

Chapter IV

RANOFER awoke with the plan fully formed in his mind. He sat up, blinking and confused. Was he still dreaming? Surely when he closed his eyes last night he had felt no hope, seen no way out. Yet this morning a solution was here before him.

Carefully, afraid to believe in it yet, he examined his plan. Except for one small risk, he found it flawless. Obviously the gods had brought it to him while he slept.

Doubtless it was one god only, he thought more humbly as he rolled up his mat and started for the storeroom. A minor god, one of no importance, who perhaps helped me for my father's sake. Or perhaps it was no god at all, but my father himself!

He stood still beside the water jar, feeling the tears come into his eyes and sting the lids. If that were true! If he could think his father's *ba* sometimes fluttered out of the tomb by night on its little bird wings and came to see if all was well with him . . .

His eyes narrowed suddenly in an effort to call back a memory of the night or perhaps a dream. No, it was not a dream. Something had happened, deep in the middle of

the night. A step? A sound? That was it, a sound. It had half wakened him and he had been afraid for a moment, because he had thought it was the squeak of the leather hinges on Gebu's bedroom door. He knew now it had not been the hinges. It was the soft fluttering of his father's *ba*.

Finding the earthen mug in his hand, he dipped it into the water jar and drank. As he did so an idea came to him. He turned quickly to the shelf. On it was a plate containing two bread loaves, half an onion, and the scanty remnants of a salted fish, the leavings from Gebu's breakfast. It seemed a banquet, and never had Ranofer been so glad to see plenty, instead of not enough. Scrupulously he divided the food in half, taking pains even with the crumbs. One half he ate, the other he knotted into his ragged sash as he hurried out of the courtyard. In the street he cast an anxious glance at the sun. If he hurried, there would be just time enough to thank his father properly.

A few minutes later he was scrambling breathlessly along a path northwest of the City of the Dead, where the cliffs curved far inward toward the river. In the sandy wasteland around him were the graves of the city's poor, each with an earthen jug or plate beside it holding the sun-dried remnants of a funerary offering. Behind this common burial ground the rough face of the cliff was honeycombed with the better tombs of artisans and scribes and merchants, carved into the rock itself. One of these was Thutra the goldsmith's. Arriving at the place, Ranofer stopped a moment to catch his breath. Then respectfully he entered the tiny chapel of his father's tomb.

It was no more than a shallow alcove hewn into the face of the cliff, with an offering table against one wall and a small stone statue of Thutra opposite. Facing the entrance

was a false door, built against the bricked-in side of the shaft that dropped straight downward to the burial chamber itself. Ranofer looked with large eyes at this door. It could not open. It was not made so. Yet through it his father's *ba* had magically emerged last night and fluttered on silent wings to the Street of the Crooked Dog to help his son.

Ranofer turned to the little statue. It was not a good likeness. Gebu had hired an indifferent sculptor whose price was cheap, and the result looked nothing like the Thutra Ranofer remembered; but it was all he had.

"Father," he said softly.

His voice seemed to set up a curious rustling in that silent place. He darted a wary glance at the false door, not knowing whether to feel hopeful or afraid. However, no wraithlike, human-headed bird appeared.

Untying his sash, he arranged the bits of food upon the plate on the offering table. It looked a poor enough meal to set before one's father. Perhaps he should not have eaten the other half.

Father will understand how hungry I was, he thought. Turning to the statue again he whispered rapidly, "Father, thank you. I am sorry I could not bring a better gift. Please, please come again."

With a little bow and a last awed look at the false door, he backed out of the chapel and set off hurriedly for Rekh's shop and his work.

By the time he arrived at the Street of the Goldsmiths he had thought over the plan once more. It was a good plan except for that one risk: he must confide in Heqet. Dared he trust so much to another's ears and tongue?

Especially to a boy he had known only two short days? The more he thought of it the larger the risk seemed.

No matter, I must take it, he thought. There is no other way. If I can find him alone somehow . . .

Heqet was nowhere in sight as Ranofer hurried toward the familiar gate. Indeed the street was almost deserted. Guiltily Ranofer broke into a run, but he entered the courtyard to find the morning weighing already over, and everyone scattering to the first tasks. Red-faced and breathless, Ranofer presented himself to Rekh.

"I crave pardon, *neb* Goldsmith, for coming late. I could not help it. I—I carried an offering to my father's tomb."

"May his Three Thousand Years be full of joy," Rekh said gravely. "You are excused, Son Who Honors His Father. Go now to the First Craftsman and find out your task."

Sata was at the far end of the courtyard, with Heqet beside him. The craftsman turned as Ranofer came toward them, and his roar could be heard all over the shop.

"There he is at last! Where have you been for half the morning, Tardy One, idler? No excuses! Here, show this Ignorant One how to make hard solder. I want four days' supply ready by the time Ra's chariot is *there*."

Pointing irascibly straight up, Sata stalked away.

Heqet put a finger in his ear and wiggled it rapidly. "I thought I heard a voice, the cow remarked as she stood on the leopard's tail."

"Sata is not so bad as he sounds," Ranofer said with the laugh Heqet always drew out of him. "Still, we've none too much time to make four days' supply of solder. Come along."

What luck! he was thinking as he led the way to the scales. We can talk as we work, with no one suspecting. I wish I knew for a certainty that Heqet can guard a secret. I must try to find out more about him. I'll ask him questions, personal ones such as *he* is always asking. He has discovered enough about me in the past two days!

While they waited for their supply of metals to be weighed out, Ranofer tried in vain to devise such questions. He could not think of a one. It did not help that he had constantly to answer the dozens that flowed from Heqet as usual without the slightest effort.

"Oh, do we mix copper in the solder?"

"Of course. You cannot solder gold with gold."

"Why not?"

"Because your work would melt at the same moment as your solder, donkeyhead! The solder must melt first."

"Oh. Then what's the silver for?"

"We use it too."

"In the solder?"

"Aye. I'll explain everything presently. Go fetch the molds."

"Of course. Which ones?"

"Well, one is flat, and—"

"Like you were using for the ingots?"

"Nay, never mind, I'll fetch them myself," Ranofer said distractedly. "Here, take the metals to that far oven yonder and wait for me."

A few moments later he spread everything upon a workbench beside the designated oven, which he had chosen because no one chanced to be working near it to-day. Before Heqet could start talking again he said in a low voice, "I have something to ask of you. It is important."

Heqet looked at him, then glanced around the courtyard. "Ask away, friend. There is no one listening."

Ranofer's lips parted, then closed again as his courage failed him. "Aye, but first I—first we had best begin the work." Avoiding Heqet's curious eye, he reached for a pair of snippers, motioning the other to do the same. "We cut these scraps and lengths of wire into small pieces. About this size, you see. Copper in this bowl, silver in this, and gold here." As they began to snip, he searched his mind frantically for those clever probing questions. "Where do you live?" he blurted finally, then flushed because of all questions he might have selected this was the least clever. Also the least useful, he told himself exasperatedly.

"Why, you know," Heqet said with mild surprise. "At the Apprentices' Quarters."

"Nay, I mean at home, where your parents live."

"Oh, they live upriver, at Hermonthis. Did you wonder why I do not sleep at home?"

"Nay, I merely—it does not matter to me where you live, of course."

"It matters exceedingly to my parents," remarked Heqet with a laugh. "Our house is small, and I have six brothers and a sister, all younger than I. Things got a little crowded, as the mole explained when he crawled out of the anthill."

Ranofer flashed him an uneasy smile but pressed on with his questions. "Your father, he is an artisan, perhaps?"

There was a short silence. Ranofer looked around to find Heqet studying him, sharp intelligence written over every feature of his homely, good-natured face.

"Nay, my father is Overseer of Storehouses on Lord

Mahotep's estate. It is a position of trust and I was brought up to know that word. Many times I have helped my father tally the mistress's cupboard, with all her fine trinkets, the golden boxes, the necklaces, the goblets with silver stems. It was handling them that first made me want to make such things, I think. Many times, too, Father bade me take delicacies to the master's table, to see if I would tuck a honey cake into my own sash, or eat just one grape. Often he whispered me a trumped-up secret, to test if I would blab it to another." Heqet paused again, smiling. "You need not worry, Ranofer. I know how to keep my lips sealed."

Ranofer's face felt as if fires were burning beneath the skin. "I ask your pardon," he mumbled.

"No need of it, friend. I am not offended."

In a somewhat awkward silence both boys turned back to their snipping. Presently Heqet remarked cheerfully, "Solder making is the easiest of tasks, if this is all there is to it."

Ranofer returned with a start to the business at hand. "We have only begun. I fear my mind is not on my work, as the—the donkey said when the—the—"

"As the worm said when the lark bit its head off," Heqet supplied glibly.

Both boys giggled and the atmosphere was easy again. "I do not know how you think of all those jokes," Ranofer said as he dragged the mold forward.

"Nor I," Heqet said airily. "Are we to snip no more? There is metal left over."

"We'll do that later. Poke up the fire a bit. Now, do you see this block of charcoal, with the hollow in it? And this funny-looking mold?"

Rapidly Ranofer explained the hearthstone mold, a stone ground flat, with a bar-shaped depression in the center and little grooves scraped from it to let the air out. As he talked he wired the block of charcoal firmly to one end of the stone, then began measuring snippets of metal into the hollow in the charcoal.

