wineskin?

Ranofer stood motionless, feeling all his flesh crawl. In a wineskin. Perhaps in the very ones he had been carrying home to Gebu each week? The ones whose contents were always emptied onto the pavement in the dead of night, as if the wine itself were of no value?

Osiris the Merciful forbid it! thought the boy. If it is so, then I too have been a thief, though I did not know it. Nay, it cannot be so! It must not be so!

Yet that slim little ingot, the one he had poured but a short time ago, how easily it would slip into a wineskin!

He let the dipper crash back into the water jar and started for the small washing trays at the front of the courtyard, darting a glance toward the wiremaker's bench as he passed. What he saw made him stop in his tracks. Only one ingot lay beside the drawplate. When the Babylonian passed this way for the drink he had not wanted, four ingots had been there. Another coil of wire lay ready for annealing. That accounted for one of them. The apprentice held another, greasing it for the drawplate. But where were the others? Where was that smallest one, which would slip so easily into a skin of wine?

Ranofer's feet took him across the stretch of sun-

warmed pavement to the wiremaker's bench without his ordering them to move. "Your work goes swiftly, Hapia'o," he said nervously.

"Swiftly? Thoth's mercy! The snail has wings compared to the hours of this day. I vow I've been pulling wire since the First Hill rose out of the waters of time, and still I've not done."

"But—but have you not? Only a short time ago there were four fresh-poured ingots on this bench, and behold, where are they now?"

Hapia'o's hands stopped their work. "Where would they be?" he demanded. "On this bench and that, being drawn, or hammered, or—" His eyes narrowed with anger as he seized the boy's arm. "What is this you say? Do you accuse me of this thieving the master spoke of?"

"Accuse you?" gasped Ranofer, aghast at the hornet's nest he had stirred up. "As Maat is my witness, I had no thought of it! Have the *khefts* taken your senses, friend Hapia'o?"

The apprentice loosed his arm, looking somewhat sheepish. "Aye, perhaps they have. I see you meant no harm. But when there's theft about, every man grows thin-skinned. By Amon, I'll not be sorry to see this thief caught and the shop rid of him!"

"Nor will I!" Ranofer said. He tried to smile carelessly, but the bowl he held was trembling. He had still not found out what he wanted to know. "Theft is a wicked thing," he went on, careful to avoid the hornets. "I've no doubt you have watched your ingots today as the falcon watches the lark."

Hapia'o laughed as he threaded the tapered end of the greased golden rod through a hole in the drawplate.

Grasping the point with his copper pincers, he began to tug it toward him, his muscles knotting. "That I have!" he agreed jerkily. "Abhi took two—for bracelets—Zoser the little one for—thread. And I myself have—used the others. I'll not—weigh short at the end of the day, you may—stake your life on that!"

"I believe it, friend," murmured Ranofer. Zoser, he thought. Zoser has the little one. As he hurried on to the washing trays, he glanced toward Zoser's bench. There he was, pounding rhythmically upon two sheep hides, between which the smallest ingot would be stretching flatter and flatter into a sheet thin enough to be cut into thread and woven like linen into beautiful shining cloth. Relief swept through Ranofer like a fresh breeze off the river. Ibni had not stolen the little ingot, perhaps he had stolen nothing at all.

I am imagining the whole thing, Ranofer told himself. The wineskin has some other explanation. It must have. Someone else is the thief.

"Welcome, friend Eyes-on-the-Ground," said a voice half-amused, half-diffident.

Ranofer looked up to find the new apprentice, Heqet, smiling at him uncertainly over the washing trays. He was a boy of twelve or thirteen, no older than Ranofer himself, though he was bigger. Both boys still wore the youth-lock, a thick strand of hair left to grow from one side of their shaven heads and fall in an ebony curl to the shoulder. Both also wore amulets dangling from one wrist, to protect them from *khefts*. Neither could boast more than a single short garment, held at the waist by a rag of a sash. There the resemblance ended, however, for Heqet was rich in



prospects. He was safely apprenticed and destined to become as fine a goldsmith as teaching could make him.

For a moment pure envy filled Ranofer, as it had when Heget first appeared in the shop, three days ago. Heget's smile wavered and Ranofer controlled his feelings quickly, realizing they must show in his face. With as civil a nod as he could muster, he stepped to the new boy's side at the bench and drew a washing tray toward him.

"May your *ka* be joyful," he murmured. "Does the work go well?"

"Aye, well enough, though I do not know my head from my tail in this place, as the cat said when she tumbled into the fowler's net."

After a moment's astonishment—jokes were few in his life—Ranofer's rare smile spread slowly over his face. Heget brightened.

"By Amon!" he said. "I thought you a surly type at first, but I see you're not. Listen, then. I know no more of what I'm doing than a hound knows of kittens. Do you understand this gold washing?"

"Aye, of course I do."

"Then instruct me, for the sake of Ptah the Bearded! That scowling one, the First Craftsman, said nothing but 'Wash these sweepings, young one!' with never a word as to how or why. Are they clean yet?"

"Aye, but there's trash still with them in the water," said Ranofer, peering into Heget's bowl. "Have you not poured it through a cloth?"

"Cloth?" echoed the other blankly.

Ranofer pointed to the coarse linen straining cloths hanging below the bench. "Come, do as I do."

Together they stretched cloths over the shallow wash-

ing trays, poured in water and gold together. As the cloth sank to the bottom of the tray, the particles of gold clung to it in a glittering residue, allowing the trash to be poured off along with the water.

"Now again, with fresh water," directed Ranofer.

"Ah," Heqet remarked presently. "I begin to find reason in this, as the priest said when he discovered the dead rat under the altar. How is it your hand is so practiced, friend? Someone has taught you well."

"My father taught me," said Ranofer before he thought.

"Your father? He is a goldsmith? The gods smile on you. What else does he teach you?"

Ranofer was biting his tongue for mentioning it. "He teaches me nothing now," he answered curtly.

"But why?"

"Because he went to his tomb ten months ago, to join my mother, who has been with the gods these many years."

Heqet glanced at him, then returned quickly to his work. "May their *bas* have food and drink forever," he murmured. There was a moment's awkward silence, during which Ranofer struggled without much success against the familiar frightened loneliness that had swept in again as through an opened door.

Heqet said presently, "No one told me your name."

"Ranofer the son of Thutra."

"Aii! I have heard of Thutra the goldsmith."

"Many heard of him. He was a friend of Zau the Master. Zau himself praised his work."

"Many will hear of you too, perhaps, when you have finished your apprenticeship here and become a—"

"I am not apprenticed here."

The other turned in surprise. "You are not apprenticed to Rekh the goldsmith? Then what—"

"What am I doing here?" Ranofer's own thought flashed back into his mind: *Why does he place me here in the goldhouse if I am never to learn anything?* Hard on that thought followed the image of the wineskin, like a dismaying answer. He turned to Heqet more brusquely than he intended. "I am a porter. I pour ingots and wash sweepings and run errands." Ibni's errands? he thought with sinking heart. "For five *deben* a month. It is work you will not long be troubled with. After your first month the hirelings will do it for you. *I will do it for you.* It is all I am allowed to do. Yet I understand annealing and wire-making as well as the First Craftsman. I have even graven arm bands and hammered out cups." He sloshed gold and water into his tray. "Perhaps not very good cups," he added more humbly. "But they were cups."

And gone now, he added to himself. Gone like everything else, like my father's house, and the garden with the acacia trees, and old Marya who used to make me date cakes; and the workshop with the shelves all around the walls, and golden collars and daggers hanging from them. Gone like my father.

