

Chapter VIII

ALL through the spring, while the heat swelled and the river shrank, Ranofer and Heqet met as often as they were able, at midday or in the evening after their day's work was done. Frequently the Ancient joined them, bringing nelumbo nuts and his cackling laugh, and his sly, wise teasing. One morning after a great many delays Heqet was finally instructed in beading, at the goldhouse. That evening he told Ranofer all about it.

"It is easy. You could do it any time you liked, if only you had the tools. Now, do you remember that charcoal block with the tiny round depressions in it? Rekh always keeps it next the big furnace, on that storage shelf."

"Aye, I remember it."

"Well, you simply melt scraps of metal in those little hollows. I used the sweep for it today. When the puddles turn the right color, you know, then you take the block from the fire and in a minute you turn the beads out. Then you boil them in pickle and wash them in water, and there they are, ready to be soldered to whatever you like. Rekh is using them for a bracelet now. He is making one for a judge's lady. Aye, and there's another way to make them,

too. You make little rings by winding the wire about a straight, thin rod and then clipping each twist."

"Aye, links. I learned long ago to make links."

"Very well, then, you make links, and you pack some of them on a layer of finely broken charcoal in a clay box. Then you cover those with another layer of charcoal bits. Then you put in more links. You keep it up until the box is full, then you wire the lid on and heat it until box and wire are redder than the fire. When you shake the charcoal out, by Amon, it is surprising! The links have all turned to little round grains."

"The first way sounds quicker."

"Aye, but the second is more fun." Heqet grinned. "Said the rat as he walked straight past the cheese and robbed the trap. I will admit it's surer to use the charcoal block, where you can see the gold melt. I had to try twice before I got the box to the right shade of red. The first time I opened it I still had links, and Sata cuffed me all over the shop. I've no doubt *you* could do it, though, if you had the chance to try."

"Someday I will," Ranofer said, but he looked at his gritty hands, rough from a day's sandstoning, adorned with one of the ever-present bandages, and wondered dismally if the day would ever come.

He wondered more and more as the spring progressed and nothing changed in his life except that Gebu was sometimes in a good mood and sometimes in a bad. It was beginning to seem to him that he had only dreamed once of goldworking, of learning from his father, of working about Rekh's shop and making the little leaves, and that now he was awake once and for all, to a world of dreary stone. Heqet continued to describe every process he was

taught at the goldhouse, but the more interesting the processes, the more complicated they were, and the harder they were to describe. Besides, it was not long before Ranofer realized he could never increase his skill merely by listening to Heqet's earnest explanations. It was practice he required, not just information.

"I cannot learn these things," he told Heqet finally one day. "Not this way. It is useless. Could you shape a bowl if someone merely told you how to do it? Nay. Not until you held the hammer in your hand, and learned the sound it must make, and the way the stake must ring. Let us give it up, Heqet. It only makes me hate stoneworking more than I do already."

The Ancient, who was sitting beside them cracking nelumbo nuts, glanced up at him. "Why is it you hate stonework so, young one? It is a good trade."

"A good trade?" Ranofer exclaimed scornfully. "It is a clod's trade! It is a trade that spoils a man's hands and makes him a dullard and near breaks his back every day, and—"

He went on until he was out of breath, while the old man listened in silence, cracking his nuts and nodding patiently now and then.

"Aye, very well," the Ancient said when Ranofer had finished at last. "It is a clod's trade and you hate it. But it is a trade, young one. A man can earn his living by it, and not too poor a living either. Now I—" He paused, carefully removed the bitter leaf from the lobes of a nut with his knobby old hands, and handed the kernels to Heqet. "I never learned a trade at all." He lifted his one bright eye and looked directly at Ranofer. "My father was a cattle drover in Lower Egypt, and I helped him. We wandered

here and there, and when he died and went to the gods—may his Three Thousand Years be full of joy—another drover took his place, and I had to wander alone. I came here at last and worked on the docks while I was young enough and strong enough, but how I used to envy those who knew a craft, and went each day to a shop, and took home their coppers safe and sure each night, and went again in the morning, instead of having to wonder who would hire them today. *Hail* Remember, young one, you will be an old one too someday, though it is hard for you to think so now. And it is not good to be an old one without a trade. If it is stonecutting instead of goldworking, that is a pity. But learn it well anyway, while you have the chance.”

“But you—” Ranofer faltered. “I thought you—you have the donkey, and the little house on the edge of the desert.”

“Aye, I do not complain,” the Ancient said, smiling. “But I have not always had them. I know what I speak of, boy, and though you may think me a dismal old crow, you’ll do well to heed my cawing.”

No doubt he is right, Ranofer told himself as he walked back to the shop. But he had no heart for trying to become a good stonecutter, or for taking notice of anything in the shop beyond what he was forced to learn.

One day, a day of glaring, shimmering heat when one’s skin drew tight from dryness and even seemed likely to crack into crazily spreading wounds as all the fields had cracked, Heqet appeared at the thicket in a state of great excitement.

“Ranofer!” he panted, flinging himself down upon the matted rushes beside his friend. “Tomorrow Rekh is sending me to the workshop of Zau the Master, to fetch a

stake. He did not say I must go alone. Do you want to go with me?"

"But I—but I cannot." Ranofer was stammering with the force of his wanting to go. "I will be all day at the stone shop."

"I am to go at the day's end, after work is done."

"Then I can! Unless Pai delays me with some stupid task. He must not. I will stay out of his sight and slip away when the first man lays down his tool. How did it happen? What sort of stake are you to fetch?"

"One of Zau's own design, which he uses in some way for the golden masks he makes to fit over the faces of the great ones when they go to their tombs. The stake has cracked and he is ordering a new one made. He has given Rekh leave to take the old one and have it copied for his own work."

"He is generous as well as great."

"Rekh is a kinsman of his brother's wife. You will meet me, then? Perhaps at the big tree by Aba the potter's. Then we will go on together. Zau's shop is near the palace."

"I know. Aye, I'll be there. My thanks, friend."

The next day dragged even more slowly than usual, with this prospect glittering at its end. Ranofer nicked his hand twice with a carelessly placed chisel as visions of the wonderful objects he would see in Zau's shop danced through his mind.

I will speak to Zau again, really speak to him, face to face, he kept thinking. He will ask me how I fare, and I will tell him everything, only little by little, as he asks. I must not pour it all out like some imbecile and make him think I ask for pity, Amon forbid it! I will answer his ques-

tions only, and be modest and proud like my father, but he will find it out, all about Gebu and the gold stealing and that I was taken from Rekh's and forced to work here among these cursed blocks of stone. And then he will frown and say that it is an evil thing, a slap in the faces of the gods, that the son of Thutra the goldsmith should be a stonecutter's apprentice. Aye, and he will remember that he once saw my little cups and arm bands, and that they showed skill, very unusual skill, and he will grow very stern at the thought of my hands being ruined and my days wasted, and he will go straight to Gebu and tell him he must release me, so that I can come and be his pupil.

Ranofer's thoughts slowed uneasily, then stopped. Daydreams had lost some of their old power; these days reality kept creeping in and ruining them with stony facts. He could not persuade himself, even in fancy, that Gebu would care a copper what Zau thought or said. Nor could he see himself speaking of the thieving. Nor could he see any way to become Zau's pupil, however warm the possible invitation, without a place to live and a way to earn his fee. The donkey. Zau would not present him with a donkey, any more than Gebu would.

Catching sight of Pai striding toward him with jaw outthrust and stick lifted, Ranofer bent hastily to his work.

No matter, he told himself. I shall see Zau again, and speak a little with him, and see things he has made. Perhaps I may even get to watch him work a little. It is enough, is it not? Yesterday brought no such gift from the gods, nor will tomorrow.

He was waiting at Aba the potter's late that afternoon when Heqet came running down the dusty street. They started at once for Zau's house, talking excitedly as they

threaded their way through the press of home-going Thebans. The parched and wounded earth was rosy with the sun's dying, and the Nile, shrunk to a red-brown trickle in its season of death, looked exactly like what Ranofet knew it was, the last feeble flowing of blood from the body of the beloved, murdered god Osiris.

The nearer they drew to the palace, the thinner the crowds became, and when they turned away from the river into the Street of the Carpenters, they found the street almost deserted, with the shops closed for the night.

"We must find a turning somewhere near here," Heqet said. "Zau lives on the Street of Good Fortune."

"I know."

"You have been there before? With your father, perhaps?"

"Aye, but it was long ago. I remember little. I think it has very high walls, with a purple vine tumbling over them near the gate, and treetops showing behind. Nay, I am not sure about the trees. But I know the design worked into the grille of the gate. It is a straining vat and cloth, the sign for 'gold.'"

Heqet turned large eyes upon him. "You can read? Like a scribe?"

"Nay, I learned a little, when my father lived among men. Look, here is a turning."

"Aye, it is the right one. Rekh said there would be a wineshop on one side, and a tall palm opposite."

Their footsteps quickened as they left the rows of carpenters' shops and entered the other street. It was almost another world. There were high walls on either side, with the tops of palms and acacias showing above them. There

was no dust, much quiet, and a pervading fragrance of flowers and wealth. Here lived Pharaoh's favorites among the artisans. Farther along, beyond their comparatively modest houses, the street broadened and the grand villas of judges and officials rose on either side in the midst of large gardens and vineyards. At the extreme end of the street, like the dazzling tip on an arrow, the two boys could see a corner of the palace walls, stained pink by the sunset.

"Here it is," Heqet exclaimed, pointing. "High walls with a purple vine. But there are other purple vines," he added uncertainly.

They walked to the gate and found the gold sign worked in its grille.

"It is the one," Ranofer whispered.

"Then we open the gate and go in. That is what Rekh said."