"Gold first, then the copper. Not too much, you see. It makes the solder a good rich color, but if we used copper alone the solder would not flow easily. Therefore we add silver too. Now put it to the fire. Nay, not the *stone*, great Amon! Turn the whole thing about. It is the block of charcoal we want to heat."

"It is true, I am a donkeyhead," Heqet said meekly.

Ranofer laughed, then grew serious. "Nay, you are not. You saw at once why I was asking you those questions."

"I did not blame you, friend. Only a fool pours beer into a vessel without making sure it will not leak. Look, the charcoal is glowing."

Both boys leaned over the oven.

"There!" Ranofer said as the metal snippets collapsed into liquid. "Now tilt it. Gently!"

Together they watched the molten puddle run from the hollowed charcoal into the stone mold to which it was wired. Half a minute later they were knocking a thin, flat bar of solder out onto the workbench. Ranofer picked it up and showed it to Heqet.

"There it is. Do the next one yourself, and I will go on snipping. While we work I—I will tell you this thing."

Ranofer glanced around the courtyard. Everyone was busy. Ibni was nowhere in sight. He took up the snippers, Heqet the tiny measuring scoop. Their heads bent close together. Ranofer drew a long breath, hesitated one more

anxious moment, then plunged straight into the middle of his story.

"Heqet, I know who is stealing gold from the shop."

"Great Ptah's whiskers!" Heqet's head snapped up, his jaw dropped.

"Shhh! I know who is stealing and I know how he is doing it."

"But—are you certain?"

"I am certain."

"Then you must tell Rekh. Why, it is wonderful, he—"

"Hssttt! Keep your voice down! I *want* to tell Rekh. But I cannot, I—"

"Why can you not?"

"Because I have been helping the thief."

Heqet became very still. Without daring to look at him, Ranofer whispered, "I did not know I was helping. I swear it! I did not even know gold was missing until Rekh told me two days ago. Then I started thinking." He turned to Heqet miserably. "It is those wineskins."

"Wineskins?"

"You saw Ibni try to give me one yesterday. I carry them home. I have been doing it for months, never knowing. Do you see? Ibni is nothing but a tool in the hands of my half brother. And so am I."

Heqet's eyes looked into his, wide and comprehending. Suddenly the First Craftsman's bellow rang across the courtyard.

"Well, dreamers? Do you mean to stand all day and gawk at one another? Get on with your solder making."

Both boys jumped to their work. For a few moments, until Sata turned back into the shop, their hands flew and their tongues were still. Then Heqet, straightening from

the oven, murmured, "You can tell Rekh. He would not believe you meant to steal from him."

"Perhaps not. It makes no difference. It is not Rekh I fear. It is Gebul"

"Gebu? What would he do if you told?"

"What would anyone do with a tool that turned on him? Look out, your mixture is melting." As Heqet bent hastily to the mold, Ranofer went on snipping and whispering with equal urgency. "What would *you* do, with a hammer that would not balance or a knife that would not cut? You would break it in anger, then get another."

"But if Gebu is seized for the thefts—"

"Gebu will never be seized. Only Ibni, or I."

Heqet thought a moment. "You refused to take that wineskin yesterday."

"Aye." Ranofer gave an involuntary shiver. "I'll not refuse the next one, you may be sure of it. Gebu is a devil, I tell you. I do not want to go on thieving for him, yet I must until Rekh is told."

"Then Rekh must be told."

"Aye, but I cannot do it. I cannot, Heqet! Therefore—"

"Therefore what?"

"Therefore I want *you* to tell him."

"I?" Heqet faced him, startled.

"Why not? He will believe *you*. Oh, you must, I beg it of you!"

"But I know nothing about it, how it is done, or—"

"I will tell you all that. There is only one way it could be done, I am sure of it." Rapidly Ranofer explained what he suspected about Ibni and the big washing vats.

Heqet nodded slowly. "I had not thought of those vats, nor has Rekh, I'll wager."

"For proof, Rekh need only find where Ibni hides that wineskin. Some cranny in the storeroom, very likely. He must drop the gold in bit by bit, a grain at a time, because ten days or more go by between the times I am called on to take home Gebu's 'little gift.'" Ranofer spat angrily, then with a glance toward the shop, picked up his snippers again.

"It is clever, so hard to trace," Heqet said. "Yet I see quite well how it could be done."

"You have not yet said that you will tell Rekh."

"I will tell him, friend."

Ranofer drew in his breath with painful relief. "Thank you. I thought you would help me, but I— And you will not whisper to anyone that it came from me? Because Gebu would learn of it."

"I'll not mention your name. Leave everything to me. Perhaps I had best not go to Rekh at all until tomorrow, since you and I have been seen talking together today."

"Aye, that would be best. I'll not come near you for a few days."

"Hsst! Here comes Sata."

The boys sealed their agreement with a glance and fell busily to work. There was no chance to say more, not even another "Thank you," for Sata stayed near the rest of the morning. After the midday break the boys separated to different tasks; but Ranofer's head rang with the words all day: "Thank you, thank you, *thank you!*"

Then, that evening as he was leaving the shop, he saw Ibni waiting, with the wineskin in his hand. Ranofer stopped, aghast. He had forgotten that this was bound to happen. He would have turned back into the shop, dodged down an alley, vanished into thin air if he could, but there

was no avoiding the Babylonian this time. His voice was as wheedling as ever, but there was an open threat in his eyes as he stepped in front of Ranofer and blocked his way.

"Ah, greetings to you, little one, I feared I had missed you with my little gift. You were mistaken yesterday, were you not, when you told me the message from your honored half brother? Did you not find out you had misunderstood him? Surely he would like a little wine, made from our own grapes."

"Give it to me and be gone," Ranofer said through set teeth. He snatched the wineskin and stalked by the Babylonian, taking pleasure in treading on his toe as he passed.

Half blinded by angry tears, he almost walked straight into Heqet, who was lurking in a doorway farther down the street, waiting for him. Ranofer motioned in silence toward the wineskin.

"Aye," Heqet said. "This will spoil our plan for tomorrow, won't it?"

"It spoils everything, everything! Here is the proof we need, in my hand, before we even had time to make use of it. Now we will have to wait and wait and wait, until he has collected more, in another wineskin."

"We will wait, then. Four or five days will make little difference, after all."

"How do we know? I do not want to wait."

"If we must, we must." Heqet touched Ranofer's shoulder awkwardly. "Never fear. We'll catch him, as the tortoise said to the snail."

Ranofer tried to smile, but he could not help feeling that Heqet's simile had for once been unfortunately

chosen. He started homeward, the hated wineskin under his arm.

When he arrived at the Street of the Crooked Dog he found Gebu in such roaring good humor that he knew the beatings, at least, were over for a while. Wenamon, Gebu's friend of the noiseless feet and drooping cloak, had been paying a call. The two were on their way down the stair as Ranofer entered the courtyard.

"*Hai!* It is the little messenger!" bellowed Gebu, as his eyes went to the wineskin. To Wenamon he added in an undertone, "Though it is of small importance now, eh?" and burst into a roar of laughter. Before Ranofer had time to wonder what he meant he beckoned peremptorily. "Well, well, come here, messenger, make your delivery, and receive your reward."

Ranofer approached cautiously, handed the wineskin to him and jumped back out of range. He did not trust Gebu's rewards. This time, however, Gebu paid no attention to him. He was showing the wineskin to Wenamon, with a grin.

"A gift from a friend, grown on his own vines, and made by his wife's hand. Is that not touching? A pity we cannot drink it."

Ranofer did not think so. It was obvious Gebu had drunk a great deal of wine already. He started for the storeroom to see if there were anything to eat.

"Stay! Do you not want the reward I promised?" Gebu shouted.

"I had that yesterday," Ranofer muttered.

"So you did, but you'll like this one better, I daresay." There was a metallic clink on the pavement behind Ranofer. He whirled in astonishment and saw a copper ring-

coin lying there. "Well? Pick it up, pick it up. Do you think it is a scorpion? Now go buy food and eat it. I can count every rib in your back. First take this wineskin up to my—" Gebu stopped abruptly, then grinned at Wenammon and finished, "Nay, I will take it."

He staggered noisily up the stairs. While he was gone Ranofer stood clutching his copper and enduring Wenammon's steady, bright-eyed gaze. It made every hair on his head prickle and it seemed to go on forever. At last Gebu reappeared, however, singing at the top of his voice. Without taking further notice of Ranofer the two left the courtyard and started down the street in the direction of the docks.

Ranofer wasted no time in taking advantage of Gebu's sudden generosity. The moment the sound of raucous singing had faded around the corner, he slipped out of the gate and ran in the opposite direction. With luck, Kai the baker's boy would have a few loaves left, and he could eat his fill for once.

Chapter V

GEBU'S joviality lasted for several days, and as was usual during these periods, Ranofer fared better as to food. His stomach ceased gnawing, but his anxieties did not. He was able to show fair patience for the first day or so of waiting for the grains of gold to accumulate in Ibni's next wineskin. But after that, though he told himself it was still too early, he could not help expecting every moment to see Heget's signal that Rekh had been told, and all was well. At last, on the fourth morning, close to midday, he noticed Heget standing close beside Rekh's worktable, ostensibly watching the goldsmith raise a bowl, but actually whispering to him under cover of the hammer taps. Ranofer turned away quickly, terrified that someone else would notice. He need not have worried. Anxiety caused him to make so many blunders the rest of the day that the whole shop's attention was irritably focused on himself.