The workshop came clear into his mind, until it seemed as if he were there again, this minute, smelling the acacia blossoms just outside the door. Hour upon hour in the old days, he had leaned upon his father's workbench watching the long, strong hands of the artist shape a bowl or a massive ornament, fashion chains and necklaces of such delicate grace that the eye delighted in them. He could remember the very feel of the smooth-worn wood under his elbows, the heat of the lamp on his cheek as he learned

with his eyes, with his memory, asking countless questions. Even through the last two years, the ailing years, of Thutra's life the artist had lain on a couch in the workroom, watching his son's first efforts at raising and engraving, teaching him to improve his designs. Besides the goldwork there was Yetti, the old greyhound, to romp with, and the tales his father read him from the leather scrolls, and every morning, lessons at the scribes' school, so that Ranofer too had begun to read a little. Now there was nothing, less than nothing. Now there were hunger and beatings and this new, hideous suspicion about the wineskins.

Heqet cleared his throat uncertainly. "It is an evil thing that you cannot go on learning," he said. "Where do you live then, if not in the Apprentices' Quarters or with your parents?"

It was a moment before Ranofer answered. He kept his eyes on his hands, which were raking the gold scraps aimlessly about on the cloth. At last he said, "I live with my half brother, Gebu the stonecutter."

"Oh! You did not say you had a brother."

"*Half* brother!" Ranofer repeated. He grudged admitting even that relationship. Until the confused and grief-stricken morning of his father's death ten months ago, he had been only vaguely aware that there was another son of Thutra, somewhere in Thebes—a first-born, child of an early marriage, whose name was never mentioned in Thutra's presence.

Twisting the wet cloth around the mass of sweepings, Ranofer cast about for some way to change the subject. He did not want to talk of these things, or even think

of them. He must speak of something else, quickly, before this boy could ask more questions.

Heqet was already talking. "Half brother, then. But I do not understand this half brother of yours, my friend. Why does he not apprentice you to Rekh, that you may learn to make beautiful things like your father?"

"Because—because I must earn the *deben*." Five a month, when he could be learning the skill that would bring him dozens! The answer sounded foolish even to himself, and in the light of what he now suspected it was absurd. Nervously avoiding Heqet's puzzled gaze, he added, "Gebu cares nothing for goldworking. He sees no value in apprenticing me to Rekh."

"Then it is strange he does not apprentice you to himself, at the stonecutting shop. It seems to me he would think your labor there of far more value than—"

"I know not what he thinks! He prefers me to work here."

"Then why, since you are here, will he not—"

"Let me be!" Ranofer gasped, whirling on him. "Can you not let me be? I am tired of your questions!"

Abruptly he left the bench, twisting and wringing the bag of gold scraps. Scarcely knowing where he stepped, he blundered his way to the far end of the courtyard and spread his sweepings on a sun-warmed sheep hide to dry. Already he was miserably regretting his rudeness to the young apprentice, who he knew had meant no harm. Now Heqet would again decide that he was a surly type, and would no longer care to be friends. Too often it happened so. If only they would not ask me questions, thought Ranofer. Why must they make me talk of these things that I wish to forget?

Meanwhile, there was this gold to be dried and melted, and in haste, too, for the Great God Ra was sinking lower and lower in the sky. Soon the god's shining boat would touch the tops of the western cliffs, and the working day would be done. Before that an ingot must be poured from these sweepings, as the First Craftsman had ordered.

Ranofer spread a fresh cloth over the glittering debris on the sheepskin, pressing it down with his palms to hasten the drying process. He found himself thinking how easy it would be to drop a few of these scraps into a wineskin when no one was watching. True, the Babylonian seldom handled the sweep, nor had he stolen the little ingot as Ranofer had at first suspected. But he did have access to the storeroom, he did work all day washing the raw gold, fresh from the mines, in the big vats at the rear of the shop.

That was the answer! That was where Ibni got the gold, from the leather sacks, heavy with trash and gravel, brought in each week from the mines in the southern desert. What could be easier than to drop a pinch of gold dust, a few nuggets, into a wineskin instead of into the washing vats? The difference in weight would be written off as trash, which defied precise weighing, or laid to a fault in the scales. In fact it had taken Rekh and his weigher all these months to decide that it was not the scales.

Sick at heart, Ranofer transferred his sweepings to a crucible and set it on the coals. He must tell Rekh at once, of course. But—

Watching the flames glow scarlet around the crucible, Ranofer thought about that "but." To inform on Ibni would be nothing. Ranofer would be heartily glad to see

the last of him, and for the shop it would be good rid-  
dance. But to do that he must inform on himself, as well.  
He must confess that it was he who had carried the gold  
away, time after time, every ten or fifteen days of all the  
months he had worked at the shop. And—Ranofer went  
cold with panic—it would mean informing on Gebu, as  
well.

Great Amon, he would kill me! thought the boy. He  
would kill me and throw me to the crocodiles, or sell me  
for a slave as he is always threatening, or . . .

In the crucible the gold collapsed suddenly into molten  
scarlet. Ranofer snatched the stones that protected his  
hands and began pouring the metal into the mold he had  
oiled to receive it. It was difficult. His hands were shaking  
so that he could scarcely control the flow.

I am not really sure of all this, he thought. I have no  
proof. That's it, one must have proof. Perhaps it is all my  
own imagining. I will not tell Rekh yet.

When the day was done he hurried from the shop, un-  
able to meet the goldsmith's kindly eye.

## *Chapter II*

THE light was beginning to fade as Ranofer left Rekh's courtyard and hurried down the Street of the Goldsmiths toward the Nile. Behind him the sky flamed over the mummy-shaped outline of the Libyan cliffs, gateway to the awesome Valley of the Tombs of the Kings. Directly ahead of him, across the river with its vivid, square sails, rose the high east bank and the other half of the ancient city of Thebes. Massive gateways, temples, roofs and whitewashed walls rising thick along its crowded streets traced a long, angular pattern against the sky.

To Ranofer it was a different world, that city across the river. Here on the western bank was the Thebes he knew, a vast jumble of workshops and laboratories known as the City of the Dead. Its low, mud-brick buildings formed a broad belt between the green fields at the riverside and the strip of desert at the foot of the western cliffs, spreading north almost to the cliffs' curve, giving way in the south to high-walled gardens and the villas of rich noblemen, which clustered around the dazzling white pile of Pharaoh's palace.

Turning from the Street of the Goldsmiths, Ranofer en-



tered a sun-baked thoroughfare thronged with workers from every part of the City of the Dead—artisans, laborers, apprentices—whose guttural speech and varied odors filled the air around him. They were clean-shaven, with skin the color of tarnished copper. Their eyelids were rimmed and elongated almost to their temples with black eye paint, best protection against Egypt's glaring sun. Their shoulders were broad and bare, their hips narrow and wrapped in cotton *shentis* of purest white. Their hands, those strong and supple hands now gesturing or fingering their amulets or swinging idly at their sides, were the cleverest in the world, for these were the glassmakers and papermakers, the weavers, carpenters and potters, the sculptors, painters, embalmers, masons and coffin builders of Hundred-Gated Thebes, and Thebes, as all men knew, was the center of the universe.