Diffidently Ranofer raised the latch, opened the gate just wide enough for them both to squeeze through, and closed it carefully behind them. Immediately all the past miserable months fell away from him as he stood breathing the hot, well-remembered odor of molten gold and hearing the chiming of a little hammer. They had entered Zau's shop, not his dwelling, which must be beyond that inner courtyard wall. Across the clay-paved court was a row of stalls roofed with palm fronds. In the largest an old man knelt on a mat before a low workbench. Otherwise the shop was empty.

As Zau half turned, both boys bent their heads, each with one hand on the opposite shoulder in the gesture of respect.

"Who comes?" said a deep, even voice. "Straighten yourselves, so that I may see something besides the tops of your heads."

They obeyed hastily. "Greeting, Master of all Goldsmiths," Heqet said. "I come from Rekh. He has sent me to fetch the—"

"Aye, aye, the stake. I remember. Come here."

Heqet started across the court and Ranofer followed him dreamily, past small basket-shaped furnaces in which the fires were dying, past the balance scales and the washing vats. He was conscious of the gleam of gold here and there, the round shapes of crucibles, the smoothness of the clay floor under his bare feet, so different from the grit and stone dust of his present life. The familiar and well-loved details receded into the background, however, as they approached the austere old man leaning with one elbow on the workbench, a little copper hammer dangling from his long-fingered, supple, corded hand. Ranofer remembered the hand well and the broad, strong-boned face with its thinning eyebrows and full, carved mouth, but he had forgotten how austere Zau's manner was, and how difficult it had always been in the old days to summon courage to utter a few words in his presence, even when his father was beside him, even when Zau had asked some question of him first.

I need not have worried that I would pour out my troubles like an imbecile, Ranofer thought. I cannot even open my mouth. What made me think that I would dare to speak to this Great One? I, a nobody, a ragged stone-cutter's boy?

He stood tongue-tied, feeling his very existence an intrusion, while Zau directed Heqet to the farthest stall, and

to the cupboard where he would find the stake. Then, when Heqet had bowed and hurried along the row of stalls on his errand, Zau glanced at Ranofer. For a moment that seemed as long as a day his eyes rested indifferently on Ranofer's face. Zau started to turn away, but hesitated; his scanty brows drew together in a puzzled expression.

"I know you, do I not?" he said.

Ranofer tried twice before he found his voice and discovered how to make it work. "Aye, Master. That is, you knew my father."

"Your father. *Ast!* It is the son of Thutra, my departed friend. May his Three Thousand Years be full of delight."

"If Amon wills," Ranofer murmured automatically.

"Aye, Thutra's boy. And your name is?"

"Ranofer, Master."

"Ranofer. I remember. How do you fare now, Ranofer? You are apprenticed at some goldhouse, I suppose."

"Nay, I—I am apprenticed to my half brother, Gebu the stonecutter."

"Stonecutter!" Zau's eyebrows lifted. "That is strange. I thought I remembered that you were interested in the smith's art. But then, I forget things nowadays." Indifferent again, he turned back to his work.

But I was, I am, I am! Ranofer wanted to cry out. He could not make a sound, confronted by Zau's back. Why did I say that? he thought furiously. It was all wrong, I should have explained first, then—

He forgot even his self-recrimination as his eye fell on the object lying on Zau's table. It was half finished, a wide gold collar formed of tiny chains strung with innumerable golden bees, each one delicately and imaginatively conceived, superbly wrought. Without knowing it he edged

forward until he stood at the old man's shoulder, looking down at the wonder and breathing hard.

Zau, glancing up at him, followed his fascinated gaze. "An order from the palace," he remarked. "Sixty days hence, at the festival of the High Nile, Queen Tiy will wear about her beautiful neck Pharaoh's newest gift. Aye, it will be complete by then, if I keep working."

He picked up a tiny hammer and began to reshape a golden wing tip which seemed to the boy already perfect. Ranofar watched the long-fingered, agile old hands and clasped his own behind him. They felt harsh with stone dust, rough and clumsy.

"Oh, that I might learn to make such things!" he whispered.

The hammer paused, uplifted, as Zau shot him a keen glance over his shoulder. Then he went back to his hammering. "You will never learn to make them at a stone-cutting shop."

Ranofar gathered all his courage, resolved to right his mistake. "It is Gebu's will, not mine, that I am apprenticed there, Master. He took me from Rekh's goldhouse, where I had been working." Not learning, only working, he told himself fiercely. Get everything straight this time. "He took me from Rekh because I—because he—because I—" He stopped, swallowing hard. He could not believe it safe to mention the theft of gold and the name of the thief in the presence of any goldsmith. Even Zau might think he had stolen it himself.

"Because you lacked skill, perhaps?" Zau said.

"Nay, Master."

"Or aptitude?"

"Nay. I—"

"Or diligence? Goldworking is not for the lazy."

"Master, I would ask nothing better than to spend every moment of my life at it. It was nothing to do with me, I did not want to leave, I did not want to! But Gebu—"

Again Ranofer floundered and fell silent. Zau put down his hammer and turned. Placing both long, strong hands on his knees, he scrutinized Ranofer.

"There is something you do not tell me," he said finally.

"Aye, Master. There is something I dare not tell anyone." Except the Ancient, Ranofer thought. But *he* does not count.

Zau considered this for a moment. "Then why do you tell me anything at all?" he inquired.

"Because—because one day before my father died you looked at the little things I had made and said they showed skill. You said, 'Perhaps, when he is older . . .'"

Zau regarded him thoughtfully for a while, then picked up his hammer again. Over the ring of its tappings he spoke composedly. "You wish to become my pupil?"

"I wish it! Who would not wish it? But I cannot pay the fee. Gebu takes the coppers I earn at stonecutting, and I have nothing else."

Cling, cling, cling, went the little hammer. "I do not take apprentices, Ranofer," Zau said.

"I know." Ranofer's voice was almost inaudible. "I ask for nothing, Master. I wished only to see you again, perhaps watch you work a little."

Why, indeed, had he spoken of all this to Zau, who could do nothing about it? No one could do anything about it. Ranofer felt a fool. He felt utterly miserable.

"I remember looking at your work," Zau said unexpectedly. "My old friend Thutra took me one morning to a

cupboard, and showed me a cup with a handle, and two arm bands. One of them was overambitious." He stopped work for an instant to level the hammer handle and a sharp glance over his shoulder at Ranofer. "You did not know enough to attempt that spiral pattern." His admonishing eye held Ranofer's a moment, then he resumed his work. "The other arm band was creditable, as was the cup. Aye, quite creditable."

"Thank you, Master." Ranofer was glowing with the praise, as joyful now as he had been miserable two minutes before.

Zau ceased his work on the wing tip, examined it intently, and seemed satisfied at last. He turned, with the collar still in his hand, and gave his full attention to Ranofer.

"Thutra was my friend for twenty years," he said. "I would be faithless if I looked the other way when his son has fallen upon evil days. Still—" Zau's ragged eyebrows lifted arrogantly. "Perhaps I *would* be faithless, if the cup and the arm band had been poor. I am interested in goldsmiths, not orphans."

"Of course, Master," Ranofer said humbly.

"However, the cup and the arm band were creditable. Promising. I wish to help you, Ranofer. You may come to me as a pupil and I will require no fee, but you must not speak of that to my other pupils."

For one moment Ranofer felt that he could soar straight into the air like any bird, but only for one moment. In the next, he plunged sickeningly to earth.

"Master, I am not free to be your pupil," he whispered. "I am apprenticed to Gebu."

"Dissolve your apprenticeship."

"I cannot."

"You speak with a flapping tongue," the old man said calmly. "When the reasons are sound, it is a simple process of law to part from one's master. Any scribe can write the papers."

Ranofer stood like a culprit, head hanging and face burning with humiliation. "Master, if I did that Gebu would kill me. Or sell me. Besides, one must eat. I have nothing except what he gives me."

After a moment Zau rose from his knees and carried the gold collar to a fire smoldering in a small hooded furnace. Coaxing a fresh blaze with a blowpipe, he found tongs and with them held a portion of the collar carefully to the blast, his corded, brown old back gleaming with the heat. The subject appeared to be closed. Everything in Ranofer fought frantically against its closing, so frantically that his racing mind found a solution.

"Master!" he exclaimed. He found himself standing by Zau's side without knowing he had moved. "Master, I work only in the day at the stonecutting shop. And at night Gebu is often gone from home, often and very late." Even in his eagerness the old question flashed through Ranofer's mind: *Where does he go?* He moistened his lips hastily and went on. "I could come at night and learn, if you would allow it."

Zau tossed the blowpipe aside and straightened. "That is impossible. Do you think I work without ceasing, like some god? I am an old man. I rest my weary bones at night."

"But Master—"

"Son of my old friend, it is clear that I can do nothing for you at the present. You must reshape your life into

some other form. When you have done this, come to me again, and I will teach you."

After a long and difficult moment, Ranofer managed to answer in a very low voice, "Thank you, Master. I understand. I will try *very* hard."

The old man nodded, not unkindly, and started toward one of the far stalls, carrying the collar. Ranofer walked slowly to the gate. There he found Heqet, whom he had completely forgotten, waiting with the stake beside him on the ground. Heqet's enormous eyes and attitude of respect indicated that he had heard everything Zau had said. In silence the two boys lifted the heavy stake and carried it between them out into the deserted street, in which the rosy light was graying into dusk. There was no need to speak, for each knew the other's thoughts. They said nothing until they had reached the Street of the Goldsmiths and were approaching the Apprentices' Quarters, with Rekh's shop in sight at the end of the street. Then Ranofer stopped, his eyes on the familiar gate ahead.

"You are to take the stake to the goldhouse?" he asked.

"Aye."

"Rekh will be there?"

"Aye, he said he would wait until I came." Heqet paused, then added, "I can carry it the rest of the way, Ranofer. You need not come."