When he reached the goldhouse next morning, he glanced instantly toward the big washing vats. Ibni was there the same as every other day, unconcernedly dumping a sack of raw gold into the vat.

For a moment Ranofer could not believe it. Surely, once

Rekh knew, he would turn Ibni out of the shop forever. Surely it *was* Ibni who was doing the thieving? Perhaps Rekh did not know yet; perhaps Heqet had been telling him something else yesterday. Or, horrid thought, perhaps Rekh had not believed him.

All day Ranofer went about his duties mechanically, forcing himself to abide by his own decision that he and Heqet should not be seen in conversation. At last, in the late afternoon, he could bear it no longer. He watched his chance and stooped close beside Heqet on the pretext of helping him stoke an oven.

"Have you told him yet?"

"Aye! Yesterday."

"I thought so. Why does he not do something, then?"

"I do not know. Perhaps he cannot find the wineskin."

"Did he believe you?"

"I am sure he did."

"You—did not mention my name?"

"You know I would not."

There was nothing to do but go on waiting, that day, and the next, and the next.

Eight days gone already, Ranofer thought as he walked homeward one evening. Yet nothing is changed at all. There must be much gold in that wineskin by now. In another day or two Ibni will be waiting for me again, handing me the filthy thing, and I shall have to take away that proof, too, and then we must start all over and wait and wait and wait some more! I cannot do it. I cannot! I'll run away first. I'll slip away to the docks at night, that's what I'll do, and hide on a Nile boat and go wherever it takes me. Ai! But then what would I do and how would I live?

Suppose the boat was sailing south, straight into Kush, where men are barbarians, and the gods are not true gods, and people speak gibberish instead of talking sensibly as Egyptians do? Suppose—

A sharp collision with a puffing fat man brought Ranofer up short. Next instant he was knocked off balance again by a group of urchins scrambling past him, to be shoved aside in their turn by workers dashing off the ferry-boats they had just boarded, and into the road. Blinking, Ranofer stared about him. Something was happening. People were shouting, gesturing to each other, beginning to run all in the same direction, southward, toward the palace.

Confused and jostled, Ranofer was swept along by the crowd, trying in vain to catch a glimpse of the palace walls over a sea of bobbing heads. At the sound of drums up ahead, and the squeal of trumpets, his curiosity drove even his anxieties from his mind. He was trying to force his way around a stubbornly motionless donkey when a hand caught his arm.

"Don't hurry, young one. You don't want to see it."

"See what? What is it?" As the crowd streamed past, Ranofer tried impatiently to free his arm, but the donkey's owner held it fast. Turning, Ranofer saw that it was the old man he had met in the papyrus marsh.

"It's an execution, young one. Ai! Turn back. You'll see enough killing before you're as old as I."

Ranofer squinted again toward the palace walls, partially visible beyond the palm-fringed garden of a nobleman's villa. The drums were pounding louder, as if to drown out a faint but spine-chilling screaming. The small,

struggling figure of a man was being hoisted by one roped foot up the palace wall, to be fastened halfway to the top and left dangling, head downward. Another followed.

"Who are they, Ancient?" Ranofer asked. "What have they done?"

"They are tomb robbers, young one. They broke into the Places of Silence, they stole away the dead pharaoh's treasures and sold them in the market place. Aye, they deserve what they get, but you don't need to watch it."

"Tomb robbers!"

Shivering, Ranofer stared at the distant copper-brown figures writhing against the white wall. Because of these wicked ones and their thievery, the *ba* of some long-dead pharaoh was now starving and destitute in the Land of the West, stripped of the magical protection of his jeweled amulets, robbed of the food and gold and furniture and weapons placed in his tomb to sustain him in luxury for his Three Thousand Years of paradise. If the wicked ones had harmed his mummy, then even his *ba* was dead, for a man's soul could not live if his former body were destroyed. Murder of the soul was a terrible, unnatural crime, hideous to think about.

His flesh crawling, Ranofer hastily turned his back, pulling away from the Ancient. "You are right, I don't want to see it. Let me go, Old One."

"You have wisdom as well as youth. A most unusual combination."

The old man released him, chuckling, and Ranofer started back along the street. Such cheerfulness grated on him today. The Ancient followed, however, giving a tug on his donkey's lead rope.

"Come along, my little Lotus, quicken your hoofbeats.

It is not every day we may walk with one so young and wise. Though indeed, I believe he is trying to run away from us."

"Nay, I am not." Ranofer slowed his pace, ashamed of his surliness. To make amends, he patted the donkey's coarse-haired, fuzzy head. "I see you have sold your papyrus," he added, nodding toward the empty pack baskets.

"Aye, at the sailmaker's. They pay little, but it is enough for Lotus and me. Today was a good day. My baskets near burst under the load." The old man cackled happily, digging six copper ring-coins out of his skimpy sash and exhibiting them to Ranofer. "I shall have cakes with my lentils tonight, and sleep sound on my mat." He whirled the rings on his finger tip, then tucked them away, patting his sash complacently.

"Where do you live?" Ranofer asked.

"Yonder, where the fields of the flower growers end and the desert begins." The Ancient pointed a thin finger westward. "The land there is waterless, but free to anyone. I built me a little house, out of bricks I made with my own hands. Aye, every brick," he repeated, as Ranofer looked at him with sudden interest. "I had no straw to put in them, but they will last my life, and my old donkey's. We are happy there, Lotus and I."

"And the donkey? Is there pasture for him?"

"Not a blade, not a twig, young one. But he has learned to like papyrus." The Ancient gave his high-pitched chuckle, his one eye bright as enamel under the dark line of kohl painted on the upper lid. "Also, I buy him a handful of grain when I have an extra copper. He does not ask much." Affectionately he pulled the little beast's ear, then nodded toward a small street they were approaching. "I

leave you here. Farewell, young and wise one. May I never see you hanging from the palace walls."

Cackling cheerfully, he turned off down the crooked lane, the old donkey plodding behind him. Ranofer watched until the shadow swallowed them, then walked on through the dusk-filled streets, in which an occasional torch bloomed now over doorway or gate.

He is happy, the boy thought. He eats, he sleeps in a house he made himself, he has coppers in his sash. Why could I not go in the early mornings to the marshes, cut papyrus and sell it to the sailmakers, then be Rekh's apprentice the rest of the day? Holy Mother Mut! Why not? I, too, could live on the edge of the desert, near my father's tomb. I could make bricks for a house. I could . . .

He turned a last corner and stopped, his excited day-dreams fading. There was the familiar gate, the ugly street, reality.

I cannot do all that, he thought. I do not even have a donkey to carry the papyrus, and besides, there is Gebu. I must go on waiting.

Next morning there was a stranger in Ibni's place at the vats.

To Ranofer, it was as if the sun had come out at last after weeks of gloomy night. The sky was radiant, the air on his cheek miraculously caressing. Even the ovens seemed things of beauty, and every worker in the shop a skilled and witty fellow. He flew about his tasks, buoyant with triumph and overflowing with energy. Rekh watched him speed back and forth between shop and courtyard, and finally stopped him, smiling.

"You'll not last the day if you keep up this pace. What has got into you? Did you swallow a hive of bees?"

"Nay, Master, I—it is nothing." Ranofer did not know what to say.

"It is something, but I did not mean to pry. May the gods continue to smile on you, little one, for a change. Now. Run to Aba the potter's for me, and get the new crucible to replace that faulty one. Also buy five measures of natron on your way back. Tomorrow, perhaps, you may make me a few gold leaves for Lady Hatasu's bracelet."

Scarcely touching the ground in his rapture, Ranofer sped through the City of the Dead to Aba's shop and from there to the long, low shed in the market place where the dealers in natron and spices and incense sold their wares. He was leaving the market place, with his nostrils still full of rich fragrances, when he saw Ibni the Babylonian emerging from a wineshop just ahead of him. In a panic as sudden as it was unreasoned, Ranofer wheeled into an alley and crouched there, trembling, until the Babylonian was certain to be gone. Even then he dared not venture onto the big streets, but found his way back to the gold-house furtively, through the alleys, like one hiding from pursuers.

Why? Why? he kept asking himself angrily. I've nothing to fear from him. He cannot possibly know it was I who told Rekh. Indeed, it was *not* I who told Rekh. For all Ibni knows, no one told Rekh at all, he merely discovered it.

The rapture was gone from the day, nevertheless. Ibni was here and alive in the City of the Dead, whereas Ranofer had somehow been thinking of him as simply gone, like a puff of smoke. Gebu was still here and alive, too, very much so, and the aftermath of Ibni's dismissal was still to come. Ibni would certainly report to Gebu, if

he had not already done so, and would Gebu ever believe Ranofer had nothing to do with it?

He dawdled on the way home, fighting off wave after wave of dread. When he reached the Street of the Crooked Dog he found the gate of Gebu's house open. Torchlight flickered within the courtyard, and there was a mumble of voices. Slowly, on feet that wanted badly to run the other way, Ranofer walked into the courtyard.

The voices belonged to Ibni and Gebu. They stood together in the middle of the paved space, and Gebu held a torch. He extended it and squinted through its light at Ranofer, but merely grunted without interest when he saw who it was, and turned back to Ibni.

"Nay, nay, you have served me well enough, but you're no use to me now, can you not see that? You must find some other master."

"Some other? But how will I live? You promised me."

"I promised you nothing. Come now, be off with you." Gebu started toward the gate, but Ibni clung to his arm and continued his panic-stricken whine.