Because of these artisans, full of laughter and vigorous life though they were, the western half of Thebes was called the City of the Dead, for most of the objects they fashioned with such skill vanished into Egypt's tombs to become the possessions of the dead. Even the lowliest fisherman went to his eternal rest accompanied by a little food and furniture, a length of new linen, a string of beads, his weapons or tools—whatever comforts the living could provide for the *ba* of a loved one beginning his Three Thousand Years in the Land of the West. As for the wealthy, their tombs were underground mansions crammed with gold and treasure. Death provided a constant market for the wares of the City of the Dead, and the living bought much for themselves as well. Therefore the shops hummed with industry day after day, and the craftsmen were many.

Now this day was done and the artisans were homeward bound. A few turned in the direction of the Nile, where high-prowed ferry boats waited to take them across to Eastern Thebes, but the majority scattered to homes near their shops in the City of the Dead.

Ranofer was among the latter but he lacked their eagerness. On the contrary, the nearer he drew to his own street, the more slowly he walked. At the best of times he would rather go anywhere than home. This evening he dreaded it with all his soul. Gebu had two aspects, one noisily jocular, one ferociously quiet. There was no knowing which to expect on any given day, and indeed there was little to choose between them, as Ranofer had long ago learned. It was a matter of whether one preferred to be kicked aside like a bit of debris or subjected to a concentrated and abusive notice. Whichever it was to be tonight, Ranofer did not see how he could face Gebu and conceal the thing he knew, and he did not know what he was going to do about it.

As the last corner appeared ahead, his reluctant feet slowed still more and finally stopped altogether. He stood a moment, took an irresolute step backward, then swerved suddenly and ran down a lane between two of the flower fields near the river. He must think this out. He would go home presently; later he would go, because he must, but first he must think.

Once past the flower fields the lane narrowed to a path that meandered through the thickets edging the river. The ground turned marshy here; patches of sedge and papyrus marked pools of shallow water, and the farther Ranofer went the more the bushes of the thicket gave way to clumps of slender, rustling reeds higher than his head.

He was soon wading oftener than he was walking, but the thick, soft mud felt good to his feet, and he wandered aimlessly on, trying to make himself believe that his suspicions were unfounded. Perhaps one of the apprentices had been hiding gold dust in his sandal. Perhaps the other porter—

It was no use. The missing gold, the wine Gebu wanted but never drank, the grinning Babylonian with his sharp glance and his soft, insistent questions, all fitted into a picture too clear to doubt. What was he to do about it? To tell Rekh would mean accusing Gebu, and to accuse Gebu . . .

Ranofer stood nibbling his thumbnail. The very idea of accusing Gebu made him shiver. Yet the thieving must be stopped, and there was only himself to stop it. Perhaps if he only threatened to tell what he knew . . .

He had reached the true marsh now, where thicket gave way entirely to the dense fringe of papyrus growing in the shallow margins of the Nile. As he turned back toward dryer land the reeds behind him rattled, and he whirled.

"Good evening to you, young one!" said a surprised voice. An old man had appeared through the papyrus stalks, wading up to his calves in the brown water. He was stooped and leather-skinned, with one blind eye and hair like coarse white linen thread. There were smears of river mud on his bare knees and his *shenti*, and on the gnarled hand with which he held the reeds aside as he gazed with mild astonishment at the boy. Behind him was a small, elderly donkey loaded high with papyrus stalks. Ranofer had seen the pair often hobbling about the streets of the City of the Dead, but their sudden appearance here sent his wits scattering like startled birds.

"G-good evening to you, Ancient," he stammered at last.

"So you've a tongue after all," remarked the old one. "I wondered if Exalted Lord Crocodile had stolen it."

"Exalted? Do you speak of the crocodile-god, Lord Sobk, or only of the muddy beast in the—"

"Hst! Softly, boy!" The old man darted a glance, half-humorous, half-anxious, toward the Nile. "Perhaps his lordship is muddy, yes, but what is a little mud? Speak politely of the noble beast, as one learns to, who must work each day within reach of his jaws."

Ranofer smiled uncertainly and the old man's face seamed into a thousand wrinkles of pleasure.

"There now! He can smile, too, eh, my Lotus, my little donkey? Perhaps he is not so burdened with trouble as we thought when first we saw his face. Is this not a strange hour to come fishing, young one? Ra sailed through the Gates of the West half an hour ago."

"I—I did not come here to fish," muttered the boy, immediately nervous again. Did his thoughts show so plainly? If so, there was small chance of hiding them from Gebu. He must come out with it somehow.

He snatched one of the stiff blooms from a nearby clump of sedge and showed it to the old man in explanation. "I came only to seek a flower for my—my friend. I must go now, Ancient. May your *ka* be joyful."

Abruptly he turned and ran back the way he had come, leaving the old man to make what he might of it. I will threaten to tell what I know, he resolved as he hurried between the darkening fields. I will make Gebu promise to stop. It is the only way.

The dusk had filled the streets now, and this time Ranofer did not pause when he came in sight of the last corner, but set his mouth tight and hastened into the Street of the Crooked Dog. It was a narrow and dirty lane, its houses joined one to another to form a continuous wall on either hand, like the sides of a canyon. Ranofer pushed open the third door on the left and slipped into the courtyard, his bare feet silent on the rough pavement. Closing the gate behind him, he stopped and looked about warily.

The dim light was kind to the skimpy walled court, glossing over some of the rubbish that littered it, concealing the smaller cracks and the peeling whitewash of the narrow, mud-brick house that occupied the west half of the enclosure. The storerooms forming the ground floor of the house were dark and empty, with their doors ajar. From the rear of the court a stair sloped above them to a single high room overlooking the street. From the open strip under the roof of this room yellow torchlight glowed, and Ranofer's eyes fixed on it. Gebu was at home.

Moistening his lips, the boy drew a long breath and padded across the courtyard toward the storerooms. Perhaps he could find something to eat before—

The storeroom door squeaked, betraying his presence.

"Who's there?" growled the stonecutter's voice from the upper room. "Is it you, Useless One? Get you here to the stairway."

Silently Ranofer turned from the storeroom door and walked to the foot of the stair. His half brother stood at the top, a torch in his hand. Obviously there was to be no jocularly tonight.

I must tell him now, Ranofer thought. I must threaten him.

"You are late in coming," the harsh voice grated. "Very late. Where have you been?"

"At—at the shop."

"Until this hour?"

"I was delayed. There was a last ingot . . ." Ranofer's voice trailed away as Gebu started down the stairs, thrusting his torch into a bracket on his way. There was no expression on Gebu's face. He was like a figure hewn out of one of his own blocks of stone. His legs were massive columns, his face a crag, with a granite-hard jaw and eyes black as chunks of obsidian beneath their painted lids. One of the eyes winked spasmodically at intervals, lending an eerie liveliness to an otherwise motionless countenance. He reached the foot of the stairs and stood there winking, his bulk dwarfing the boy, who was thin as a reed.

Again Ranofer moistened his lips. I must tell him! he thought. Instead he said, "It is true I walked down to the river on my way home, in order to cool my feet in the mud. You can see, I plucked a bloom while I was there." With fumbling hands he extricated the wilting blossom from the folds of his sash. The stonecutter looked at it, then at Ranofer. Suddenly a fist like a boulder crashed against the side of the boy's head, sending him sprawling.

"Scum! You have been some other place. Where did you go? Who did you talk to?"

"No one, I swear it!" Ranofer cried. "Only an old papyrus cutter I chanced upon in the reeds, with his donkey."

"You lie."

"Nay, I speak truth, as Maat is my witness!" Ranofer dodged a kick and scrambled to his feet, shrinking back against the wall. If he had needed further evidence for

his suspicions, here it was, in this accursed one's distrust. Rubbing his cheek, he blurted angrily, "You need not fear. I have told no one about the wineskins—and what is in them—yet!"