Ranofer glanced at him gratefully and nodded, relieved that he did not have to explain. He had not seen Rekh nor set foot inside the shop since the day he had left it so abruptly months before, the same day Ibni had left abruptly too. Common sense told him that Rekh knew nothing of his connection with the affair, but he felt so certain that the odor of thievery must hang about his

name at the goldhouse that he had no desire to test the point. If Rekh were to look at him with disdain and disappointment he knew he would shrivel with the shame. And if Rekh were unchanged? Kind and concerned with his welfare, as always? That would be worse, today of all days that would be far worse. Ranofer felt that if anyone were kind to him right now he would fly into a million pieces.

Heqet heaved the stake to his shoulder. "You will come to the papyrus marsh tomorrow at midday?"

"Aye. I'll come."

With no further talk the boys parted, Heqet to trudge up the dusky street toward the goldhouse, Ranofer to start the long walk home.

It was not until he reached the ferry docks—now rising high and queer-looking above the shrunken river, with the ferries moored far out in a basin of mud—that he began to realize, first, how tired he was, second, how late it had grown while he stood talking to Zau. If Gebu were home, waiting for him, growing more and more angry at having to wait . . . Ranofer's steps quickened in spite of his tired and aching body. I can rest later, he thought. The sooner I get home and hand over my coppers, the sooner—

He stopped short. He did not have his coppers. He had dashed out of the stonecutting shop this evening thinking of nothing but Zau, so afraid that Pai would detain him for some trivial task that he had not even waited for the daily ritual of wage paying, had not even thought of it until this moment.

How could I have forgotten? he thought, standing aghast in the middle of the darkening street. Still, why should he have remembered? He felt no interest at all in

his wages, since all he did was carry them home to Gebu. If I could *have* them once, he thought bitterly.

Never mind, he could not have them. Things were as they were, and right now they were very bad indeed. He could not stand here forever while night came on, yet he could scarcely conceive of going home to face Gebu empty-handed.

What will I tell him? Ranofer thought desperately, even while his feet took him hurrying homeward again. I cannot tell him I forgot. He will not believe it, and then he will beat me for lying. If he does believe it, he will beat me anyway, from fury. Aye, and he will want to know where I have been so long, what I have been doing and why I have been doing it. I cannot think of answers to all those questions. I will have to tell him nothing, or the truth.

When he reached the Street of the Crooked Dog he had not yet decided between these alternatives. Either was unthinkable. He stopped trying to decide, and in a sort of exhausted calm trotted the rest of the way down the gloom-filled street and into the familiar, barren courtyard. It was empty. Maybe there will be a miracle, Ranofer thought as he leaned, panting, against the gate. Maybe Gebu did not wait, this once. Maybe he forgot the coppers too, and went out somewhere and will stay a long, long time—until tomorrow—and will never know that I did not have them, or ask me questions, or find out that I went to Zau's.

The hinge of the door at the top of the stairs creaked loudly, the door banged back against the wall, and Gebu came violently down the stairs. There was to be no miracle that night.

Chapter IX

THE following morning Ranofer crept to the shop sore in every muscle, with the old, familiar strips of fire across his shoulders. As he had expected, Gebu had not believed the simple truth, that he had forgotten to collect his wages. The added truth which might have convinced him, the story of the visit to Zau, Ranofer had stubbornly withheld. He had paid a high price for his silence, but even a beating was preferable to turning his heart and hopes inside out for Gebu's scornful inspection, seeing them withered with ridicule and blown away like dust before his eyes. He had little enough hope left in him as it was, after the conversation with Zau.

Gebu came into the shop in the middle of the morning, snarled ill-naturedly at Pai and stalked about inspecting the work in a manner that caused every man to bend closer to his chisel or drill and all conversation to cease. Ranofer, scrubbing away with sandstone at a chunk of quartzite, dared not glance around when Gebu paused beside a half-finished stone coffin only a few feet away from him. His very skin shrank in an effort to put more distance between himself and his half brother, but he

could not help being aware of the voices of Gebu and Pai, gradually raised in argument until they could be heard even over the clatter of the shop.

"You, Ranofer!" Pai roared suddenly.

Ranofer dropped his sandstone and looked around fearfully.

"That scroll on the lower shelf, the plan of the judge's tomb. Fetch it. Hurry."

Ranofer hurried, as much as the soreness of his legs allowed, to the storeroom at the far end of the shop. There were five scrolls on the lower shelf. With hands made clumsy by haste, he unrolled one after another. From being ordered often to bring some particular scroll to Pai, he had become superficially familiar with these drawings, which at first had looked like meaningless bird tracks to him. All tomb plans were similar in design, but he could now tell one from another by recognizing some detail. The judge's was the one with the narrowest entrance passage and only two rooms beside the burial chamber. It was the last he picked up. He snatched it and returned to Pai, who took it without a glance.

Ranofer was glad to be ignored; gladder still to be safely back at work when a moment later Gebu's voice rose in an angry bellow directed at Pai.

"You see, imbecile? The coffin is too wide. I told you. Perhaps you would care to chip away the sides of this passage on the day of the burial!"

"It is easy enough to alter the coffin," Pai answered sulkily.

"Then alter it, and hereafter heed what I say, or I will find a foreman who will."

Gebu stalked past Ranofer with nothing more than a glare, and Pai followed, thrusting the scroll at Ranofer as he went by. As Ranofer scrambled down from his stone to take the scroll back, he saw Pai at the pay box, counting out to Gebu the coppers from yesterday, and those for today as well.

He means to take no chances that I will forget tonight, Ranofer thought as he started for the storeroom. Cursed One! What does he care for my coppers, except to make sure *I* do not get them? If only I could keep them, I could hide them away and some day buy a donkey. But he does not even need them, especially these days when he swaggers about in fine headcloths and new-made sandals. He has *two* pairs of sandals now, one with buckles, like a judge's. Aye, and he eats fish often, and salted waterfowl. I can smell them in the storeroom at home. And he reeks always of wine or barley beer.

Ranofer's thoughts paused in surprise. He stood in the storeroom, the scroll forgotten in his hands, and considered these things. Until now he had paid them no attention. Certainly Gebu seemed to be increasingly well-to-do. The sandals, the headcloths of fine linen—several of them—yes, and for some time Gebu had reeked of expensive ointments as well as barley beer.

My coppers cannot have made all that difference, Ranofer reflected.

Perhaps the Fanbearer had paid a great sum for that red granite coffin with the alabaster lid. Or else Pharaoh must have rewarded the stonecutters handsomely indeed for the work on the temple. How else could the Cursed One have grown rich so suddenly, unless he—*unless he was stealing again.*

The instant the idea occurred to Ranofer he was sure it was the answer. A remark of Gebu's sprang into his mind: "... him and his paltry wineskins! There are far bigger birds in the air than Rekh the goldsmith." Obscure at the time they were spoken, the words were now as clear to Ranofer as the shape of the shelves in front of him. Gebu had found some other goldsmith to rob, and no doubt a better, safer way to do it. No wonder he had needed the Babylonian no longer, and scarcely taken notice of his dismissal! The new scheme must have been already in operation.

Ranofer thrust the scroll onto the shelf and hurried back to his work, filled again with the hope that he had thought almost quenched yesterday. This time, if he found Gebu out, he would make sure of his proof, he would find witnesses. Better, this time he had friends who might help, not only Heqet but the Ancient.

He could scarcely wait until midday. When it came at last he ran at full speed to the thicket, disregarding his soreness and passers-by alike. He ran so fast that he was the first to arrive in the little green room and had to wait, fuming with impatience and groaning a little in spite of himself at the flames he had stirred to life across his shoulders. Presently, however, Heqet and the Ancient arrived together, speaking in low tones as they came along the shaded little path, with the soft-eyed donkey plodding behind them. Ranofer suspected Heqet had been telling the old man about what had happened at Zau's, no doubt feeling he must explain beforehand Ranofer's probable gloom. They both looked surprised when Ranofer jumped to his feet and pulled them through the reeds into the little clearing, urging them to sit down quickly and listen.

"Gebu has been beating you again," Heqet said, with a sharp glance at his friend's shoulders.

"Aye, because I forgot my coppers yesterday. But I'm glad I did, because it made me think. Now listen to me."

The story poured out—Gebu's sandals, his headcloths, his ointments, his peculiar remark to Wenamon months before. Heqet and the Ancient mechanically performed the usual ritual of dividing what food there was, but their attention was riveted on Ranofer. Heqet grew so excited that by the time Ranofer paused for breath his snub-nosed face was transformed and he could scarcely sit still.

"You are right! I know you're right! Isn't it so, Ancient? How else could a man become so rich in a few months' time, unless Pharaoh had singled him out for favor? And *that* one is as likely to be singled out by Pharaoh as I am to lose my appetite overnight. Here, Ranofer, take one of these loaves and some grapes. Now, what shall we do about it?"

"I don't know," Ranofer answered, realizing for the first time that he had no idea of how to proceed. He glanced questioningly at the Ancient, who was old and must therefore know a great deal about everything, but he found the old man looking both thoughtful and dubious. The doubt was contagious. Ranofer turned away quickly and said in a louder tone than he intended, "But we can do something, that much is certain. We can find out more. I will watch Gebu, see where he goes."

He was talking at random, but Heqet pounced on the words. "Aye, that's it. Follow him as often as you can, see who he talks to, try to hear what they say. His companions, we must discover his companions. That skulking Wena-mon is surely part of the scheme. Perhaps *I* could watch

him, he lives but a step from the Apprentices' Quarters. We will become spies! Who else is Gebu's friend, or does he have any others?"

"There is a river captain. Of course I do not know if he has anything to do with this."

"Aha! A river captain!" Heqet was in transports. "Naturally there would be a river captain. Do you see? They must smuggle the gold out of the city in some way, perhaps to Abydos. They would not dare barter raw gold here for headcloths or sandals. Someone would soon ask how they came by it. Do you agree, Ancient?"

"Aye, that is doubtless the way they would do it," the old man said slowly, so slowly that Ranofer stole another anxious glance at him. Heqet was already talking again.

"The Ancient can spy on the river captain. What could be easier? He is here near the river all day, he goes each evening to the sailmaker's by the docks. An excellent ideal *Ast!* What a bright fellow I am, as the stone said when it looked into the copper mirror. What's this river captain's name?"