"You did, aye, you did indeed, at the wineshop that night when we struck our bargain. You said—"

"I said nothing I remember. Be off." Gebu brushed him away with a careless gesture that nevertheless sent him sprawling, and strode on past Ranofer to the gate, where he looked this way and that along the street, holding his torch high.

"Ask the boy!" Ibni cried, apparently catching sight of Ranofer for the first time. "Here's the young one, ask him!" He scrambled to his feet and darted over to Ranofer with his most obsequious smile and the hateful hand-rubbing. "You'll help old Ibni, won't you? I'll wager you missed

me today, and wondered where I was. Well, I've been turned off. I've been accused unfairly of someone else's evil doing. Can I help that? I'm the soul of honor, always have been. I trust people's promises. Tell your honored brother how he promised me a copper a day for life if I would serve him at the gold shop."

"I know nothing about it," Ranofer muttered. Brushing past the Babylonian in his turn, he walked quickly to the storeroom and went inside. There he stood in the darkness, clinging to the gritty edge of a shelf and breathing fast with joy. He could scarcely believe his luck. Obviously all was well at last, all was better than he had dared hope. Neither Ibni nor Gebu suspected him of any connection with the affair. Gebu was not in a rage. Incredibly, he did not even seem much interested. How could that be? After all the rages and beatings concerning those cursed wine-skins. Still, thought Ranofer, the last time I brought the winekin he did not seem much interested either. He said to Wenamon, "It is of small importance now." Why just *then*? Nothing had changed that day that Ranofer could remember, except that Gebu's mood had suddenly altered, as it often did, and food had been more plentiful since.

He gave it up. What mattered was that Gebu was *not* interested. He was waiting for someone, no doubt Wenamon or that Nile-boat captain, and his mind was on something else. Ranofer prayed to Amon that it might stay there.

Groping along the shelf he found half a bread loaf and several onions. He ate them quickly while the voices went on outside, then dipped a mug of water and drank deep. A sudden roar of anger brought him to the doorway. Gebu had come to the end of his patience with Ibni's whining.

"Tie that tongue of yours in a basket and throw it in the Nile!" he bellowed. "You'll get nothing more from me. Get out and don't come back."

He gave the Babylonian a push that sent him careening out the gate into the arms of Wenamon, who was just coming in. Wenamon dropped his unexpected burden, side-stepped disdainfully, and entered the courtyard.

"Ah, here you are," Gebu grunted.

Ibni, picking himself up, was shrilling venomously. "Very well, very well. We'll see how you fare without me. You'll get no one else to do your bidding at Rekh the goldsmith's. That boy won't, no use to ask him."

Gebu closed the gate in his face. "Him and his paltry wineskins. There are far bigger birds in the air than Rekh the goldsmith. Eh, my friend?" He grinned at Wenamon in a slow, sly way that made Ranofer suddenly uneasy, much as he had enjoyed seeing the last of Ibni. Deciding abruptly that what he wished now was the obscurity of his corner, he started for the acacia tree. Gebu's voice stopped him.

"You, Ranofer! I'm going out. If any should ask for me, send them to Mutra's wineshop." Gebu turned away, then turned back. "About tomorrow. You're finished at Rekh's. Come to the stonecutting shop at first light in the morning. You're apprenticed to me now."

Again he turned to go, leaving Ranofer too stunned at first to move or even speak. Gebu was at the gate before he found his voice.

"Wait! Gebu, wait!"

"Well?" Gebu grunted, turning.

"I—I—please, what did you say just now?"

"I said come to the stonecutting shop at first light tomorrow. You will start your apprenticeship."

"But you cannot mean that! You cannot mean—"

"I mean what I say, as always," Gebu said, walking on again. Ranofer rushed after him and caught his sleeve.

"Do you mean I cannot go back to Rekh's? Not ever? Oh, please—"

"Hsttt! Leave off that yowling."

"But please! Oh, please do not make me leave gold-working! I do not want to be a stonecutter, I—"

"Silence. Get out of the way."

"But why are you doing this? Why? I have done nothing."

Gebu glanced at him impatiently. "Did you not hear the Babylonian? It is all over at the goldsmith's. I told you before, I must have some use of you."

"But I earn *deben* at Rekh's, and I bring them all home. Wait, listen to me, please! Let me go to the goldhouse tomorrow, only tomorrow! Rekh will expect me, he does not know—"

"I sent word to him an hour ago. Out of the way, now. Come, friend, we are late."

Pushing Ranofer aside, Gebu opened the gate and raised his torch for Wenamon to pass through.

"Nay, please, *please* let me go tomorrow! Only one more day! I was to make little golden leaves tomorrow."

The gate slammed, the torchlight was cut off by the wall. Ranofer dropped to his knees on the pavement and burst into sobs.

Later, when the moon had climbed high over the courtyard wall, Gebu came home again. Ranofer was waiting for him, huddled deep in the shadow of the acacia tree.

He had rehearsed many times every word he was going to say. Now the time had come. As Gebu bolted the gate behind him and started for the stairs, Ranofer came out of the shadows under the acacia tree and walked across the moonlit pavement toward him.

"Eh? Mother of Night! What is that?" Gebu gasped and fell back a few paces, then straightened himself in anger. "It is you, Worthless One! Curse you, what do you mean coming upon me like that? I thought you were a *kheft*."

"Gebu, I want to talk to you. Please listen."

"Well? Well? Make haste, I'm tired. I want my mat."

"I—it is about the apprenticeship." Ranofer stopped to swallow.

"You will begin it tomorrow, and that is all I have to say about the apprenticeship. Do not waste your breath arguing."

"Nay, I will not. I do not mean to argue. I mean to— to tell you of a plan I have. One that will please you," Ranofer added quickly.

Gebu grunted skeptically, but waited.

"You took me when my father went to the gods," began Ranofer carefully. "Out of the"—he swallowed, but forced it out—"out of the goodness of your heart. I, a gutter waif. If you had not offered me food and lodging I would be sleeping in the dust of the streets, and fighting the dogs for their leavings. Instead I live comfortably on your bread, and you found me work to my liking and did not apprentice me to a fishmonger or—or yourself, until now. I am a burden to you, a great burden. You have said so many times. Have you not, Gebu?" Ranofer cried, forgetting his speech for a moment in his emotion. "Is it not true, all I have said?"

"Go on," Gebu said.

Again Ranofer swallowed, a great gulp to give him courage, then poured out the rest in a torrent, for fear he would not get it out at all. "Therefore I wish to take away the burden of myself. I will leave you and not live on your bread, or sleep in your courtyard. Instead I will build myself a little house in the desert out of bricks that I shall make myself, and I will cut papyrus in the marsh and sell it to the sailmakers and buy my own bread and fish and you will not need to trouble about me ever again, any longer. And I can do this, all this, and never again be a burden to you, if only you will—you would—you will buy me a—a donkey, just one very small donkey to carry the papyrus to the sailmakers. It need not be a young donkey, just an old one. I can give you coppers for it when I earn them, and—"

He stopped because Gebu was laughing, at first softly in little bursts, then louder, then in great gales, first doubling over and then leaning far back with his chin tipped to the sky, until the courtyard rang with it and the neighbor across the wall flung back his lattice and began to curse at the noise. Still laughing, even staggering with the force of his laughter, Gebu moved on toward the stairway and up the steps to his room, leaving Ranofer standing silent in the moonlight.

When the door of the upstairs room had creaked shut on its leather hinges and the laughter had at last died away, Ranofer turned and walked slowly back to the acacia tree.

This plan had not succeeded. He had not really, in his heart, ever thought it would.

Chapter VI

THERE was nothing whatever to do but go to the stone-cutting shop next morning, and Ranofer went. Numbly he walked down familiar streets, past the papyrus marsh, past the beginning of the wharves. Then, with a longing glance ahead at the corner where he had always turned to go to Rekh's, he turned unwillingly, traitorously he felt, into a different street, walked past different shops and laboratories and warehouses, and stopped at last before the long, open shed that was Gebu's stonecutting shop.

He had been here only once or twice, and each time had left the place as soon as he could. The whole street rang with the harsh clamor that issued from it, the clatter of chisel on stone, hammer on chisel, granite shrieking against rough granite. It was as different from the music of the little gold hammers as anything could be. Under the low, palm-thatched roof he could see stone-dusted figures moving about among the great blocks and slabs of stone that stood here and there upon the cluttered dirt floor.

One of these figures would be Pai, the foreman, to

whom he must present himself. At this season Gebu was seldom in the shop. He and the greater part of his men were across the river, working on Pharaoh's new addition to the Great Temple, shaping and fitting stones as they were needed for the walls. Here in the shop only great sarcophagi were built, and blocks of stone roughhewn to size, ready for the sculptors. The sculptors themselves worked elsewhere, in their own workshops. No carving was done here, no huge image of the gods or Pharaoh emerged gradually, majestically, from some rough block. No lotus or twining marsh flower traced itself slowly upon an alabaster vase. No little ducks and vultures and baskets, all spelling words, appeared upon a slab under the skillful chisel of an artist. If Gebu had been a sculptor! Ranofer thought. Then, at least, I could have learned to make something beautiful, if not of gold, then of stone. It would have been something worth learning.

There was no use struggling. The gods and Gebu had decreed that he learn this instead: mere cutting and hacking to make the stone ready for others. He sighed and crossed the street to the shop.