Instantly he was aghast at his own temerity. Gebu had gone menacingly still.

"Indeed," he said softly. "And what is in the wineskins, save wine?"

"You know that already, and Ibni knows. But I did not know until today."

Gebu moved closer, thrusting his face into the boy's. "What do you know?"

Ranofer swallowed, pressing back against the wall in a vain effort to retreat. He *knew* nothing at all, nothing he could prove. "I know gold has been missing from the shop," he insisted. "I know they are weighing even the sweep."

"Indeed," said Gebu again, but in a different tone. He straightened slowly and his great shoulders relaxed. His speculative eyes went over the boy, so deliberately and in such pitiless detail that Ranofer became vividly aware of every defect in his unprepossessing small person—the ribs that showed, the undernourished arms and knobby knees, the dusty rag of a *shenti* that always hung askew on his hips. By the time Gebu turned his eyes away, Ranofer felt more insignificant than the lowliest beetle in the roadway.

"And what has all that to do with me?" Gebu said.

"I—it—I tell you the goldsmith is suspicious! I dare not carry the wineskins home any more, or they will—"

"Worthless One!" The heavy hand slapped back and forth across Ranofer's face, almost negligently, yet with a

force that twisted a crick into his neck and set his ears ringing. "I know nothing of this gold, and if you do, you had best pretend otherwise. As for the wineskins, they contain date wine and you will bring them to me as before."

"Nay, I will not do it!" Ranofer cried miserably. He knew he had failed. Everything had gone wrong somehow. Gebu was no longer worried, he was only contemptuous. "I will not bring them," he repeated.

"Aye, you'll bring them." Gebu half smiled and his eyelid jerked. "Are you so stupid that you do not understand? I know nothing of your stolen gold. No man can prove otherwise. If you would put your own head in a noose, you have only to go babbling to Rekh."

"My head?" Ranofer stared at him, bewildered. Then he felt his scalp prickle as he realized what Gebu meant, why he had suddenly ceased to worry—and why it was utterly useless to say a word to Rekh. Gebu would merely deny that he had ever seen the gold. He would deny any knowledge of the Babylonian, of the wineskins, of any part of it. He would shrug and shake his head over the wickedness of boys, and point to Ranofer as the thief. Gebu could be very convincing when he chose. And who would defend Ranofer? Not Ibni, certainly. He would only add his accusations to Gebu's. Not Rekh, who would be scornful and hurt. There would be no one, except himself, to speak the truth, and who would believe his tale?

Bitterly conscious of defeat, Ranofer turned away and started for the storeroom. Instantly Gebu jerked him back.

"Where are you going, pig's son? Did I say I was finished?"



"I—I want my bread. I am hungry."

"Your bread! When did it come to be yours? By Amon, you have grown too toplofty of late, behaving like Pharaoh instead of the gutter waif you are. Aye, a waif, and remember it! Where would you be this moment, had I not offered you food and lodging out of the goodness of my heart? Sleeping in the dust of the streets, aye, and fighting the dogs for their leavings. Instead, you live comfortably on *my* bread."

"It is mine too. I earn five *deben* a month and give you all of it."

Gebu's heavy lip curled. "Five *deben*. A fortune!"

"It is all they will pay for porters' work!" Ranofer was struggling against tears. Without hope, he offered the old plea. "I could earn more, much more, if I could learn, become a pupil, a craftsman—"

"Listen to the princeling! What do pupils earn? Nothing. *They* must pay, instead, for their instruction. Who would pay for yours, Fatherless One, Homeless One?"

The last words cut like strokes of a lash. Ranofer bent his head under them. "An apprentice, then. If you would apprentice me to Rekh!"

"Take care I do not apprentice you to some fishmonger. Ingrate! I could have you bound over to myself, at the stonecutting shop. But did I? Nay, I found you work to your liking. Come, is it not so? Was it not I, Gebu, who placed you in Rekh the goldsmith's shop?"

"Only to help you steal," Ranofer whispered.

"Watch your tongue." Gebu raised one fist. With the other he shoved Ranofer against the wall and pinned him there. The boy sucked in his breath, squinting in expectation of the blow, his back pressing against the rough bricks

until their edges dug into his flesh. The fist knotted tighter, tighter. Ranofer, with every nerve and muscle taut, felt a wave of fear that was almost nausea.

With a scornful laugh Gebu lowered his fist to his side, leaving the boy limp and covered with cold sweat.

"Look at you!" the stonecutter jeered. "Cowering there like a cringing puppy. Can you not stand on your feet when I talk to you?"

Ranofer straightened, sick with humiliation. Accursed One! he thought. I hate him, I hate him! He makes of me not only a thief but a coward. "It is only that I am hungry," he mumbled.

"Hungry. Always you are hungry. Why did you not dig yourself a few lotus roots while you dawdled by the river? Many such brats as you get nothing else and think themselves well off."

The lecture might have gone on for some time, but Gebu had evidently grown bored with baiting him. Still muttering irritably, he plucked the torch from its bracket and strode down the court. Ranofer followed in silence. The invariable reaction to a scene with Gebu had begun to set in, a fatigue so deep it penetrated mind and body alike.

Gebu went into the second storeroom, emerging presently with one of the small, flat loaves of Egyptian bread; but when Ranofer reached for it, he drew it back. "Did the Babylonian say anything today for you to tell me?"

Wearily Ranofer prodded his memory. "Aye. He said he would send wine tomorrow."

"Good." Gebu's eyelid fluttered as he stared fixedly at the boy. "You will bring it. Do you understand?"

He broke the bread, giving half to the boy and thrust-

ing the rest into his own mouth. "I'm expecting friends," he mumbled through it. "Open the gate when they come."

Winking vindictively, he made for the stairs and vanished up them, taking the torch with him.

Ranofer stood alone in the dark courtyard, holding his piece of bread. Half a loaf. It barely covered his palm, and the emptiness in his stomach felt as big as the whole temple of Amon. The emptiness in his heart matched it. Gebu's last warning had needed no underscoring. On dragging feet he padded into the storeroom, felt his way to the big water jar and drank thirstily. Afterward he searched, though without hope, for another bite of something—a forgotten onion, a mouthful of stewed lentils left from Gebu's meal. The storeroom yielded nothing more except the tantalizing fragrance from boxes and kegs all sealed and forbidden him.

He left it and crossed the courtyard to the farthest corner where his sleeping mat was spread under a straggling acacia tree. Flinging himself upon the rough fibers, he held the bread to his nose, and its yeasty fragrance brought the saliva rushing into his mouth. He began to eat slowly, carefully, making each mouthful last as long as he could.

All too soon it was gone, leaving him only the craving for more. He lay back, pillowing his head on his hands. He could have given me the whole loaf, he thought. They are small enough at best—I could eat twenty of them. Thirty! The pig was punishing me for trying to defy him. *Aii!* If only I were free of him! If only I could climb aboard a boat and sail far, far away, and never see this courtyard or the Street of the Crooked Dog again in all my life. What if I tried it? What if I ran away tomorrow?

The thought filled him with the old panic. Ah, but what would I do then? he thought. How would I live?

It was impossible. He would not think of it. He would think of a day to come, when he was a man, and would have gold of his own, and could buy all the bread he wanted. But how would he get this gold, if he grew up ignorant, fit only to be a porter? No matter, he would get it somehow. Perhaps he would find it. People did find gold sometimes, hidden away in the crevices of the hills, or under an old house, buried there by someone long dead and forgotten.