"Setma."

"Setmal" the Ancient echoed.

"Do you know him, Ancient?"

"Aye, I know him. I do not like his sort."

"Wenamon is worse," Ranofer said quickly.

"And Gebu worst of all," Heqet added.

Once more Ranofer searched the old man's face. "Now do you believe all this?" he ventured.

"I never said I did not believe you, young one."

"You have not said much of anything at all," Ranofer said uncertainly.

"Nay, I have not." The Ancient sighed and picked up Heqet's knife to slice a lotus root. "I fear for you two hotheads, mixing yourselves up with dangerous business. What if these men catch you spying on them? It would go hard with you."

"But we will be very careful!" Heqet exclaimed. "I mean to be a spy worthy of any noble's hire. Silent and invisible." He glanced challengingly at the Ancient. "Of course, Old One, if you are *afraid*—"

The Ancient's face relaxed into its usual good-natured creases. A slow grin turned into his high-pitched cackle. "May the gods love you, boy. Why should *I* be afraid? No one takes any notice of an old one-eyed nobody like me. I could tread on a man's heels for weeks before he'd suspect *me* of being dangerous."

"It is the same with us," Heqet argued eagerly. "Who takes notice of boys? Especially ragamuffins?"

"You are no ragamuffin, Heqet," Ranofer said with an admiring glance at his friend's new *shenti*, which was of firm-woven linen. His own was the flimsiest cotton, and tender in every fiber from long wear.

"I am no Lord High Fanbearer, either," retorted Heqet. "Though of course we both have our natural beauty, as the hippopotamus said to the rat." Heqet snatched up a bunch of grapes and held them across his throat like a necklace, meanwhile assuming an expression of such conceited hauteur that both Ranofer and the Ancient burst out laughing. He flung the grapes down and went on. "In any case, I am paid no more attention than a thousand other boys in Thebes, and neither are you, Ranofer. We need no magic to make us invisible so long as we do not actually stumble over anyone's feet. For my part, I am ready to be

Wenamon's shadow day and night, except when I am at the goldhouse, of course. And even there—" He stopped and his face lighted with a new idea.

"What is it?" Ranofer prodded him.

"Why, I have just realized something. I can do much more to help you. You know yourself, Ranofer, when gold is missing from any goldhouse in the city, the others learn of it. The smiths warn each other."

"Aye, that is true. Rekh sent Sata to his brother's shop, and others down the street."

"Exactly. Very well, then. I will keep my ears open. I will grow ears like that donkey yonder. If word comes of thievery in anyone's shop, I will know which one."

"Now *that* is a good plan," the Ancient said emphatically. "That will accomplish something, possibly."

Heget, the irrepressible, glared at him an instant and then growled deep in his throat like some very small, fierce dog. "You do not think my spying plan of any value, then?" he demanded.

"Aye, of inestimable value," the old man cackled, shaking his head until his threadlike hair quavered. "Spy all you like, young one. You are probably right, no one will notice your antics. You might even find out something."

"And you will watch the river captain?"

"Aye, I'll watch him, though it will not be a pleasant sight, I assure you."

"Then you will watch Gebu," Heget said to Ranofer.

"I will do my best. But I think he will notice if I try to follow him."

"Aye, that's a problem in your case, it's true."

"No matter, I will try it anyway," Ranofer said. "All he can do is beat me and send me home."

He hoped it was true. He did not really know what Gebu would do if he realized Ranofer was prying into his affairs, and he preferred not to think about it.

Something of the sort must have passed through Heqet's mind, for he said uneasily, "Take great care, though. Well, it is all arranged, then. We will meet here when we can, as always, and tell each other what we have learned. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Ranofer said solemnly.

"Agreed," the Ancient echoed, not solemnly at all. He was still chuckling now and then under his breath, and Ranofer suspected that he looked on the whole plan as a child's game. As they left the little green room to separate to their work, however, he beckoned Ranofer down the path in the direction of the shrunken river, and the familiar twinkle in his one eye had vanished.

"Come with me a moment, young one."

He left the path presently and pressed through the trackless growth of rushes and bushes, which he seemed to know as well as Ranofer knew the Street of the Crooked Dog. At a place where the undergrowth ended and the papyrus began—the water's edge in winter, now a stretch of mud—he stopped beside a spreading patch of some low, green plant. Stooping, he gathered a handful of the leaves and crushed them with a little mud in the palm of one hand. Then he turned Ranofer about and very gently smeared the mixture on his shoulders, where the fires still burned. Instantly they cooled; the relief was so great that tears sprang to Ranofer's eyes. He looked wonderingly at the old man, whose gentle touch seemed as great a magic as his salve. The Ancient smiled.

"I have not much wisdom, but I know a few things," he

remarked. "Now I want a promise from you about this spying, young one. Will you give it?"

"Aye."

"Do not follow this Gebu of yours after full night has fallen. Men can come and go in the darkness, and often no harm comes of it. But you are not yet a man and *khefts* fly away with children, even half-grown boys like you. Do not risk it. It would be better to spend your life as a stone-cutter."

"That is true, Ancient. I will not risk it."

"Well, then. Be off with you."

He is right, Ranofer reflected as he hurried back to the shop. I will tell Heget, too. Heget fears nothing. He might not even remember about the *khefts*.

A moment later, though, he realized that Heget would do no dashing about after Wenamon at night, even if he should want to. The doors of the Apprentices' Quarters were locked and sealed at nightfall, and there were no exceptions to the rule. They would have few hours in the day for following and watching. Still, much could be done between the end of work and the coming of full dark, which was later now than in the winter seasons. And think what it might mean if they could discover something! Ranofer was determined to begin that very evening.

He went directly home at the day's end, with none of his usual reluctant dawdling. Gebu was there. Ranofer could hear him moving about in his room at the top of the stairs, but he did not come down. Why should he? thought Ranofer resentfully. He already has my coppers for today.

He found supper in the storeroom, drank from the water jar, and settled himself under the acacia tree, pre-

pared to watch every motion Gebu made if he should come into sight.

He did not come into sight for what seemed an interminable length of time. Ranofer's eyelids were drooping and his head nodding when he heard the upper door suddenly open and footsteps come down the stairs. Every sense alert, he watched Gebu walk across the courtyard, open the gate, and go out. As soon as the gate closed, Ranofer scrambled to his feet, wincing as the abrupt movement reminded him of his soreness, and ran to the corner of the wall where cracks in the mud bricks and a straggling vine provided a precarious ladder for climbing to the top. Peering over anxiously into the street, he saw Gebu walking eastward in the direction of the river. Ranofer waited until he was a considerable distance down the street, then jumped from his perch, ran to the gate and let himself out cautiously. Staying close to the walls of houses and courtyards, he followed the distant bulky figure around a corner and into the thoroughfare, then along the thoroughfare to the beginning of the docks. There Gebu turned into one of the several doorways set into a solid line of palm-thatched buildings, and disappeared from sight.

Ranofer gazed blankly at the doorway, over which hung a leather wineskin. He was both relieved and disappointed. He knew what this place was. It was Mutra's wineshop. There was nothing very mysterious about Gebu's going there; he went there often. Still, he might be meeting someone. This might be the place where the thieving plots were laid.

It's certain I cannot follow him inside, Ranofer thought. I can watch the door, though. That is what Heqet would do. I will see who goes in to meet him.

Across the street, on the stone docks, was a row of overturned fishing boats draped with nets spread out to dry. Ranofer selected one of the small punts made of bundles of papyrus reeds bound together, and crawled under it. Its sharp-pointed prow lifted it at an angle from the stone floor of the docks, and though its shelter concealed him he could still watch the doorway easily.

It was another long wait. Men came and went along the thoroughfare; several times one went into the wineshop and after an interval came out. Ranofer knew none of them. Wenamon did not come, nor did Setma, nor did anyone connected with any goldhouse, as far as he knew. The sunset light faded, the street grew dusky, and still Gebu did not appear. A fat-bellied man waddled out of the shop with a lighted torch, thrust it into a bracket beside the door, and waddled back inside. Ranofer began to peer about uneasily, searching the deepening gloom among the boats for possible *khefts*.

At last, when he was thoroughly stiff from his cramped position and almost ready to retreat before the coming of night, the door of the wineshop opened. Gebu came out and turned immediately toward home.

I must get ahead of him, Ranofer thought. I must get there first, so he will not know I have been gone. But how will I do it? What if he is not going home? How can I tell unless I follow right behind him?

In a panic he crawled out from under the punt and raced silently down the street after Gebu, who walked stolidly ahead. When he turned at the end of the thoroughfare Ranofer was sure he could be going nowhere but back to the Street of the Crooked Dog. Dodging into an alley, he ran as fast as he could until he was certain he was

ahead of Gebu. Then he crossed back in the direction of home by another street, and emerged into the Street of the Crooked Dog to see Gebu still some distance away in the gloom. Ranofer flew across the street and into the courtyard, closing the gate as silently as possible behind him. An instant later he was safe on his mat under the acacia tree, breathless and panting but lying in an attitude of sleep. In a few moments Gebu came in the gate, banged it carelessly with no regard for noise, and climbed the stair to his room.

Ranofer relaxed and gradually regained his breath. He felt considerably flattened by the evening's events. If this was spying, it was anything but an exhilarating occupation. What good was there in crouching under a punt all evening, watching a wineshop door? Moreover, it was no less dangerous for being dull.

Still, I must keep on with it, he told himself as he settled more comfortably on his mat. This was only the *first* evening. Perhaps he will go someplace else tomorrow, or meet someone, or do something suspicious. Perhaps Wenamon and Setma have met tonight, and Heqet will have much to tell tomorrow.

He drifted off to sleep, anticipating.

Chapter X

THE following midday Ranofer was the first to reach the little green room in the thicket. Heqet appeared only a moment later.

"What news? Ranofer asked breathlessly.