Hesitating under the straggling fringe of palm fronds, he peered into the shop's interior, which seemed in deep gloom after the blaze of sun in the road. There were a dozen men moving here and there about their tasks, but no one took the slightest notice of him.

Near where he stood an old man squatted on his haunches beside a great slab of alabaster, examining and blowing at a small hollow in one corner of it. As Ranofer watched, he rose and hobbled to the next corner of the slab, sprinkled black sand from a box upon a chalk mark on the stone, set the bit of a hand drill on the spot, and

began to bore another hollow. His face looked patient, worn and kindly, and Ranofer, hoping the man was Pai the foreman, approached him.

"I beg pardon, Master," he said hesitantly.

The old man went on drilling, slapping the stone weights around and around with one gnarled hand while holding the handle of the spindle with the other.

Ranofer raised his voice above the surrounding noises and touched the old man on the shoulder as he spoke. "I beg pardon, Master—"

At his touch the driller jumped and halted the circling stones, then looked around. He seemed surprised to see Ranofer.

"Eh? I thought you were the foreman, come to tell me I am doing it all wrong again. What do you want of me, little one?"

Obviously this could not be Pai.

"I am looking for the foreman," Ranofer said.

"Eh? You'll have to shout—this noise—"

"I am looking for the *foreman*, please," Ranofer shouted.

"Ah, the foreman. That would be Pai, young one. The skinny little man yonder—don't say I called him that!—in the far corner, beside the finishers. What do you want of him? I warn you, do not bother him with trifles, his temper is as short as my thumb."

The old man held up his right thumb, which Ranofer saw with a shock was hacked off at the first knuckle.

"Aye, the wedge slipped, when we were splitting a block of granite twenty years ago," said the old one with a sidewise grin. "And here"—he tucked the handle of the drill under his arm and held up the other hand—"the chisel went awry one time; and here a hammer crushed my

finger tip instead of the sandstone. They are stonecutter's hands. Not pretty, nay, not pretty at all, but still fairly useful, praise be to the gods. What do you want of Pai, young one?"

"I am to report to him," Ranofer answered. He could not take his horrified gaze off the old man's mutilated hands. "I am the new apprentice."

"Aye, well, that's a necessary errand. Go and speak to him, but be sure you shout. He hates nothing so much as people who mumble."

"I will. Thank you—er—Master."

"Zahotep, that is my name. Only Zahotep, undercraftsman. Run along with you now. I must drill these sockets or Pai will have my tongue out for wagging so long."

Zahotep turned back to his drill and Ranofer started down the length of the shop, his bare feet cringing away from the gritty carpet of stone chips that covered the dirt floor.

Suppose my hands become like that, he was thinking. Why, I could never work with gold again. I could never handle the little tweezers, or solder a delicate joint, or shape the little gold leaves. I would be good for nothing but rough work, I could never learn skill in anything.

He circled a large block of some dark green stone, upon which two men knelt facing each other, scrubbing the surface with a block of sandstone. Their bodies worked rhythmically back and forth, and the sandstones produced a series of harsh, grating screeches that caused icy trickles to run down Ranofer's spine and set his teeth to aching. He dared not look at their hands.

Beyond him, in the farthest corner, three men worked around a great sarcophagus of pink granite, one stretching

a red-chalked string across its side, the others chipping off the high spots where the string touched and the chalk rubbed off. A man stood surveying these works, his thin arms akimbo and his fists, one of which grasped an authoritative-looking stick, propped on his skinny hips. He was scarcely taller than Ranofer, but he looked as if he were made of twisted wire.

Swallowing, Ranofer moved reluctantly to his side and spoke up loudly. "I beg pardon, Master Foreman—"

"Aye? What? Who are you?" snapped Pai, turning his head and thrusting it toward Ranofer all in one rapid motion.

"I am Ranofer, the new apprentice. Gebu bade me find you and—"

"*Gebu?* You will call him Master, here, if you please. So you are the young brother."

"Half brother," Ranofer muttered rebelliously.

Pai either failed to hear or chose to ignore the correction. He was looking with disdain at Ranofer's thin shoulders and arms. He seemed even to be counting his ribs.

"He sends me these creatures, then expects me to make something of them," he remarked to no one in particular. "Stonecutter! This one's more fit to become a ratcatcher or a twiner of flower wreaths. Well, come along, come along."

Burning with resentment and humiliation, Ranofer hurried after him toward the front of the shop. Pai moved with quick, jerky, impatient strides, swinging his stick, thrusting his head this way and that toward the workers he passed, like a long-necked bird of prey. He led Ranofer straight back to Zahotep and the drill, and pointed to the box of black sand near the alabaster slab.

"That is cutting sand," he shouted. "Put a little into the hole each time Zahotep raises the drill, that the bit may cut deeply. When the sockets are finished, I will set you another task."

He spun around and was off down the room with his jerky gait before Ranofer could do more than nod. Glancing at Zahotep inquiringly, Ranofer picked up the box of sand and squatted near the newly begun socket. Instantly the old man stopped the drill.

"Young one, stand up, or else squat yonder, at the other side, unless you wish your eyes put out. The sand flies and it will cut flesh as well as stone."

Ranofer recoiled so hastily that he stumbled and all but dropped the box.

"There! Now you've spilled some. Don't let Pai see it. Scrape it up with your fingers. Now put a pinch into the hole. This is not ordinary sand, you know, to be spilled and scattered. It is cutting sand. Harder than the hardest stone, it is. Aye, that's enough for the moment. Now stand back."

Zahotep set the drill twirling again, to the gritty, grating rasp of sand against stone, while Ranofer stood well aside, his teeth on edge, and looked disconsolately at the great inert slab which could cost a man his thumb, his skill or his eyesight as the price of his labor on it. What was being fashioned of it, anyway? The next time the drill stopped, he asked Zahotep.

"Why, this is the lid of the outer coffin of Pharaoh's fanbearer, young one. Do you see yonder where the finishers are working? That is the coffin itself. Aye, a grand one it will be, the finest pink granite, with this alabaster lid. I understand His High Lordship has ordered two inner coffins, also. One of acacia wood, finely joined, all painted

and gilded, and the other, the innermost, of cedar wood, with his portrait in solid gold set into the lid. *Hai!* He will go to his tomb in style, that great one! Put in the sand, boy. A pinch only, that's enough."

His portrait in solid gold, Ranofer thought as he watched the old man's scarred hand slap the stone weights of the spindle around and around. How wonderful it would be to make such a thing. One would fashion it by raising, like a bowl, like a series of little bowls all joined together, and of strange shapes, one like the nose, one like the curve of the cheek, one like the chin. The mouth. What stakes would I use to shape a mouth in gold? Just the edge of Rekh's smallest one, perhaps, using the smallest of hammers.

The noises of the shop faded and Ranofer stood alone before a line of shaping stakes, moving from one to the other as he tapped out the full curve of a forehead, the clean line of a jaw, the subtle modeling of an upper lip, choosing one and then another little hammer from the rack before him. His mind had paused in puzzled frustration at the golden corner of an eye when Zahotep's touch on his shoulder brought him with a start out of his day-dreaming.

"The sand, young one, the sand."

As Ranofer hastily knelt to the box, the old man darted a glance about the shop. "Eh, Pai was not looking that time, but beware of idleness and dreaming, young one. Never think he is not keeping his hawk eye on you. It is everywhere at once, that eye, and if it sees you idling, you'll soon find why he carries that stick."

"I will not dream any more, Zahotep."

Ranofer kept to his word, but it was difficult. His task

was so small, so monotonous, and so utterly lacking in interest that he found it almost impossible to keep even part of his mind on it. A pinch of sand, a long, dull wait, another pinch of sand. He spent what seemed an interminable time watching the hollows slowly form in the four corners of the coffin lid, his eyes glazed from staring at the whirling drill, his ears bombarded with the harsh noises of the shop.

"What are the hollows for?" he asked Zahotep at last, more to fight inattention than because he wanted to know.

"Why, they are the sockets for the pins to fit into," the old man said. He pointed down the shop to the coffin itself. "Do you see those bosses at the top edge of the coffin? One in each corner. When the lid is in place, they will fit just so into our sockets, young one, and make the lid fast. It would be too bad to have a lid slipping and sliding when they carry His High Lordship down into his tomb."

Privately Ranofer wished lid, coffin and Lordship in the tomb already, but he refrained from saying so. Wisely, it turned out, for as he dropped a last pinch of sand into the fourth socket and stood back, he found Pai at his elbow.

"Finished here, eh? Come along then. Zahotep has no more need of you. Hurry, hurry, don't lag behind, I'm a busy man. This way. There's a block of granite yonder ready for the smoothing and I want it out of here by tomorrow. *Nebre!*"

The last word was uttered in a roar so thunderous that Ranofer stopped in his tracks, wondering confusedly if it were some order he was supposed to understand and obey. Instantly Pai's stick was beating a tattoo about his ankles. With an irritable "Don't lag! Don't lag!" the foreman

strode on again. Ranofer followed hastily. He realized now that the shout had been merely a summons to someone named Nebre, for a gangling figure was hurrying toward them from another part of the shop. Pai stopped beside a block of granite and pointed a bony finger at it just as the newcomer arrived. He was a boy, obviously another apprentice. He was a year or two older than Ranofer, and a full head taller, with a stolid, sullen face.