Aye, that was it, he would find it. Ranofer closed his eyes, smiling to himself. He could almost see the little gold ingots, row on row, lining the walls of some secret cave that only he would know about. He would take one home each week to Gebu, and there would be no more beatings. Nay, there would be no Gebu! He would have a house of his own, he, Ranofer the son of Thutra. He would buy fresh-salted fish, and milk and lentils, and a honey cake—many honey cakes! The gods would smile on him, and Osiris himself, Osiris the Merciful, would speak out of the wind to him and direct all his affairs. Aye, and better than all, he would use the ingots for gold-working! He would make a broad, fine bowl with a pattern of reed flowers inlaid in silver wire, and he would make a little eye-paint pot with a hinged lid, and a bracelet. Perhaps two bracelets. How would he fashion them? In the form of snakes, perhaps, with garnet eyes. Or should he shape them like lilies, with long stems twining about the arm? Aye, like lilies. And they would be more beautiful than the moon, and all Thebes would stand in wonder before them. Zau the Master would see them and

would carry them to Pharaoh, who would buy them immediately for many coppers, and the fame of Ranofer the goldsmith would spread through all the Black Land. He would take a few pupils, only the talented ones as Zau did, and become—

A knocking sounded at the gate. Ranofer jerked up his head and stared about dazedly. The stars had come out over the silent courtyard, revealing the rubbish-strewn pavement and peeling walls in all their ugly reality. He sighed, dragged himself to his feet and walked across the court.

The moment he unlatched the gate it was shoved open with a violence that all but knocked him down. Massaging his bruised ribs, he squinted resentfully into the glare of a torch.

"Where is the stonecutter?" grunted a thick voice.

It was Setma, the Nile-boat captain. One needed only one's nose to recognize his characteristic aura of river stink and barley-beer fumes. Ranofer jerked his head in the direction of the stairway. "Up there."

The man brushed past, almost dropping his torch in his unsteady progress along the courtyard. In his wake came another man, a tall, stooped figure with a dark cloak folded about him like drooping wings. He was not drunk like the riverman, but Ranofer drew back from him instinctively. Wenamon, he was called; he was a mason. He paused, gazed at the boy a moment with glittering bright eyes, then followed the riverman to the stair on feet that made no more sound than a *kheft's*.

Shivering, Ranofer latched the gate and went back to his mat. Gebu was bad enough, but his friends were worse. Ranofer had long been sure that Wenamon possessed the

Evil Eye. He fingered his amulet nervously, hoping it had protected him, but he knew it had no power over the Evil Eye. That required a different amulet, the *ouzait*, shaped like the sacred eye of the god Horus. His was only the life sign, *ankh*, a green-glazed cross with a looped top, tied to his wrist with seven knots to bind his spirit to his body. He could remember the old magician his father had bought it from, and how safe he had felt when it was made fast over the exposed pulse through which his *ka* might try to escape. Safe! Aye, it had kept his *ka* in his body, but it had saved him from little else. Not from Gebu, not from beatings and hunger, not from Ibni and his hateful wineskins.

Ranofer rolled onto his back, trying to switch his thoughts again to the secret cave full of ingots, but the little golden bars kept turning into wineskins in his mind, or into loaves of bread that vanished when he tried to touch them. His stomach knotted with hunger, and his mind with worry. He could not bring that accursed wineskin on the morrow, knowing what it contained. Yet, what would Gebu do if he appeared without it? Fear dried his mouth at the very thought. He was afraid of Gebu and his heavy fist, afraid of his own hunger, most of all afraid of the void that yawned always on his right hand, waiting for Gebu to turn him out. Sleeping in the dust of the streets, fighting the dogs for their leavings . . .

I am a coward, he thought. A cringing puppy, as Gebu said. And tomorrow I shall become a thief, because I am afraid.

Saying it, even to himself without a sound, somehow cleared his mind. He, Ranofer the son of Thutra, a thief? Staring up through the ragged branches of the acacia to

the stars spangling the dark sky, he could see only the kindly face of Rekh the goldsmith rising before him in reproach. He turned over and flung an arm over his eyes.

I'll not do it, he told himself fiercely. Never, never! Not a grain of gold, not a scrap will I bring that Evil One, let him beat me all he likes. Let him have his bread. I'll find my own somehow, or do without, but I'll be no thief.

The reproachful face faded from his mind, and his tension vanished, driven out by the exalted sense of heroism with which his own words had filled him. He began to picture himself, a larger, more muscular self, nearly Gebu's size, standing with proudly upflung head before the stone-cutter, defying him, smiling coolly at his raging, easily side-stepping his poorly aimed blows, and walking at last from the hateful courtyard without deigning to glance back. Then he would go to the goldhouse of Zau the Master and beg to be accepted as a pupil. Had not Zau *almost* said he would accept him, a month before his father died, when Zau had come to inquire after his old friend's health? He had looked at the little cups and arm bands Ranofer had hammered out, and he had said to Thutra, "Your son shows skill. Perhaps, when he is older . . ." Then the evil day of death had come, and old Marya had told Ranofer, weeping, that there would be scarcely enough coppers left for bread after his father's tomb was furnished, and the embalmers paid, and the offerings made to the priests of the Necropolis. He could not even go back to the scribe's school where he had been learning to read, much less think of Zau, who charged a pupil's fee. Even though Zau was there among the mourners at his father's house that morning, Ranofer had not dared to speak to him, but had stood watching him from a corner, thinking, *Later, maybe*

*later, when I am older.* All the world was grief and confusion that day.

Then Gebu had come, a solid form blocking out the sunlight in the doorway so that everyone turned to look. In the silence he had stepped into the room as if he owned it, as indeed, it seemed, he did. He had a scribe's paper that proved his claims as first-born. Before this stranger with his scrap of paper Zau and Thutra's other old friends had stepped aside, departing one by one to their houses and out of Ranofer's life. Soon old Marya vanished too. Gebu sold her at the common slave market to pay for funerary arrangements. He sold the last of Thutra's gold-work and his tools and his worktable. Then he took everything left in the house, including Ranofer, and moved them to the Street of the Crooked Dog, and that was the settlement of Thutra's estate.

Ranofer found himself sitting up on his mat in the courtyard, staring blindly into the dark. Frowning, he threw himself down again, pulling an edge of the matting over his bare legs.

No need to think about all that again, he told himself. All will be different now. I shall defy Gebu, I shall leave the Street of the Crooked Dog forever. Ah, then anything will be possible! The golden ingots, those ingots in that hidden cave I shall discover, I can use those to pay my pupil's fee. Then Pharaoh will buy my necklaces for Queen Ti, who is beautiful and kind, and she will smile on me, Ranofer the son of Thutra—and I will not be a thief!

Curled into as tight a ball as possible against the chill of the night, Ranofer slept at last.



## *Chapter III*

**R**ANOFER woke with the feeling that something important and fine had happened. He sat up, peering around him sleepily. Then he remembered his decision of the night before.

Wide awake at once, he scrambled to his feet, and his eyes went automatically to the upper room. Was Gebu still sleeping or had he gone to his work? No matter, I am not afraid of him, thought Ranofer. It seemed unnecessary, however, to court trouble by investigating the matter. He stole across the courtyard, which was dingier than ever in the cool morning light. There was nothing at all on the storeroom shelves except empty crocks and baskets, and a dish containing the crumbs of last night's loaf. Gebu had not yet breakfasted and Ranofer decided not to wait for him. Hunger was a better companion. Drinking deep from the water jar, he yanked his sash tight around his hollow middle and let himself out the gate.