"A great deal!" Heqet flung himself down and began to divide his food as he talked. "I have discovered an *excellent* place to watch Wenamon's house. He lives near his shop, you know, in the Street of the Masons, which is only one street away from the Street of the Goldsmiths. Well, there is an alley behind the Apprentices' Quarters—"

"Greetings to you, fellow spies. Seen any hangings lately?" The Ancient's seamed face appeared through the fringe of reeds, and his one eye rolled from Ranofer to Heqet with an expression of exaggerated stealth.

"Greeting, Ancient. Come in, listen, Heqet has much to tell us. Go on, Heqet."

"Well, there is an alley behind the Apprentices' Quarters which runs directly behind Wenamon's house, too. I discovered this last evening as I was prowling about the place. And in this alley, just a short distance from Wenamon's rear wall, is a straggly old *dom* palm tree. And from

the branches of this tree I can see directly over Wenamon's wall and into his courtyard. He has a wife with a voice like the hyena."

The Ancient cackled, and Ranofer leaned eagerly closer. "Well, go on. What did you see?"

"I saw Wenamon come home from his work, I saw his wife give him barley beer and set his food before him, nagging all the while. He had salted waterfowl and bread and onions for his meal. His wife ate what was left when he had finished."

"But did he go out after the meal?"

"Nay, he sat in the courtyard."

"Oh. Then, did someone come to see him?"

"Nay," Heqet confessed. "He did not do anything at all *last* evening. But I could see him perfectly, he was in my sight all the time. No doubt *this* evening something will happen. Then I will watch it all from my tree. It is an excellent thing to have discovered such a good place."

"Aye, aye, it is," Ranofer agreed, but he could not summon as much enthusiasm as Heqet seemed to expect. Boiled down, Heqet's story was the same as his own. Nothing whatever had happened.

"And you, Ancient?" Heqet said. "Did you find Setma last evening?"

"Aye, I found him. He was at the sailmaker's when my Lotus and I brought our papyrus. I kept my eye on him awhile. He went to a wineshop and bought his food and ate it. Then he walked across the mud to his vessel and went aboard. You can be sure he took no trip to Abydos or anywhere else. No vessel can move now until blessed Osiris rises and the Nile comes back to life. Possibly he entertained a few *khefts* or devils in his cabin later, but I

did not stay to see. My Lotus and I went home to our little house and rested our old bones."

Again, nothing.

Well? Ranofer asked himself angrily. What do you expect, after only one evening? Patience, stupid one. These things take time. Something will happen this evening, or perhaps tomorrow.

Nothing did, however. A week passed during which neither Gebu nor Wenamon did anything more suspicious than walk to some wineshop after the evening meal, or gamble at hounds-and-jackals with some crony in the privacy of their own courtyards. Setma's movements were even less interesting whenever the Ancient took time to spy on him. Ranofer found the whole thing very discouraging, but Heqet's interest never flagged; it seemed rather to increase.

"They are lying low," he told Ranofer one midday. "They are purposely avoiding one another. Wait and see. There is some deep reason behind it, and we'll find what it is, soon. Keep watch. Something is sure to happen any day now."

At last something did, several days after the river began to rise. Gebu went out one evening, with Ranofer doggedly behind him, and struck straight across the City of the Dead instead of turning toward Mutra's wineshop as usual. Ranofer grew more and more excited as he followed Gebu's twistings and turnings; more and more cautious, too, as he noticed that Gebu often looked behind him in a not-quite-convincingly casual manner. Surely something was afoot this time! Ranofer was certain of it when he realized they were nearing the Street of the Masons, and

almost choked with excitement when he saw Gebu turn in at Wenamon's gate.

I must find the tree, he thought. Heqet will be there, and we can watch together. Perhaps we can even hear them plotting!

There was no way to pass from the Street of the Masons into the alley behind it except to pass through one of the houses, or else go far around by the next cross street. After considerable fuming hesitation as to whether he should leave his post, Ranofer decided to risk it. He ran for the far corner as hard as he could run, worrying all the way over the possibility that Gebu and Wenamon might walk out the front gate and be gone before he could find them. A glance back from the corner showed the long street still empty. He dashed on, around the corner and down the cross street, hurried into the alley and was triumphantly sprinting for the tree when just beyond it a door in the wall opened without warning and Gebu and Wenamon stepped out.

Ranofer stopped so abruptly that a little cloud of dust rose from his skidding feet and he almost lost his balance. They had not looked in his direction yet, but in no time at all they would. Frantically he groped at the wall beside him, clutched a latch and pushed. In an instant he was inside some stranger's courtyard. In another instant a dog was rushing toward him, giving tongue as he came. Ranofer turned in a panic to the wall again, seized a branch of some creeper and with the aid of a toehold in the roughness of the plaster pulled himself up a few inches above the dog's snapping jaws. They still looked frighteningly close; he took a better grip on the vine and loosed one foot to search for a wider crack. The moment he moved, the

vine began to pull away from the wall. He froze. One more moment and he would fall straight on top of the dog, or else Gebu would open the gate and find him. In that minute some dark object sailed over his head and the dog's snarling changed to an offended yelp. Another object followed; this time Ranofer heard the *chunk* as it hit, and the dog howled and made off across the courtyard.

"Ranofer!" came an urgent whisper from somewhere above him. "Come out, quick. They've gone."

Ranofer dropped to the ground, staggered with relief and treacherously numbed toes, flung himself out the gate and closed it. As he leaned against it, panting, Heqet dropped from the branches of the *dom* palm and ran toward him.

"Hurry! They've gone that way. We can still follow and keep them in sight."

"How did you—what did you—do to that dog?" Ranofer gasped as Heqet pulled him relentlessly down the alley.

"I threw *dom* nuts at him. I could see everything that happened. I *knew* they were coming out that back gate and I thought they'd catch you for sure. Come, this way. There they are, ahead there. Lucky for you I could see into that courtyard where the dog was as well as I could see into Wenamon's. Where were you going so fast?"

"I was coming to join you." They had slowed down now and Ranofer's breath was beginning to return. "I followed Gebu to the Street of the Masons, saw him go in."

"Well, it's turned out well enough this time, as the ostrich said when he swallowed the melon. But there had better not be a next. That was too close for my peace of mind."

"Mine, too. Still, I'm glad I'm not hiding beside the front gate still, waiting for them to come out. Look, they're turning toward the shop."

"Gebu's shop?"

"Aye. It's just yonder. We'd best get out of sight a minute."

They ceased whispering and flattened themselves into a shadow. A little way down the dusk-filled street they could see Gebu and Wenamon pause at the door of the stone-cutting shop and, after a moment, go inside.

"Maybe Setma will come, now," Heqet whispered. "Maybe this is their meeting place."

Setma did not come, however. After a while a torch flared inside the shop and they could see it moving in a leisurely way here and there. It stayed some time in the scroll room, then flickered toward the place where Ranofer knew the judge's coffin stood.

"It is only some matter of business," Ranofer said, disappointed. "The judge's entrance passage is too narrow for his coffin, or the other way around. I heard Gebu speak of it once. That's all they're talking about now. This has nothing to do with gold stealing."

Heqet sighed. After lingering a few minutes longer, he said rather lamely, "Well, we have done all we can today, as one locust said to another. Perhaps tomorrow."

The two boys separated and went their ways. Again, nothing had happened.

The Nile rose freely in the next few weeks and, in spite of the relentless heat, the gloom of the god's death was gone from Egypt and the joy of his rebirth was in every man's speech and walk and brightened eye. Navigation began again on the river, and the pace of life quickened.

Except that he shared the deep relief of his fellow Egyptians at the river's rising, Ranofer's life did not change. For a time he and Heqet doggedly continued their spying and reporting to each other, and the Ancient joined in when he could. The old man could not come often to the little green room nowadays because he was cutting his papyrus in a distant part of the marsh and the sailmakers demanded bigger loads each day in this season of boat-building and refitting. Occasionally, though, his seamed old face would appear through the curtain of reeds, and with his cheerful cackle and his "Seen any hangings lately?" he would come in and share his food with them. He kept a faithful, if intermittent, eye on Setma, too; the riverman had begun regular trips up and down the Nile again. The Ancient always made them laugh with his mock-solemn reports, but he never found out anything. Probably, Ranofer reflected, because there was nothing to find out.

He himself was fast losing all faith in the spying. Never had Gebu behaved so innocently, never had a man seemed so devoted to his own courtyard and nagging wife as Wenamon. Occasionally the two met at Mutra's, or at the stonecutting shop to study the scrolls, and presumably to confer for long dull periods over building plans. Neither went anywhere near a goldhouse or appeared to be acquainted with so much as a goldsmith's apprentice. Gebu was not stealing anything, that was all. He was doing nothing whatever but live a stonecutter's routine life. No doubt Pharaoh *had* paid more than usual for the temple work. Whatever the explanation, the continuing signs of wealth were not due to stolen gold.

So Ranofer reasoned, and could find no fault in the

reasoning however much he wanted to, until one night when he was wakened again by the squeak of hinges. He lay still, listening to the stealthy pad of Gebu's feet on the stair and across the courtyard, feeling the usual tingling thrill down his spine as the gate latched softly and he knew Gebu was out in the dark street, moving among the nameless evils of the night on one of his unknown errands. What kind of errands could they be, that he would brave even demons and *khefts* to accomplish them? What could conceivably be that important, especially to Gebu? As far as Ranofer had ever been able to discover, nothing was important to Gebu, excepting gold.

Excepting gold!

Ranofer sat straight up on his mat and stared into the dark. Gold. Of course. Gebu was after gold. Why in the name of Amon had he not realized it before? *This* was when the thief was doing his thieving. Those squeaky hinges were the answer to everything, they explained the inexplicable, they wiped out the contradiction between Gebu's innocent daytime behavior and his mysteriously increasing wealth. It was no wonder, Ranofer thought disgustedly, that all his spying, and Heqet's and the Ancient's, had gained them nothing; everything was happening while they slept!