Pai gave them rectangular chunks of sandstone and a few barked-out orders. A moment later Ranofer found himself kneeling on the granite block face to face with Nebre, scrubbing back and forth with his sandstone as he had seen the two men doing earlier, and producing the same rasping shrieks from the granite surface.

Pai watched them a moment, mouth tight and eyes suspicious, but evidently he found nothing to criticize, for he turned suddenly and strode away. As soon as he was gone, Ranofer glanced at his companion and ventured a sideways smile.

"A horrid noise this makes," he said.

Nebre looked at him blankly and briefly. He said nothing. Ranofer's heart sank, but he tried once more.

"Have you been here long?"

Again Nebre raised blank, indifferent eyes. "Been here?" he repeated.

"As an apprentice. Have you worked long at the shop?"

Nebre stared a moment, still scrubbing the sandstone back and forth. "Aye," he said finally. His eyes went back to his work.

Ranofer gave up. The longer he knelt there, scrubbing away tediously with his glum companion, the more he desired to raise his chunk of sandstone and bring it down

with a crack on Nebre's head. When he thought of Heqet he could scarcely keep the tears from his eyes.

During the next few days Ranofer learned many things about the stonecutter's trade. He learned that sandstoning was even more monotonous than sanding the drill, and far more fatiguing. He learned that roughdressing stone with chisel and hammer, to which he was introduced his third day, was the most fatiguing of all, and while it was slightly less boring it was much more dangerous than either of the other two tasks. He learned that when he grew tired he made mistakes, and when he made mistakes Pai pounced like the leopard of Upper Egypt, raining curses and blows indiscriminately upon his already aching back. He learned through fear to keep his mind every instant upon his work, not only because of Pai's wrath, but because of the painful scrapes and gouges inflicted on his hands by the slightest inattention. With the vision of Zahotep's mutilated hands floating always before his eyes like some evil prophecy, his shoulders and thin arms numb or afire from the unaccustomed labor, and his mind in a prison of monotony, he learned above all to hate the stonecutter's trade with a passion which matched, in intensity, his love for the goldsmith's.

Gebu came once each day to the shop, sometimes at midmorning, usually at the hour of noon when all work ceased for a time and a blessed silence descended on the shop. During this respite some of the men ate food they had brought from their homes. Others sprawled on the gritty floor to talk or snatch a few moments' sleep. Old Zahotep and the two finishers always walked to the wine-shop on the corner and drank their refreshment. Ranofer had no food to bring, no coppers to buy wine, no com-

panion to talk to, and during his first few days he was too tired and sore to sleep or even rest. He merely sat exhausted on a block of stone and watched dully while Gebu conferred with Pai or strode about examining the progress of the work.

Sometimes Gebu went to a little storeroom at the rear of the shop and took out ragged rolls of papyrus or coarse linen, selected one, and growled orders to Pai as he showed it to him. Sometimes he brought a new one to add to the store. Often he took men with him when he left, and sent others back from the temple site to take their places, so there was a continual change of workmen in the shop and Ranofer gave up trying to remember them all.

Occasionally Wenamon came with Gebu and they would pore over some linen scroll together. When this happened Ranofer turned away and made himself as inconspicuous as possible, feeling the usual chill run up his spine at sight of the lank, stoop-shouldered figure, muffled from head to foot in a cloak that made him look like a molting vulture—Wenamon with his silent cat's feet and queerly bright eyes. However, neither Wenamon nor Gebu ever took the slightest notice of him. Even at home Gebu seemed to have all but forgotten his young half brother's existence. He kicked Ranofer awake each morning on his way out of the courtyard, tossed him a copper to buy bread or jerked his thumb toward the storeroom to indicate that there was food laid out. Each evening he appropriated the boy's scanty wages doled out by Pai at the close of every long day. The rest of the time, aside from a few furious cuffings to vent an ill humor, or mocking taunts to enhance a good one, he ignored Ranofer completely. Ranofer was glad enough to return the favor.

At least I am not stealing for him any more, he often told himself as he lay on his ragged mat at night, watching the moon float high and tangle itself in the branches of the acacia tree. Someday, please Amon, I will grow as big as he, and then I will free myself of him somehow and go back to goldworking. And then I will never, never, never look at another block of granite in my life.

Meanwhile he looked at them day after day. His muscles were slow to harden to the rough demands of this sort of labor, and as long as they were taxed beyond their strength each day, their soreness and throbbing disturbed his rest each night, and filled his sleep with fitful dreams.

One night it was not his own aching body but a certain sound that roused him in the night. Quickly he raised up on his elbow. Surely he had heard the thin squeak of the leather hinges on Gebu's bedroom door? Commonplace enough by day, in the depths of night the sound was strange and unnatural. He listened with beating heart, thinking that Gebu was coming to punish him for some error, and expecting every second to hear his step on the stair. He never heard the step. After a long silence he lay back, puzzled. Had he been mistaken? Or maybe, instead of coming out of his room, Gebu had just gone in. But why? From where? Surely it was later than he usually came home from the riverside wineshops. Indeed he had come home from there once already tonight, much earlier in the evening. If the hinges had squeaked just now, he must have been returning from a second trip. And this time, instead of slamming the gate and stumping noisily across the courtyard as usual, he had slipped as silently as his bulk would allow up the stairs and into his room. There had even been a furtive sound about the way the hinge

squeaked, as if he were cautiously easing it shut, as if he did not want even Ranofer to know he had been gone.

Queer, Ranofer thought as he lay down to sleep again, shivering. Queer and awful. During these hours *khefts* and mysteries possessed the world; everyone knew that. The *bas* of the dead fluttered out of their tombs and across the dark face of Egypt, revisiting the places they had known in life. The malevolent spirits of the unburied roamed at will seeking mischief they could do. The even more fearful beings like the Woman With Her Head On Backward snatched away any children whose mothers had not bound amulets about their wrists and said the night spell over them before they slept. Surely no errand was urgent enough to draw Gebu out into all that. Then what was the noise?

Something in his thoughts had stirred an elusive memory in Ranofer's mind. Finally he captured it. The night before that day he had brought home the last wineskin from the goldhouse he had heard this same tiny sound. Next morning, filled with his plan, he had believed it was the fluttering wings of his father's *ba* that had half-waked him. Had the *ba* come back again tonight, then? He tried to believe it, but it was difficult. Perhaps he had heard only the squeak of hinges that other night, too, and the *ba* had never come at all. Certainly he had not had much help from it. True, he had waked with the plan that next morning, and the plan had worked, but look at the disaster that had followed!

Still, he told himself hastily, Father could not have known *that* would happen. He tried to help me, he did help me. The rest was Gebu's fault, not his. No doubt he

has come back to help me again. No doubt I shall wake in the morning with another plan.

Next morning, however, all was the same, no marvel had occurred, no plan or even hope had come.

A week or so later he was wakened by the same stealthy squeak. There was no mistaking the sound of the hinges this time. Ranofer sat straight up, the goose flesh rising on his arms and little trickles running down his spine. It was the very middle of the night, he could tell from the position of the moon. Yet he could hear furtive footsteps creeping down the stairs. He heard them cross the pavement, heard the faint rattle as the gate was opened, a tiny click as it closed. Incredulous, he let out his long-held breath. Not once but twice—three times, really, since he must now give up believing in the helpful *ba*—Gebu had gone out into that *kheft*-filled darkness at an hour when all men in their right minds stayed in bed. Where could he be going? And why, why?

Ranofer got no answer to his questions, but he did not cease to ask them whenever the nocturnal mystery was repeated, which it was at irregular intervals. He did not, of course, ask any questions of Gebu; he would sooner have thrown himself into a crocodile's jaws. After a time the hinge squeaked less frequently, then only rarely, or else, as his muscles hardened and his work grew correspondingly less exhausting, he slept more deeply and did not hear it. In either case, the matter receded to the back of his mind still unexplained. It was merely one more thing about Gebu that he could not understand.

Chapter VII

THE cool days of winter passed, and the face of Egypt changed in accordance with the rhythm of the Nile, that miraculous river which brought new life and wealth each year to the long valley it watered. Each fall it overflowed its banks and spread over the fields in a silver flood. Islands disappeared and men and animals walked about their business on a crisscross network of dykes. Each winter the waters withdrew, leaving behind a thick new layer of mud so black and fertile that two crops grew in Egypt while other lands eked out one. Slowly the river shrank as the grain sprouted, grew, and covered the black with emerald; continued to shrink under the ever more powerful sun as the emerald ripened into gold.

Now it was harvest time. Every available man went out into the fields to gather in the gold of grain and fodder. In the wake of the reapers' scythes the black land showed again through the stubble, no longer moist and rich but bone-hard, desiccated, and beginning to crack in all directions under the burning sun. Eventually the cracks would spread into treacherous gashes, sometimes ten or fifteen feet deep and wide enough to trap a man's leg. Temple

building ceased in this season to free more men for the fields. The faces in the stonecutting shop changed accordingly. Only top craftsmen and young apprentices continued to work the stones. Gebu was in and out of the shop all day, usually remaining for several hours in either the morning or the afternoon, personally overseeing or working alongside his craftsmen.