Running on fleet, silent feet down the Street of the Crooked Dog, he felt frightened but jubilant. Today he would begin a new life. No longer would he be a cringing puppy, ashamed of the welts on his back, avoiding Rekh's

eye. He would weigh the gold, every grain, and pour the ingots and wash the sweep, and he would *not* carry home the wineskin when the day was done. "Gebu does not want it," he would say to the Babylonian. "He bids me tell you he does not like your wine."

Great Lord Ra burst over the eastern horizon just as Ranofer turned into the broad road that edged the fields of the flower growers. Beyond the emerald fields he could glimpse the surface of the river, jeweled with sunlight. A flock of pintail ducks planed down over the papyrus marsh and vanished among the reeds.

"*Sah*," murmured Ranofer automatically, reminded of his lessons with the scribe. He halted and dropped to one knee, scratching the hieroglyph of the pintail duck in the dust with his finger. By adding a vertical stroke beside it, and the picture of a man kneeling, one could write the word *sah*, "son." Ranofer admired his handiwork a moment, then changed the kneeling man to a sitting woman, obliterated the stroke and replaced it with a bread loaf. Behold! *Saht*, "daughter."

Ranofer smiled. It gave one a sense of power to be able to write words. He wished, though, that he had not added the bread-loaf "t." It reminded him of his empty stomach.

He got up and hurried on. There were many people in the street now, calling greetings to one another as they set out for their work. Everywhere, once he had thought of it, Ranofer saw hieroglyphs. There on a doorstep was a wickerwork basket, "k"; yonder, "n," the ripples on the water. The vulture wheeling above the slow-moving boats was the guttural sound, "ah." Even the boats themselves and the rising sun, the amulet on his wrist and the beetle

crawling in the dust were the same as the careful signs he had learned to draw on his clay tablet.

He had not forgotten them. Perhaps if he urged his memory further, practiced each night as he lay on his mat . . . Nothing seemed impossible today.

Buoyant with hope, he turned into the Street of the Goldsmiths. Ahead of him, just emerging from the Apprentices' Quarters and finishing his breakfast as he ran, was the new boy, Heqet. The two exchanged tentative glances, then Heqet's snub-nosed face broke into a smile.

"May Ra shine upon you, comrade."

"And upon you," Ranofer returned eagerly. It was clear his rudeness was forgiven. "Did you pour your ingot without splashing yesterday?" he asked as they started on together.

"Aye, in a manner of speaking," the other said with a grin. "Which is to say, I watched the Second Craftsman pour it."

"He will let you do it yourself today," Ranofer said. In spite of himself his eyes strayed to the food Heqet was eating as he walked. "What have you there?" he added, trying to sound unconcerned.

"Only a fig," Heqet replied. He glanced at Ranofer, then looked again more closely. "I have another. Will you eat it?"

"I? Oh, no, no. I merely asked. I do not care for figs. They—" Ranofer's hasty protests were cut short by a dismal growling from his empty belly, which felt even vaster than the temple of Amon this morning. Heqet, still watching him, dug a second fig from his sash and held it out.

"Come, take it, Ranofer. It will quiet your rumblings, as the man said when he tossed his right leg to the crocodile."

Ranofer found himself grinning broadly as he imagined the crocodile's surprise. This Heqet must be the drollest fellow in Egypt.

"You look quite different when you smile," said Heqet, studying him curiously. "Why do you not do it more often?"

"I—I do not know."

"There! Now I have made you solemn again. I should put a curb on my tongue. Here, take the fig. That should cheer you."

Ranofer took the fig. The temptation was stronger than his pride. Thanking Heqet awkwardly, he set his teeth into the crisp golden skin. Pure honey dripped into his mouth with every bite. He thought he had never tasted anything so good.

The sun was pouring into the broad courtyard of the goldsmith's shop, flooding ovens, benches, crucibles, with a radiance that made even the washing vats seem things of beauty. Parting from Heqet inside the gate, Ranofer hurried into the shop to begin his first task, that of helping the weigher and the scribe issue each man's portion of gold. Rekh and the craftsmen had not yet arrived, but the storeroom door was open and the older apprentices were lining up in front of the scales. The weigher emerged from the storeroom with a basket of ingots just as Ranofer took his place beside the waiting scribe.

"Rejoice, friends," puffed the weigher, bobbing his head to the room in general. "We will begin. Name the master's wishes, Hotepek."

"Four measures to the apprentice Hapia'o, for beating into a sheet," droned the scribe, reading from his tablet and at the same time keeping a sharp eye on the scales

as his companion weighed out ingots to equal four measures.

"Done," the weigher grunted as the scales balanced.

"Four measures to Hapia'o," echoed Ranofer. He dug the ingots out of the leather weighing bag and handed them to the apprentice.

The scribe made a mark on his tablet and read the next instruction. "One-half measure to Geryt, together with one-twentieth measure of copper and of silver, for preparing solder."

The morning ritual went on, each worker accepting his portion from Ranofer and carrying it to the courtyard to begin his task, while the scribe kept strict account of every grain.

Rekh the goldsmith arrived as the last measure was doled out. He greeted the men in his deep, gentle voice, smiled at Ranofer and bade him make ready the big furnace. As the boy started for the charcoal bin, Rekh limped past him and spoke to the scribe.

"Well, Hotepek?"

"Master, the figures remain the same, though I checked them thrice over. The weights do not tally. Again we are lacking. It is not a large amount, but still it is gone."

Rekh was silent, and the boy dared not turn from the bin of charcoal to look at his face. He did not need to. Too well he could imagine the kindly eyes clouding, the smile fading into discouragement.

Rekh sighed. "I do not understand it," he murmured. "Eh, well, we shall have to take other steps, though I do not know what. Weigh all sweepings again today."

"Aye, Master."

Ranofer bent over the bin, outwardly intent on scooping

charcoal into the furnace pan, inwardly cursing the Babylonian and Gebu alike. Rekh's limping footsteps stopped behind him.

"Anubis save us, that is enough charcoal, boy," the goldsmith said in a tone of mild surprise. "It is only a small box I wish to solder, not Pharaoh's throne."

"I crave pardon, *neb* Goldsmith," the boy mumbled, hastily returning a scoop or two of the black lumps into the bin.

"It is of no moment." Rekh hesitated, then added, "Your shoulder is better today. I am glad, *shari*."

There was affection in his voice, and his use of the term "small one" brought sudden tears to Ranofer's eyes, so vividly did he recall his father's voice using that very endearment. He scowled fiercely to cover his emotion and, not knowing what to say to Rekh, made no answer at all. In a flutter of self-consciousness he turned his back, dropped a hot coal into the nest of charcoal in the furnace and began to blow on it vigorously.

"Gently, gently!" exclaimed Rekh. "Blow only a little at first or the flame will not come. Sometime before midday you had best make more charcoal. The bin is nearly empty."

He limped on to his bench to resume work on the jewel box he was making for the tomb of a wealthy Theban. Ranofer, flushing hot as he coaxed the flame, could only fume at his own bungling. Again he had behaved rudely to one whose friendship he most desired. Could he not at least have thanked Rekh for his concern about the shoulder? Could he not have smiled? And why, oh why had he puffed away at that coal like an ignorant novice, when he had known for years exactly how to coax

a flame into being? Rekh would think him a dullard, unfit to learn the goldsmith's trade.