What exactly *was* happening, though? Who was Gebu robbing? Could he be climbing over courtyard walls, creeping into rich men's houses, prying into their store-rooms and treasure chests in the dead of night? Ranofer could not picture it. As well picture a block of granite wafting like a feather, or a hippopotamus slithering like a cat. Rich men had guards about their courtyards, and light-dozing hounds, and servants who slept across the

storeroom doors. Just one of Gebu's heavy footfalls—even at his stealthiest they were audible—and the whole household would be shouting the alarm.

Could he be stealing from some goldhouse, then? But there were guards at all goldhouses, too. The palace? Ridiculous, impossible.

Where, then? Ranofer asked himself, exasperated. Where does he go when he sneaks out like this? Where is he going this minute?

The question resounded in Ranofer's mind as if he had spoken it aloud. Slowly his eyes turned toward the gate, barely visible in the shadows of the wall.

If I followed him *now*, he thought, I could find out.

For an instant he did not move, only stared toward the gate while visions of *khefts* and horrors paraded before his eyes. Then he rose slowly to his feet and stole toward the gate. There he paused again, trembling, before he reached out for the latch. The gate swung open. Another dreadful pause and Ranofer stepped out into the street.

It looked utterly strange at this hour. The moon had set already, and the darkness was profound; not a torch flickered anywhere, not a gleam of lamplight shone from any house. Straight above were the stars, but their brilliance served only to emphasize the blackness of Egypt here below. What faint light they shed fell gloomily upon some roof corner or a waving strand of vine, transforming familiar daytime shapes to eerily unfamiliar phantoms. Gebu was not in sight.

I waited too long, Ranofer thought. He could be streets away by this time, and I don't know which way he went.

A voice inside him said, *Coward! You're simply making excuses.*

But I promised the Ancient I would never follow at night, Ranofer told the voice. I gave my word.

Coward. Here is your chance, at last, and you're afraid to take it. You're afraid!

Yes, I'm afraid, Ranofer thought desperately. But he could not endure the voice any longer. Tucking his head down as far as it would go between his hunched-up shoulders, he darted down the black street in the direction of the river. Whether it was the right direction or not he had no idea. Gebu might have gone the opposite way or followed one of a dozen crooked alleys across the city, toward Wenamon's house. Yes! Would he not have done that? Ranofer whirled and doubled back, casting a shrinking look over his shoulder as he did so. He saw nothing but blackness, heard nothing but the light staccato of his own frightened feet.

I must say a charm, he thought as he peered through the darkness for the darker rectangle which would be an alley's entrance, turning his eyes every instant to this side and that for fear some unknown thing would pounce upon him if he did not keep watch. "*Avaunt, ye dead man,*" he whispered hastily, "*who comes in the darkness, who enters stealthily, with nose behind, face turned backwards.*" The whisper changed to an uncontrollable chattering of teeth as Ranofer halted beside the narrow panel of blackness he was seeking. The alley was darker than the street, much darker and much more frightening, if that were possible. Gingerly he stepped into it. "*Avaunt, ye dead woman—who comes in the d-darkness—who enters stealthily, with—with nose behind, f-face turned backwards.*" The very words he was saying frightened him into a drenching sweat, they conjured up so clearly the horrors that might

be creeping up behind him now, this minute, or lurking behind that object near the wall, whatever it was, or hovering just over his head with withered hands stretching out to seize him.

Ranofer whirled in a panic to stare behind him and above him, at the same time stumbling back away from the unknown object near the wall. At that instant three things happened. A blow behind his knees knocked his feet from under him and sent him sprawling; something soft and bodiless rushed past him even while sharp, claw-like fingers seized his shoulders in a dozen different places; and the night was rent by a wild and eerie screech.

Ranofer tried to scream but he could not, or else he screamed and could not hear it over the hideous reverberations of that other noise. He tore himself free of the clawing fingers, half-fell, half-threw himself out of the alley, and by the time the last shivering wail had died away was tugging at his own gate. One last agonized glance backward as he flung it open showed him a lean, gliding shape on the top of a wall, silhouetted against the stars. Then the gate slammed behind him.

He leaned against it, trembling all over and too weak to walk another step. After a while he went shakily to his mat and dropped upon it. It took him some time to quiet his breathing, longer to stop trembling, and longer still to remember some fleeting familiarity about that gliding shape he had seen. For a while his mind would not accept it. Then a cat called from somewhere down the street, a low and quavering, drawn-out wail. Ranofer's hair lifted in a cold tremor of recognition, which was followed by burning shame. Could it have been a cat, only a *cat*, from which he had fled as if it were a demon? No, impossible!

Remember the blow behind the knees, the bodiless something rushing past him, the clawing fingers. His shoulders still stung from the scratches; when he put his hand to them he could feel the little welts. He felt again, frowning. They felt remarkably like thorn scratches. And a cat, if he had stumbled back upon it and it had bounded away, might have hit him behind the knees as it escaped. Its fur, as it rushed past him, would have felt exactly like a bodiless Something touching him.

Aii, what a coward you are! Ranofer told himself disgustedly. You shied away from nothing, fell into a thornbush and frightened a cat as badly as it frightened you. Now you'll never find Gebu, he could be anywhere by this time.

Still, he could try. He went to the gate once more and opened it. The street was as black, as threatening, as enigmatic as before. There was no shape now upon that wall. Had it *really* been a cat? *Khefts* could take any shape they chose, any time they chose. Would a mere thornbush have felt *quite* so much like clutching fingers? Ranofer stared into the darkness, shivering.

Aye, perhaps it was a cat and a thornbush, he thought. And perhaps it was *not*. In any case, Gebu is gone.

He stepped back and closed the gate, making sure the latch caught securely. Just because there were cats in the world did not mean there were not *khefts*, also. One was as real as the other, and both were abroad at this hour. He did not care to encounter either again tonight.

Next time the hinges squeak, I will follow, Ranofer thought as he went back to his mat. The very next time.

There was no next time. For several nights he stayed awake as long as he could, but weariness always overtook

him long before the hour at which the hinges might have squeaked. He changed his tactics and went to sleep early, hoping that by that hour he might be sleeping lightly enough to wake at any noise.

Neither plan produced results. He suspected there was no noise to hear. After all, he thought exasperatedly, I cannot *make* the hinges squeak, even if I stay awake all night. It is simply that Gebu is not going out. He had mentioned nothing of his nocturnal fiasco to Heget or the Ancient, and now he was glad, very glad. It was enough to endure his own humiliating knowledge that if he had started after Gebu sooner, or pursued him faster, or been braver, all the mystery might have been unraveled now.

A fine spy I have turned out to be! Ranofer told himself. I am as great a bumbler as I am a coward. The Ancient was right. I would be better occupied in learning the stonecutter's trade as well as I can. It is at least a way to earn my bread when I am a man, and no doubt I shall never be a goldsmith.

Smothering the rage of protest that rose in him in spite of all reason, he set himself drearily to improving his skill at stonework, observing the methods of the craftsmen, trying to understand the running of the shop. When Pai sent him one morning to the scroll room and told him to set the shelves in order, he studied the drawings as he worked, noting the design for a further temple addition, comparing the plans for a royal shrine or two, and marking the variations in several tombs.

One of these latter drawings contained a detail he found in none of the others, either a truncated passage or a small room in a location which seemed either senseless or mistaken. He puzzled over it awhile, forcing himself to think

of possible explanations in spite of his usual boredom and utter lack of interest in what its purpose might be. None of the explanations fit, and he threw the scroll aside impatiently.

A moment later he picked it up. He was a stonecutter's apprentice and, tedious though it might be, he had resolved to learn his trade. He carried the scroll into the shop and looked around for Pai. Instead he saw Gebu, just straightening from his inspection of the finisher's progress on a limestone slab.

"Well?" Gebu grunted. "What do you want? Why are you standing there?"

"I want to ask a question of Pai, about this scroll."

"Ask it then. Of me. I am the master here."

Wishing he had thrown the scroll in the Nile, Ranofer silently unrolled it and pointed to the little chamber.

"This room, I do not understand its purpose."

Instead of an answer he got a blow on the head that sent him sprawling on the gritty floor.

"Impudent mongrell" Gebu flung the words at him like stones. "Why should you understand it? You'll do what you're told here, and nothing more, do you understand me?"

He leaned down, snatched the scroll from Ranofer's hand and thrust it into the folds of his sash. His face was contorted with rage; Ranofer had seldom seen him look more vicious. Dazed by the blow and the completely unexpected reaction he had provoked, Ranofer could only stare.

"Up with you!" Gebu snapped, digging the copper-sheathed toe of his sandal into the boy's ribs. "Back to work! And keep your questions to yourself hereafter."

He strode off across the shop and Ranofer escaped to the scroll room, consumed with resentment and bitterly resolved that he was through with trying to be of value in the shop. He finished the day in a silence as sullen as that of the other apprentice, Nebre, whose stony indifference to men and work alike he was beginning to understand very well indeed. In the late afternoon Wenamon came into the shop and glided in his chilling, catlike way toward the statue base Gebu was measuring. Watching the two from beneath sulkily lowered lids, Ranofer saw Gebu walk quickly to meet him and draw him aside. They conferred a moment, then the scroll was produced from Gebu's sash and transferred to Wenamon's.

Hateful thing, Ranofer thought as he stretched the red-chalked string across a block of granite. I hope it brings both of them bad luck. I hope the roof of that imbecile little room falls in on them while they are building it. I hope it is a stupid mistake they have made in their stupid drawings, and that the owner of the tomb will have them lashed, and refuse to pay, and discredit them in all the City of the Dead, and that Pharaoh hears of it and sends them far away into the desert to labor in the gold mines. *That* should please Gebu, greedy thief that he is.

Unfortunately, all the ill wishes he could invent were not powerful enough to rid him of Gebu's stubborn presence here in Thebes. Ranofer forced the scroll and his own anger to the back of his mind; it only made him hotter on an already oppressive day. That evening after work he met Heqet in the thicket and told him about it.