The presence of the master, Ranofer discovered, sharpened Pai's already sharp eye and diminished his short temper to the vanishing point. To work under Pai these days was to feel yourself caught in a swarm of angry bees, all stinging, buzzing, and hurling themselves at you tirelessly. The only respite from the torment, which in Ranofer's resentful opinion caused more mistakes than it corrected, was during the midday break. In order to escape for a time from the sight of Pai as well as the sound of him, Ranofer began leaving the shop each day. He walked about the streets until the changing slope of his shadow on the heat-baked dirt underfoot told him he must return and begin again his interminable chipping at the rough red granite slab that would eventually become one side of the High Priest's outer coffin.

One midday, forty long and miserable days after his apprenticeship had begun, his feet turned of themselves toward the Street of the Goldsmiths, and carried him along the well-known way until he stood no more than a pebble's toss from Rekh's courtyard wall. He went no closer. Until now he had not dared to come this far. From the longing that rose inside him as he stood looking at the familiar, friendly gate, he knew it had been a mistake to come at all. Still he stood, and stared, and remem-

bered, until he felt the sun burning down on his bare feet and knew his shadow had crept behind him.

He turned quickly, hurried along the street, and almost collided with somebody who shot out of the Apprentices' Quarters at that moment. Ranofer found himself looking into Heqet's astonished face.

"Ranofer!" cried his friend, and the face split into a grin of delight.

"Greeting, Heqet," Ranofer said, but he backed off a step or two, suddenly overcome with self-consciousness. He had not meant to be caught hanging about Rekh's shop like a stray dog. The stone dust that powdered him seemed a badge of slavery, and the two bloodstained rags about fingers of his left hand proclaimed the unskilled depths to which he had fallen. No longer was he the budding craftsman who in spite of a menial position in the goldhouse could teach apprentices their tasks. Heqet would now be far ahead of him in knowledge and skill, and needed nothing he could offer. Ranofer hid his hands behind him and scuffed a toe in the dust, realizing unhappily that Heqet was doing the same; self-consciousness was catching.

"Well!" Heqet said with an effort at heartiness. "You're quite a stranger these days, as the caterpillar said to the butterfly."

Ranofer smiled in spite of himself, encountered Heqet's friendly, questioning eyes, and the self-consciousness diminished.

"Aye," he answered. "To myself as well as you. I do not know myself as apprentice to a stonecutter. I do not even wish to," he added, spitting contemptuously in the dust.

"You do not like it?"

"I hate it."

Heget was silent. Ranofer did not blame him. There was nothing to say to such a statement.

"And you, Heget?" he went on quickly. "Tell me how the work goes at Rekh's."

"It goes well. I have learned to draw wire and Sata is teaching me to solder."

This time Ranofer was silent. Sata's face floated before his eyes an instant. Even with the scowl that his memory reluctantly but justly added, it seemed a face as kindly as a father's compared to Pai's.

Pai's image suddenly blotted out the other, and Ranofer started guiltily. "The midday is over. I must run or I'll taste that foreman's stick."

"But wait, we've scarcely said a word to each other."

"I know. I wish it were different."

"Can you not come again?"

"Nay, I—" Ranofer glanced toward the goldhouse and turned away. "I cannot come here."

"Then somewhere else? At the day's end, perhaps? To-day! I'll meet you wherever you like."

"I can do *that*," said Ranofer, realizing for the first time that there was nothing to prevent it, that working in different shops, at different trades, did not mean he and Heget must keep to different worlds. "I *will* do it. Where shall we meet? The ferry landing?"

"Aye, or better, the fish dock beyond. You'll surely come, now?"

"I'll come. Good-by till then."

With a wave Heget made off toward the goldhouse, and Ranofer started at a run back to his red granite slab.

His feet were light with the thought of seeing Heqet again, seeing him often, perhaps every day. All afternoon he thought of nothing but the coming meeting, and when the day was over at last he was out of the shop and running toward the fish dock the instant his coppers were in his sash.

Heqet had farther to come. Ranofer stood for some moments among the great nets spread out to dry on the dock before he saw the familiar lithe figure, so much better fleshed than his own, squirming through the crowd about the ferry landing and running toward him.

"I was afraid you might change your mind," Heqet panted, joyfully clapping him on the shoulder. "Come, let us get away somewhere."

"The thicket by the river is cool and private," Ranofer suggested. As they started along the road he added, "Why did you think I would change my mind?"

"I don't know. You're an odd one sometimes." Heqet smiled sideways at him. Ranofer returned the smile uncomfortably, but could think of nothing to say.

They turned off the road presently into the lane between the flower fields, then followed the meandering path into the thicket. Foliage arched over their heads, casting a welcome shade made denser by the stands of tall reeds. Here there was still mud underfoot, cool and soothing after the hot baked clay of the roads.

"Ah! I can hear my toes telling each other what a fine fellow I am to bring them here!" Heqet said. "Look—that would make a fine place to sit." He pointed to a spot veiled from the path by only a thin fringe of swaying rushes. Something had crushed the grasses and weeds beyond down into a little nest. Heqet sloshed through the stretch

of watery mud to it, then turned and bowed elaborately to Ranofer. "Come into my storeroom, as the pelican said to the fish."

Ranofer grinned and obeyed. It did look like a little cool, green room with walls of foliage, a door of sedge stalks, and a thick, springy carpet of matted undergrowth. There was just space enough for them to sit side by side and stretch their feet out.

"Now," Heqet said firmly. "Tell me about the stonework. Come, don't pull into your shell like a tortoise. It will do you good to say out loud how much you hate it. Curse if you like. There's no one to hear but me, and I don't mind."

Ranofer could not help laughing, and as he laughed he felt a knot untie somewhere inside him and realized he felt better already. It was impossible to stay in a shell with Heqet around, and it was impossible to feel altogether gloomy. He began to talk about the stonecutting shop. It was noisy, it was gritty, it was altogether horrid, the foreman was a living wasps' nest, the other apprentice a glum and stupid nobody with a chunk of granite where his head ought to be.

"That's better," Heqet said with satisfaction. "And what do you do? Shape blocks, or what?"

Ranofer told him, fairly spitting out his frustration, what he did, and how he must keep his mind on it, no matter how tired or bored he was.

"Otherwise this happens," he said, extending his bandaged fingers. "And worse, oh, much worse! The undercraftsman, Zahotep, his hands are a ruin. Heqet, if my hands became like his, I could never go back to gold-working."

He had dropped his voice with the horror he felt, and for once Heqet, too, was subdued, his eyes fixed on the bloodstained bandages.

"You mean to go back to goldworking someday, then, in spite of all?" he said.

"I do!" Ranofer flashed him a belligerent look. "You may think I cannot, but I will find a way somehow. I even know a way. I have a plan."

"You do? What is it?"

But Ranofer did not want to talk about the plan, about the donkey and the little house at the edge of the desert, and studying with Zau. It sounded too improbable, it was safer not told—not yet.

"No matter," he said. "Tell me instead about the gold-house. Is all the same there?"

"Nay, not without you."

Ranofer smiled one-sidedly. "No doubt Sata and Geryt and the others weep for me each morning before the gold is weighed. Aside from my absence, is all the same?"

"Others are absent also. Ibni, to whom good riddance. And the scribe—you remember Hotepek—left a week before harvesting began. His child has the falling sickness. Hotepek is taking her to Abydos to the priest of Ra there. Rekh fashioned a little amulet from the sweep for her, so the priests might say their spells over it. Meanwhile we have a new scribe."

"And you, you have learned to draw wire? And to solder?"

"I am learning, I think. As the hare said when he tried to fly," Heqet added wryly. "So far I have not succeeded in making anything stick to anything else. But no doubt next week, or perhaps next year..."

"Aye," Ranofer said. "My boxes fell apart too, at first. Don't lose hope. One day they will stick, and then you will have no more trouble."

"Your father taught you to solder?"

"Aye, but no doubt I have forgotten, it has been so long. And it will be longer before I can do it again. Curse Gebu and his granite!" The boys sat in silence a moment, then Ranofer added, "I would rather have Gebu for a master, though, than that friend of his."

"What friend is that?"

"Wenamon the mason. He comes often to the shop. He came today. He reminds me of a *kheft*."

"Wenamon," repeated Heqet, frowning. "Does he wear a long cloak, winter and summer?"

"Aye! That's the one."

"I have seen him often. He lives near the Apprentices' Quarters. He makes me shiver, but the man I sometimes see him with is worse. A great, heavy-shouldered fellow with a scowl and a face like stone—" Heqet broke off and turned to Ranofer with a sudden question in his eye.

"That is Gebu," Ranofer told him.

Heqet's expression changed. He looked at Ranofer as if he had never really seen him before, and there grew in his eyes a look of such troubled pity that Ranofer flushed and got quickly to his feet.

"It is late, the dark will be here soon."

"Wait." Heqet scrambled up, too, then hesitated as if he did not know how to say what he wanted to. "I was thinking," he said at last, "if we met often, in the evening or even at midday, I could tell you all I learn. I mean at the goldhouse. Unless it was something you'd learned already. That way you would have the knowledge. Then

when you come back to Rekh's someday, you will lack only the practice."

Light broke and grew inside Ranofer; he felt as if the sun were coming up. "We *could* do that! You could learn from Sata and I could learn from you."

"Aye! Aye!" Heqet became very excited. "We'll do it every day. I will meet you here tomorrow. We could come at midday and eat our food here."

Ranofer, who never had food to eat anywhere at midday, saw more shame ahead and drew into his shell again. "Nay. That is, I do not know if I can get away."

"You got away today," Heqet reminded him.

"Aye, but—"

"Sata says I am to try beading in the morning. Have you learned that yet?"