Well, he would prove otherwise somehow. Ranofer's brow cleared and his heart lightened again. He could not stay gloomy today, knowing the trouble would soon be gone from Rekh's gentle eyes. There would be no gold missing this week, nor the next, nor the next, forever. Giving a last puff to the fire, which was now blazing merrily, he hurried to answer the First Craftsman's call.

It was the middle of the morning before he had a moment to spare for the depleted charcoal bin. Glancing into it guiltily, he snatched up a basket and plunged out into the sunny courtyard before anyone else could cry, "Ranofer! Come hither!" He was filling his basket at the woodbox when Heqet came up beside him.

"I was looking for you, friend. The ever-scowling First Craftsman bids me ask if you will be making charcoal today."

"Aye, this very minute."

"Good, then. I'm to watch you and learn how it's done. Will you teach me?"

"Gladly." Feeling a pleased importance, Ranofer led the way across the sun-warmed pavement to an idle furnace. "If you do it yourself, you will remember better. See that copper box? Fill it with these little logs from the basket."

"Aye, *neb* Ranofer." With a grin and a mock obeisance, Heqet began to arrange logs in the firing box, and Ranofer used his moment of leisure to watch the work going on around him. Eagerly his eyes moved from bench to bench, sliding over Hapia'o, who was still beating ingots into sheets, lingering on the older apprentice next him, who

was winding gold wire about a rod, preparatory to clipping it into links for a necklace. Ranofer waited until he thrust it into the fire for annealing, and made careful note of the exact dull red it reached before it was pulled out again. Across the way young Meryra knelt before one of the shaping stakes, hammering his first bowl. Meryra's brow was furrowed, and Ranofer's ear told him why. The metal was not ringing true. The sound set Ranofer's teeth on edge. Meryra would have a sorry and crooked bowl, he reflected, if he did not hold his elbow higher, and he must stiffen his wrist or that sharp-edged hammer would leave marks all over the gold. The craftsman should have given him one of those round-faced horn hammers weighted with lead, for his first attempt. Thutra would have done so.

"Is it enough, Master Ranofer?" came Heqet's voice. "It may be I could crowd in one or two more logs, but—"

"Nay, that's enough," said Ranofer, hastily returning to the business at hand. "Now the lid must go on. But do not fasten it too tightly or there will be no place for the gases to escape. We will do it thus—do you see?—leaving a little space there."

He helped Heqet wire the box shut, then turned to stir up the fire. "Now take the other handle, friend. We'll set the box in the furnace. So. There is nothing else to it."

"But when the gases have all escaped?"

"Then the wood will be charcoal, and one may take it off the fire to cool. Is it not simple?"

"Simple if you know the trick of it, remarked the vulture as she laid a falcon egg." Heqet chuckled at his own joke, then waved Ranofer away. "Go on to your next task, friend, I'll see this done. Many thanks for the lesson."



Today he does not ask me questions about myself, thought Ranofer as he moved away. Perhaps he understands that I do not wish to answer them. We shall be friends after all.

*Pang, pong, pang!* Once more the sour notes of the hammer offended Ranofer's practiced ear. He paused behind Meryra's bench, squirming inwardly as he watched the work being done all wrong. Finally, with some misgivings, he touched the apprentice's elbow.

"Eh? What is it? Can't you see I'm busy?" Meryra scowled over his shoulder. He was a youth of about seventeen, with the blunt hands of a farmer. Goldworking did not come easy to him, and it was obvious his poor results with the bowl had ruined his usual even disposition.

"I crave pardon, friend," Ranofer said. "I know why your bowl is not shaping properly. Will you allow me to tell you?"

Mollified by the courteous tone, Meryra shrugged his big shoulders. "Well, what, then, if you think you know? It's certain I don't."

"You are not striking the metal true. Hold your elbow higher and bring the hammer down smartly. Then it will shape as you wish."

Meryra frowned suspiciously from Ranofer to the hammer. "Perhaps it will, perhaps not. If I strike it sharply will it not mar the surface even more? See the hammer marks there already."

"You should have a different hammer, one with a round face. But this one will not mark if you keep your wrist very stiff and firm, to control your aim. Would—would you let me show you?"

"*Ast!* I won't, then. You might ruin it."

"Aye, I might," Ranofer agreed humbly. "I have little skill and less experience. But I have watched my father raise a hundred such bowls and I know what should be done."

"Perhaps you do, perhaps you don't," the other grumbled, but he looked thoughtful. Once more he placed his half-formed bowl upon the shaping stake and, raising his elbow high, gave a sharp, firm tap. The stake rang like music. Meryra's face brightened. He turned the bowl upon the stake and struck again, then again, then again. Each time the ring was true, and already the curve of the metal was beginning to assume the proper angle.

"By Amon, you're right!" he exclaimed.

"Aye, quite right," put in an amused, quiet voice. Both turned to find the goldsmith leaning on the next bench. He straightened, limped over to Meryra and, taking the hammer from his hand, dropped it into its slot in the tool rack. "Try the cow's-horn mallet, my son," he advised. "It will not play tricks on you. As for you, Ranofer," he turned interested eyes on the younger boy, "come with me. I have a task for you."

Flushing with pleasure and confusion, Ranofer followed him to one of the smaller furnaces. Upon the low table beside it lay a stone hammering block and a coil of gold wire. Rekh motioned for him to kneel on the mat and, extracting a mallet from the tool rack attached to the table, handed it to him.

"Now, Small One. You know something, it seems, of the goldworker's art. Do you know the manner of making the little leaves we use to ornament ladies' jewelry?"

"Aye, Master."

"Good. Make one now, while I watch."

Ranofer dared not believe his ears. "I make one, *neb* Rekh? Out of real gold?"

Rekh only nodded toward the coil of wire and waited.

Trembling with excitement, Ranofer could scarcely make his fingers loosen a strand of the wire and straighten it. He, Ranofer, was to be allowed to work in gold, to learn a bit, to practice, to fashion a leaf. *Aii!* Might the gods smile on Rekh the goldsmith. Might they make him rich and honored, might Pharaoh himself shower gold upon him!

Ranofer's mind, fluttering as uselessly as his fingers, focused suddenly upon the fire. Was it hot enough? He stirred it, then glanced anxiously at Rekh. "May I use the blowpipe, Master?"

"Use whatever you need."

Once clasping the familiar shape of the blowpipe, Ranofer's hands steadied and so did his nerves. He could do this. He had done it many times, with Thutra watching from his cot. There was nothing new. Just snip a length of wire, grasp it firmly in the little tongs and—careful now.

With infinite caution Ranofer held the tip of the wire in the flame, blowing a light, steady stream of air through the pipe. The flame blued to intense heat. Presently the wire tip melted and ran up into a bead. At once Ranofer removed it to the stone block, dropped the blowpipe and seized the mallet instead. One sharp tap and the bead flattened to a tiny leaf shape, with the remainder of the wire its stem.

He studied it anxiously, running his tongue over his lips. Was it good enough? Was perhaps the stem too long, the edge too thick? He raised his eyes slowly to the gold-

smith's face. Rekh was smiling, he was nodding approval at the leaf.

"It is a good leaf, Ranofer. But then, it was the first, and I was here behind you, watching every move. One is always diligent with the first. I wonder, would you use such care in making a fifteenth? Or a fiftieth?"

"To be sure, Master," Ranofer said in surprise. "How could I do otherwise? Without care, the leaf is ruined and must be done over."