"I only asked a question," he finished sulkily. "And I get a cuff that makes my ears ring all day. He won't even let me learn *his* craft, much less the one I want."

"Perhaps there is something secret about that little room, something he did not want you to find out."

"Nay, how could there be? It was drawn there on the scroll, anyone could see it."

"But did you not say he gave the scroll to Wenamon, later?"

"Aye, but there is nothing unusual in that. I told you, they work together often. Let's not talk about it any more, I am sick of the subject."

The subject was not closed, however. Later that evening, much later, for he had even less desire than usual to go home and had dawdled about until almost night-fall, he opened the gate of the courtyard to find Gebu waiting for him, grim-jawed. Hoping it was only the coppers he wanted, Ranofer went directly to him and put them in his hand. He turned quickly toward the store-room but Gebu spun him around.

"Now. I want an explanation of that question you asked today. I want no lies, either. Make haste, speak!"

"I only asked the purpose of that little room. What harm is there in that?"

One of Gebu's fists rose more swiftly than Ranofer could dodge, and struck him a glancing blow across the mouth which nevertheless felt as if it had loosened half his teeth.

"I know what you asked! I want to know why you asked it!"

"Because I was trying to learn your hateful trade!" Ranofer shouted. "I was trying to grow skillful, I was trying to understand how tombs are made and shrines are built! Never fear, I am finished with that now! I intend to do what I am told and not the smallest bit more!"

He fell silent, trembling with anger and with fright at his own temerity. One did not shout at Gebu without paying for it somehow, now or later. No matter, Ranofer thought. Let him beat me! It is worth it sometimes.

However, Gebu only stared at him fixedly, the one eye blinking. There was no possible way of telling what was going on behind the stony mask of his face. After several minutes that seemed a lifetime each, he turned away, walked to the gate and went out.

Ranofer's knees gave way from weariness and discouragement. He sat down where he was, on the rough stones of the pavement, and did not think at all for a while. After some time he became conscious of a trickle of something on his chin. He touched it gingerly and drew his hand away smeared with blood. His split lip was beginning to swell painfully. He got to his feet, walked to the storeroom and tugged open the door, feeling the saliva pour into his mouth as the fragrance of grain and salted fish came out to meet him. Stepping into the gloom, he felt his way from shelf to shelf, encountering the curve of bowls, the rough edge of a basket, the cool, sweating sides of the big water jar. Dipping a mug full, he splashed water freely on his lip and chin before he drank. There were a few crumbs in the basket and an onion in one of the bowls, but Gebu had left nothing else—on purpose, Ranofer was certain. The onion was small, but he ate it, thankful for part of Heqet's lunch at noon, then poured the crumbs carefully into his palm and licked it clean. Far from satisfying him, the sketchy meal only whetted his appetite; moreover, the onion had made his lip smart and burn. It was swelling rapidly and felt as big as a duck's egg.

More water eased his throbbing lip but not his hunger. He left the storeroom, banging the door behind him, and started for his sleeping mat under the tree. Halfway there an audacious thought stopped him. Slowly he turned toward the stairs. Gebu had frequently threatened to beat him insensible if he ever set foot in that upper room. On the other hand, Ranofer was in the mood to ignore all threats and defy Gebu if he could. Moreover, he was ready to wager his one *shenti* that there was food hidden away up there—and Gebu was gone.

Next instant he was creeping toward the stairs.

It was almost full dark, but the moon-god Thoth's heavenly barque, which revealed its high-prowed boat shape clearly these nights of its waning, was beginning to shed a gentle radiance over the littered pavement. Keeping well in the deep shadows next the wall, Ranofer hurried up the worn and slanting steps, his mind full of enticing images: honey cakes, a whole keg of dried fish, a handful of sweet, sticky dates. He reached the passage and moved to the closed door at its end. There he paused, breathing hard, his ears straining for any sound below. Then he tugged at the bolt. It resisted; he tugged harder, bracing his shoulder against the door. At last it gave way with a jolt and the door swung inward.

The thin squeal of the leather hinges made him shiver in spite of himself. He stepped into the room.

It was windowless, like all Egyptian dwellings; but just over the level of Ranofer's head the walls ended, and widely spaced wooden posts rose from them to support the ceiling several feet above. Through the space thus open to the fresh air of evening, moonlight poured in, dimly lighting Gebu's frayed sleeping mat and baked-clay

headrest, a stool or two, a box in one corner and a battered wooden chest in another.

Ranofer tried the box first. He found nothing there but a kohl pot half full of the black eye paint, a copper mirror, a razor and a little jar of the ointment Gebu had been perfuming himself with lately. The chest looked no more promising; he fumbled hastily among sandals, headcloths, a couple of coarse white linen *shentis* four sizes larger than the one wrapped around his own narrow hips, and several of the new, fine-woven ones. There was something hard and curving in a corner, wrapped in a scrap of cotton rag. It might be a jug of honey. He tugged it out, jerked the cloth away impatiently and went numb all over with the shock of what he saw.

There in his hand lay a gold goblet more beautiful than the sun.

For a moment he stood perfectly still. Then he sank to his knees, for his legs had suddenly become too weak to support him. In a shaft of moonlight he examined his find more closely. It was pure gold, exquisitely fashioned in the shape of a lotus blossom. An inlaid band around its rim was of priceless silver, and so was its delicate stem. It was the work of some master who was Zau's equal or superior, and worth a prince's ransom.

Gebu had stolen it, that was certain. But where? From whom? There was not a goldhouse in the City of the Dead that produced such work as this. Only Zau could have made it, and Ranofer was growing more and more uncertain whether even Zau could have, or would have. There was something about it that was different from the work one saw nowadays; the manner of finishing the inside of

the base, for instance. Perhaps it had been made long ago, handed down to some rich noble from his father.

Ranofer bent closer. Was that a bit of picture writing, etched into the golden curve of a petal? He twisted it to catch the light and saw a group of hieroglyphics enclosed in an oval line. The sign of royalty! Just so were the names of kings always written, with an oval line about them. Had that Accursed One stolen this from the palace itself? But how under heaven could anyone have done that?

Perhaps he could read the name, if the light was sufficient and if he had not forgotten too many of the little pictures he had learned at the scribe's school. Slowly, one by one, he spelled out the hieroglyphs: THUTMOSE-NEFER-KHEPERU.

Ranofer's hand grew slowly icy, while he knelt staring at the goblet as if it had turned to an adder in his grasp. He read the inscription again, and still again, but there was no mistake. This treasure bore the name of Thutmose the Conqueror, Pharaoh of Egypt *over a hundred years ago*.

Gebu had robbed a tomb. There was no other explanation.

Suddenly all Ranofer wanted was to get the goblet back into the chest and himself out of this evil room. Clumsy with fright and haste, he dropped the cotton rag three times before he was able to wrap it about the goblet as it had been before. He knew very well his life would not be worth a copper if Gebu came home at this moment.

He thrust the bundle deep into the chest and with shaking hands scattered the *shentis* and headcloths over it, shut the battered lid and sprang for the stairs. As he did so his bare feet grated on some gritty substance in

the doorway. He stopped, peering down at scattered particles of dried clay on the moonlit floor. What was this? Some trap. He whirled to examine the bolt.

Only then did he see that it had been sealed with a lump of clay and marked with a clear imprint of Gebu's scarab ring, an imprint which was now half broken away by the door's having been opened. One glance and Gebu would know he had been in this room.

Chapter XI

IT was a sound on the street outside that finally roused Ranofer. He sprang into the dark passageway and flattened himself against the wall, listening to footsteps draw nearer, nearer, then pass and begin to recede down the street. Letting out his breath with a rush, he stumbled back to the door. Somehow he must mend that seal.

He knelt to examine it. It had broken in the middle when he forced open the bolt. A lump still clung to the bolt itself, and a smaller one to the socket on the door-frame. When the door was closed a jagged crack would show plainly between the two lumps. The clay that had filled it was now scattered in dry crumbs on the floor.

Standing in the passage, he closed the door gently, and in the process shut off every glimmer of the moonlight, which was all coming from Gebu's room. He could feel the crack but he could no more see it than he could see through the wall at his side. There was no help for it, he must have a light. He had no idea where Gebu kept his fire drill and tinder; they had not turned up in any box or chest in his room. It would take time to search for them, more time to kindle a torch, and time was what Ranofer

did not have. He must fetch a light. That meant venturing outside into the street and the *kheft*-haunted night.

This time there is a moon, at least, he thought. And it is not really so late or dark or silent as that other night. This time I shall be braver, I *have* to be. And there *has* to be a torch burning somewhere.

Quickly he opened the door again, gathered the scattered crumbs into a little pile with the aid of the moonlight. It was dim enough at best, and he had to feel anxiously into the shadows to be sure he had not missed some morsel of clay. Then he flew down the stairs and into the nearest of the storerooms. Again by touch, he located the oil pot, in which several torches soaked, head down. He snatched one and, shivering with dread, forced his reluctant feet across the courtyard and out the gate. A glance showed one torch burning in a wall bracket by a doorway far down the canyonlike street. He ran silently toward it, expecting each moment to hear the eerie flutter of a *kheft's* invisible wings, or feel its fleshless fingers on his throat. Once he glimpsed a moving shadow near an alleyway and sped faster, telling himself forcefully that it was a cat. Cat or *kheft*, by the time he reached the distant doorway he was weak with fright, but he thrust his torch into the flame, made himself wait while it caught well and, whispering what he could remember of the incantation against evil spirits, stumbled back the way he had come.

Safe once more inside the court, he leaned a moment, panting, against the wall. He had fetched the light, he had not been seen, the *khefts*—and cats—had stayed away. Now if only Gebu did not come back and catch him at this.