"Nay, but—" Beading! The temptation was too strong. "All right, midday. I'll come."

I must get some food to bring, somehow, Ranofer thought as he hurried toward home. I will save part of what I have tonight, and part of the morning's. Perhaps Gebu will leave two loaves this time.

Gebu left the usual one, but there were three onions in a dish when Ranofer explored the dusky storeroom. Jubilant, he tucked one of them into his sash, along with half the loaf. When he had eaten the rest, however, and drunk deep from the water jar, he felt almost as empty as before. There was a small keg of salted fish in the storeroom; its enticing aroma always filled the place, but Gebu kept it sealed. Ranofer wandered over and inspected it, just in case, and found the usual fresh wad of clay covering the latch, with the imprint of Gebu's ring pressed into it. He wandered away again, out into the courtyard,

fingering the half loaf in his sash. Tomorrow midday seemed far away and relatively unimportant compared to his present growling stomach.

I will eat just half of the half, he decided. And I will still save the onion.

But half the onion was gone, too, before he slept. In the morning he found a dish of stewed lentils on the store-room shelf. He looked at it in dismay; how could he tuck half of *this* into his sash? Scorning himself for his weakness of last night, he ate the lentils and started for the shop. A pinch of bread and half an onion. A fine midday meal to produce before Heqet's already pitying eyes.

I will dig a lotus root on my way to meet him, Ranofer thought, resolutely ignoring the fact that he had no knife to pare the root, and that the strong anise flavor of lotus root had always made him feel slightly nauseated.

The detour to find a stand of lotuses cost him several precious moments of his midday hour, and when he arrived at the little green room in the thicket, muddy root in hand, Heqet was there waiting. The latter looked up at him apologetically.

"After all, I did not learn beading this morning," he said. "I had to make charcoal instead. I am sorry. But I will learn it soon, and then I will tell you."

"No matter," Ranofer said, concealing his sharp disappointment. He sat down beside Heqet, eying the chunk of golden cheese, the two loaves, the salt fish and the figs spread out on his friend's lap. "I ate most of mine on the way here," he said carelessly, wondering why he had not thought of this excuse before. He took the bit of dry bread and the slightly wilted half of the onion from his sash, avoiding Heqet's eyes. When he had finished them—which

he did in a humiliatingly short time—he surveyed the lotus root, wiping it on the mat of crushed grasses and wondering how he was going to cut it.

“I hate cheese,” Heget said suddenly. “I wish they would give us something else to eat with our bread at the Apprentices’ Quarters. Now we never have lotus root, except boiled, and I like it better raw, don’t you?”

“I don’t like it at all,” said Ranofer, startled into truthfulness. “Do you really hate cheese?”

“I do. Let’s trade.”

Ranofer held out the lotus root almost before the words were spoken. He had not tasted cheese since his father died. “I am sorry, I have no knife to cut the lotus,” he confessed.

“I have. Would you like a piece of this fish, too? And a fig? I have more than I want.”

Ranofer caught his breath. Such good fortune was almost impossible to believe. It *was* impossible to believe. In the act of reaching for the fish Heget held out, he snatched his hand back.

“You don’t have more than you want,” he said angrily. “You don’t hate cheese, either. You’re lying.”

Heget eyed him a moment, then grinned uncertainly. “All right. But you were lying, too, when you said you ate most of your food on the way here. I could tell by the look of it you saved it from last night.”

“And if I did?” Ranofer jumped to his feet, furious and shaking with humiliation. Heget stood up too, an impatient scowl on his usually amiable face.

“I mean only that you have not enough food at your table. Is that so bad? Why must you get angry with me?”

Come, I have plenty. Take half and let's forget the matter. It's stupid to quarrel."

"It's stupid to waste *pity* on your friends, who do not need it!" yelled Ranofer.

"Merciful Osiris," said a mild voice behind him. He whirled and saw the Ancient standing there, his hands parting the thin curtain of sedge stalks which hid their nest from the path. Beyond him was the placid, soft-eyed face of the donkey, Lotus.

"Will there be a fight soon?" the old man inquired. "Perhaps you would let me watch it. I enjoy a good fight on occasion."

"Nay, we are not going to fight," Ranofer muttered. "We are friends."

"Friends! Are you indeed?" The Ancient's straggly eyebrows climbed halfway up his forehead. "Now that's an odd thing. When I was a youth, friends laughed together and spoke in peaceable voices. Only enemies stood glaring and yelling, with their fists doubled. But then, times change." He shrugged and sighed so philosophically that Heqet burst out laughing, and even Ranofer smiled sheepishly.

"Come, old one," Heqet said. "You be our judge. This fellow here has more pride than Pharaoh. He considers himself too fine to accept a gift of something we both know he needs and wants."

"What gift?" asked the Ancient, pursing his lips judiciously.

"Food. Look at the flesh on his ribs, if you can find any. Yet he insists that I sit here like a pig in a trough rooting my way through cheese and fish and bread and figs while

he eats a wilted onion. Is he a friend when he finds pleasure in ruining the taste of everything for me?"

Ranofer stared at him. "Is that the way it seems to you?"

"Aye." Heqet gave a defiant kick at the food scattered upon the matted ground. "If you will not take half this stuff, then I don't want the other half."

"I did not know I was ruining the taste," Ranofer said humbly.

The Ancient began to chuckle. "You need no judge, I see. But perhaps you will let me share your bower, which was my Lotus's before you came. I have food to eat, too."

"Come in." Ranofer stepped back as Heqet triumphantly began arranging the food in two piles. "This place was your donkey's?"

"Aye, how did you think such a nice little nest was made? It is his rolling place. I eat my bread and he takes his midday rest here. It is no matter. He can make another as easily as you can eat that cheese." Smiling slyly at Ranofer, the old man lowered himself to the ground and took a packet from his sash. "Now then, let us barter. In exchange for a fig or two I will share my nelumbo nuts, the best you ever ate."

"Done," Heqet said promptly, handing over a fig.

Ranofer liked nelumbo nuts, but figs were food for the gods, and to him rare as rain in Egypt. He hesitated just long enough for the Ancient to add quickly, "A fig or whatever else you care to barter."

"A loaf, perhaps?" Ranofer said self-consciously. He could not yet feel it was really his loaf to barter.

"Half a loaf, that's a fairer trade," the Ancient told him. He unwrapped his packet, in which were onions and a salt

fish, and placed the fig and the half loaf beside them gravely. Then he produced from another fold of his voluminous sash one of the cone-shaped fruits of the nelumbo plant. There were fully twenty-five seeds studding the top of it, each as large as the end of his thumb. When they were cracked, and the almondlike, sweet white nuts inside freed from the bitter green leaf that separated their two lobes, they added the last touch to what seemed to Ranofer a feast suitable for Pharaoh himself and all his court. It was true, too, that Heqet appeared to enjoy his share the more for watching Ranofer eat. When he took out his knife and cut into the lotus root, he offered Ranofer a wedge of it.

"Nay," Ranofer said. "I was not lying. I really do not like those."

"And I really do, so I was not lying either, at least not about that," Heqet said blandly, offering the wedge to the Ancient instead.

"Eh, well, I'd be lying if I refused it," said the old man, taking it off the point of Heqet's knife. To Ranofer he added, "I'll show you where the nelumbos grow. There's a good stand of them just yonder, toward the river. You could have them every day if you wanted them. Who is it sets your table, young one, that you have only a wilted onion for your midday?"

"My half brother. Gebu, the stonecutter. I'm apprenticed to him."

"It is little food for such hard work."

"It is not always so little. This morning I had lentils. Besides, it is no matter. I will not be at such work long, if I can help it."

"Nay? Then what do you mean to do?"

"I mean to be a goldsmith, like my father."

"A goldsmith. *Al!* That is a fine craft." The Ancient's sharp old eye lingered a moment on Ranofer's face before he added dubiously, "It is also a difficult craft, young one, I've heard tell."

Heqet dusted the crumbs from his fingers. "He tells you one half of it, Ancient, and not the other, like the dog who confesses he ate the bone, when the whole haunch is missing. Last winter he was more skilled than any apprentice at Rekh the goldsmith's, though he worked only as a porter. His father taught him more of goldworking than I'll know before another year has passed."

"But how is it, then, that you now work on the stones?" the Ancient asked.

"Because—" Ranofer broke off, exchanging a glance with Heqet, whose lips were tightly shut. "Because of a wine-skin," Ranofer finished. "I do not care if *he* knows, Heqet. He will say nothing. Let us tell him."

They did so, while the reeds rustled stiffly in the sun-heated air, and the old donkey chewed patiently on the leaves a little distance away, where he had rolled himself out another nest. Before the meal was finished and the story ended there were three friends instead of two in the little green-walled chamber.

When they parted on the path a few moments later, Heqet said, "Let us meet again tomorrow. Will you come, Ancient?"

"Aye, unless I'm hired at the docks to haul cargo, or unless Lord Crocodile gets me first." The old man's shrill cackle sounded as he tugged his donkey to its feet. "Watched any hangings lately?" he added slyly to Ranofer.

"Nay."

"*Hail* That's right. That's wise. Trouble enough in this

world without borrowing from others. Well, may Ra shine upon you, and Mother Mut smile."

The Ancient and his little beast trudged off through the papyrus, and the boys went back to their tasks, Ranofer strengthened by the unaccustomed food and companionship, and buoyant with the thought of more tomorrow.