"Aye, so it must." Rekh picked up the leaf and examined it once more, then put it aside on the bench. "Very well. This day the Lady Irenma'at has ordered a necklace of many strands, ornamented with greenstones and golden leaves. Fashion me those leaves, fifty of them, each one the twin of the last. When you have made them, bring them to me in the shop."

He turned and limped away, leaving Ranofer staring after him in a ferment of joy. Fifty leaves! He, *he* was to make the ornaments for a grand lady's necklace! Perhaps she would wear it to a dinner party at the villa of some great lord or count, perhaps to the palace itself. Aye, to the palace. And Queen Tiy, Beloved of the Two Lands, would notice it, and ask whence it came, and who, *who* had fashioned those delicate leaves, each one a work of art, and Pharaoh himself would lean from his throne to see the necklace better, and . . .

To work, stupid one, Ranofer chided himself. Dreaming will fashion no works of art. Cease gawking at the gold, and use it.

The day passed in a blissful haze which not even the gnawing of Ranofer's empty stomach could penetrate.

Even after the leaves were finished, the fiftieth the twin of the first, and all made with supreme and loving care, his spirits continued to soar. Perhaps Rekh would now let him make leaves every day, perhaps allow him to anneal wire, spread solder just so on the boxes, and learn and become skillful. Even back at his old chores of washing the sweep and pouring molds, Ranofer's rapt face and hurrying small body radiated such joyful hope that a contagion of laughter and joking swept over the whole courtyard. Even the First Craftsman ceased to scowl, though he could not have told why.

At last the day was done, a good day, a fine fortunate day, favored by all the gods. It lacked but one thing to place the seal of total success upon it, and that would take place very soon.

Ranofer timed his leaving to coincide with Heqet's. With his friend beside him he stepped confidently out the courtyard gate, into the long shadows striping the Street of the Goldsmiths. At once he spotted the Babylonian waiting for him in a doorway ahead. He walked on, a little nervous now but trying not to show it. Surely, with Heqet beside him, Ibni would not even dare approach him. Ibni was not so easily put off. As the two boys drew even with his doorway, he stepped out, grinning and bobbing his head, holding out the wineskin.

"A little gift for your honored brother, young Ranofer. I pray you, carry it home to him. True, it is a poor gift and unworthy of him, but the wine is made by my wife from our own dates, and though humble—"

Ranofer drew a long breath and faced him. "Gebu does not want it," he said. "He bids me tell you he does not like your wine."

Without waiting to see the effect of his words, he hurried on. Heqet followed, glancing back over his shoulder.

"A queer fellow, that porter," he remarked. "I think you offended him, friend Ranofer. He has an ugly glint in his eye."

"Let him! I'll not fetch and carry for such a one. I think he's half crocodile, with his grin and his stinking breath."

Ranofer swelled with satisfaction. He had bested his enemy with exactly the scornful phrases he had imagined this morning, and the seal of success was on the day. He dismissed Ibni from his mind, sniffing the air luxuriously. The shop's hot odor of molten gold had given way to the fragrance of lotus and marsh weed, mingled with the familiar reek of the Nile and the pungent smell of natron and spices from the Street of the Embalmers, which they were passing at the moment. To Ranofer, lightheaded with hunger and triumph, all the world seemed tinged with remarkable beauty. The western cliffs burned amber in the last of the sunshine. To the north a falcon wheeled slowly over the shining walls of Pharaoh's palace, as if to proclaim the presence within of the royal god-king he symbolized. Yonder from the fields, like flute notes, sounded the creaking of the water wheels.

"The gods smile on Egypt," murmured Ranofer.

"And on you too today, is it not so? I saw you making leaves there like some elder craftsman. And by the Hidden One, the master himself could have done no better."

Ranofer drank in the praise and the respectful glance which accompanied it. "My father taught me how to make them." In a burst of confiding he added, "Perhaps Rekh will teach me more now. Perhaps someday I shall be a master goldsmith and make necklaces for the queen."

"May Amon grant it," Heqet replied warmly. "Then perhaps you will smile more often." They walked on in sudden silence, each a little abashed by his own sincerity. As the familiar palm-thatched outlines of the Apprentices' Quarters loomed ahead, Heqet resumed his usual flippant tone. "Behold, the Great Palace of the Downtrodden approaches. Is it not a monument fit for the gods themselves? *Aii*, what a life we lead there! Dancing, parties, mad frivolity. Well, friend, I fear I must leave you now, as the hare remarked to the hunter. Farewell, and may Nuit guard your sleep."

Ranofer grinned and waved, reflecting that anyone would smile more often when Heqet was around. He went on alone, trying to ignore the aroma of frying fish that drifted from the Apprentices' Quarters and, it seemed, from every other house he passed. In spite of himself there rose in his mind the image of a golden-brown *bulti* fish, crisp without and succulent within, served on a platter and giving off fragrances sweeter than the lotus.

Do not think of it, he ordered himself.

To forget it he began to run, almost colliding with a group of glassmakers as he turned into the main thoroughfare that paralleled the Nile. He dodged in and out among the homebound workers, shouting greetings to Kai the baker's boy and a few other urchins he knew. He was turning his whole attention to physical activity so that he might not notice the nagging uneasiness beginning to force its way into the conscious part of his mind. It grew stronger the nearer he drew to the Street of the Crooked Dog, but the stronger it grew the faster he ran, refusing to let it in, shoring up the bulwarks of his mind against it.

Only when he drew up, breathless, at his own doorway,

flung it open and stepped inside, did his defenses crumble like faulty dikes. Faced with the dingy, familiar courtyard, all the eager hopes of the day vanished beneath a torrent of blackest fear.

He had come home empty-handed. He had defied Gebu.

In vain he tried to summon the proud resolve, the brave words he had planned last night. Behind him the gate swung shut with a click like the jaws of a crocodile closing. And yonder, across the court, Gebu rose slowly from the bottom stair.

Half an hour later, Ranofer sat hunched on the rough pavement of the courtyard, trying to stop the bleeding of his nose. Gebu still stood over him. His face was rock-hard, save for the convulsively winking eye. His fists were like stones. He spoke in a voice that was hoarse with fury.

"Has understanding now entered your head, Slow-Witted One?"

Ranofer managed to nod. He could not speak. His body was raw with pain, his mind was like a disordered room still ringing with panic.

"I am ready to instruct you further, if need be. You will bring the wineskin tomorrow, to atone for your empty hands tonight. You'll bring it next time also, and the next, and the next. Do you hear? Do you understand?"

Again Ranofer nodded, and the fresh welts on his back throbbed like a fist opening and closing. Gebu continued to glare at him a moment. Then he thoughtfully fished a particle of food from between his teeth.

"By Amon, I'll wager you'd hop fast enough if you were under my eye all day. You've grown lazy and insolent, playing about with gold, doing as you pleased. How would



you like it, Spawn of Crocodiles, if you were never to walk through Rekh's doorway again?"

Ranofer raised startled eyes and Gebu's lips twisted.

"Aye! You had best dance to my tune. You are a goldsmith's helper. Is it not what you want? Fail me once more, only once, and you'll find yourself a stonecutter's apprentice instead. I must have some use of you."

He moved on up the stair, leaving Ranofer aghast. Stonecutter's apprentice? Apprentice to Gebu! Within reach of his fists all day, pounding chisel against stone with great heavy mallets instead of fashioning leaves or watching the gold turn crimson in the crucible? Seven years of bondage, all the while learning a craft he hated, with never a chance for the one he loved?

Dismay changed quickly to despair. It's no use, he thought. No use, no use.

Dazed with pain and hunger, he crept to his mat and buried his head in his arms.