He hurried upstairs to the door and thrust the torch into the wall bracket beside it. Scooping the clay crumbs

into his palm, he spat on them, softened and mixed them with a careful finger, then pressed them into the crack and smoothed the edges as well as he could. A sliver of palm fiber off the torch handle made a poor enough engraving tool, but it was all he had. With it he scratched in the missing bits of the scarab mark. It was done, but his heart sank as he saw how crude the patching looked. It would never pass Gebu's inspection.

I must run away, he thought. Gebu will kill me, I must go quickly.

But where? He had no place to go, and the night was thick with dangers.

Stumbling with fatigue and with the trembling weakness which follows fright, he went downstairs once more, extinguished the torch and replaced it in the oil jar, then flung himself on the familiar roughness of his mat. He would rest here just a moment. Then, *khefts* or no *khefts*, he must slip away through the streets and perhaps steal on board a Nile boat bound for Menfe or Abydos in the morning.

Perhaps an hour later, a sound in the darkness brought him bolt upright. Had he slept? He must get out of here, now, at once! He sprang to his feet, then froze at the sound of a muffled crash upstairs, followed by a stream of oaths. Gebu was home, he had seen the seal, it was too late!

He ran toward the gate, only to whirl and run back again as he heard the upstairs door crash back against the wall and Gebu's staggering footsteps sound in the passage. Gebu was very drunk; he stumbled and half fell down the stairs, cursing at the top of his voice. Ranofer shrank into the darkest corner of the courtyard, wishing

he could disappear into the bricks of the wall. He heard an angry, sleepy voice from the next house. "Quiet, son of a pig! Can't a decent man rest?" Gebu roared some blurred profanity in answer. Ranofer, pressing still closer to the wall, watched the gleam of moonlight on Gebu's *shenti* as he wavered across the courtyard and into the storeroom. There was the familiar sound of a mug clinking against the water jar, then a tinkling crash of broken pottery. Gebu emerged and stood a moment, swaying. Then, miracle of miracles, he staggered to the stairs and climbed unsteadily up them. A moment later the door of the upper room banged shut.

Stunned at first, Ranofer gradually realized that he was safe. Gebu had not even noticed the seal, he had been too drunk.

The boy's breath escaped in a quivering sigh. He left his corner and went back gratefully to his mat, thanking all the gods of Egypt for the invention of barley beer. Weary, sore and still supperless, he fell at once into exhausted sleep.

He was roused at daybreak by the usual rude dig of Gebu's sandal in his ribs. "Up with you! Make haste to the shop. You can buy a loaf on the way." Gebu tossed a copper to the paving.

Ranofer groped for it and, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles, stumbled across the courtyard still half asleep. The cold water on his face helped wake him, and a careless touch on his hurt lip jogged his memory. Something important had happened. Suddenly he was wide awake, remembering everything—the seal, his fear, the golden goblet. Last night he had been too concerned with im-

mediate problems to think about the goblet. Now it filled his mind.

He hurried down the Street of the Crooked Dog and into the dusty thoroughfare, which was stained pink with dawn and already dotted with the scurrying figures of men on their way to work. He knew he must eat; he was too foggy with hunger now to think what this discovery meant to him.

Near the Street of the Sailmakers he spied the baker's boy, Kai, emerging from his master's shop with a laden basket on his head. Kai turned at Ranofer's hail and lowered his basket.

"Yesterday's baking," he remarked laconically.

"No matter," Ranofer retorted. "I have yesterday's hunger."

He snatched one of the flat, round loaves and bit ravenously through the glazed crust, handing Kai his copper.

"You get two for a copper when they're yesterday's," Kai said. He handed over another loaf, started to raise the basket to his head again and hesitated. "Take three, nobody need know of it. You had best put Nile water on that broken lip of yours."

With a sympathetic glance Kai hurried off. Ranofer tucked the third loaf into his sash for midday and went on, more slowly now, toward the shop, eating as he walked.

It is the most important thing that ever happened, finding that goblet, he was thinking. I will be free now, and Gebu will hang head downward from the palace wall! It is right, it is just. He stole a treasure from the Precious Habitation of that great king. That is a terrible, evil thing to do. I will tell someone right away. I, Ranofer the son

of Thutra, will make the crime known, and then the soldiers will come out of the palace and snatch Gebu, and he will be gone forever, he will never beat me any more and I will be free of him and free of the stone shop and everything will be like a wonderful dream. All Egypt will thank me. Pharaoh himself will thank me! He will summon me to his courtyard for the Shower of Gold, he will hang golden collars around my neck and order flowers strewn in front of me and tell Zau he must take me as his pupil. I will be rich and happy and eat roast waterfowl every day. I have only to tell this thing.

An old, familiar question broke in on his daydreams. *How* was he to tell of it? Take the goblet from the chest and show it to a soldier? But he would be accused of stealing it himself. Go to some noble, then, or seek an audience with a priest of Amon? Impossible. An insignificant stone-cutter's apprentice would get no farther than the first guard. Even if he managed to tell someone, there would be Gebu to deal with. Would anyone take an apprentice's word against his master's? No, it would be he, not Gebu, who would end up hanging from the palace wall. It was all the same as before, when he wanted to tell about the wineskins. The questions had no answers, the problem no solution.

Nevertheless he worried it as a dog worries a bone while he doled out cutting sand for old Zahotep's drill. Suddenly, at midmorning, the idea came like a flash of sunshine. Zau! Zau the goldsmith was known at the palace itself. The soldiers would trust his word. But would Zau trust Ranofer's word? Ranofer was not sure. Still, Zau might believe if he held the goblet in his hand. Surely

he would believe then! The first step was to steal the goblet out of the chest. . . .

"The sand, boy! The sand!" Zahotep's voice crackled with impatience. "Do you think this drill is made to toy with like a lotus flower? If Pai sees me idle here . . ."

Ranofer hurried forward with the pinch of sand. Zahotep set the bit of the drill into the hole again, still grumbling. "If the master were here, I'll wager you'd need no reminding."

And where was the master? Ranofer thought as he stepped back. Gebu had not appeared this morning, though it had been his custom lately to come early to the shop and stay most of the day. He might show up at midday, but if he did not, the noon hour would be a perfect chance to slip away home and take the goblet.

Gebu did not show up at midday. After waiting a last nervous few minutes, Ranofer wandered casually from the shop and, once out of sight, ran like a hare. He shrank from the very thought of breaking another door seal and repeating the nerve-racking process of mending it, but there was no other way.

Breathless, he reached the courtyard gate and pressed his ear against it. All was still. Cautiously he stepped inside, padded across the empty court and listened again. Then he climbed the steps, silent as a wraith. Immediately he knew that Gebu was gone, for the door at the far end of the passage was bolted on the outside. But, wonder of wonders, it was not sealed! The gods were with him.

An instant later he was inside the room and searching frantically through the wooden chest. The goblet was gone.

Dazed by the collapse of all his hopes yet another time,

Ranofer started back to the shop. So certain had he been of finding the goblet waiting for him that even now he could almost feel it in his hands. Where had it gone? Maybe into some melting crucible, though it made him sick all through to imagine it; maybe into a bale of linen in the hold of some northbound Nile boat, probably Setma's, to be sold in some city downriver, or even in Crete or Phoenicia or Mycenae. In any case he would never see it again and soon Gebu would be wearing a fine new arm band and swaggering when he walked.

From habit, Ranofer's feet took him along the thoroughfare, past the lane that led between the flower fields toward the river; but his mind was so full of the goblet and his despair that when the Ancient suddenly appeared from the lane and hurried toward him, he had to stare a moment to realize who it was. Then he wanted only to escape. He could not tell anyone about the goblet, not yet, perhaps not ever.

"Oh! I—I cannot come to the thicket today," he stammered. "It grows late—I must go back to the shop—tell Heget I will see him another time." He tried to edge around the Ancient, but the old man caught his arm.

"Heget has come and gone, young one. I waited in hopes of a glimpse of you. I have something to report. Ayel!" The Ancient chuckled as Ranofer's attention suddenly riveted on him. "I've been spying again, without really intending it, I confess, and this time I saw something. I did indeed."

"You saw something?" Ranofer repeated. The goblet? he thought. Could he have seen the goblet? Could he know where it is?

"I saw a quarrel, a bitter one."

Ranofer, who had opened his mouth to ask straight out about the goblet, closed it again abruptly. The Ancient nodded in a conspiratorial manner, winked his one eye, and chuckled again as he led Ranofer into the lane where his donkey was snuffling morosely along the baked roadside ditch in search of a blade of something green. "Come, I must keep an eye on Lotus while I tell you. It was Setma and that Gebu of yours who were quarreling. Only an hour ago, it was, on the edge of the papyrus marsh close by the fish docks. I was there cutting my day's load, no more than three cubits away from them, though they could not see me for the reeds. *Haii!* But they were angry! They all but came to blows, and I wished they had. That would have been a fine treat, now wouldn't it, young one?"

"But what did they say, Ancient? What was it they quarreled about?"

"Gold, my boy. What else? When two rogues like that fall out, you may be sure it is over the price of some skulduggery one is to do for the other. I think that young scamp Heqet is right. Setma has been taking whatever Gebu steals and selling it for him in another city. But it's finished now."

"Finished? Ancient, what did you hear them *say?*"

"They whispered, young one. They hissed and spat and growled at each other, but all in whispers, angry as they were. I caught only a few words. One was 'never'—that was your stonecutter—another was 'dangerous' or 'danger.' It was Setma saying that. Then Gebu said, 'A third part, no more, *no more!*' There was more hissing and snarling, and a few fine names they called each other, but I heard nothing more of interest until Gebu swung away

and walked past the edge of the marsh so close to me I could have touched him. 'You're finished,' he was saying. 'There are other captains on the river.' I stood quiet as an image, and he went by me and away toward the docks. When I looked again Setma was gone too, and good riddance to them both."

"It seems quite clear what they were saying," Ranofer said finally.

"Aye, they've parted. That is certain. No doubt Setma raised his price and Gebu would have none of it."

So what of the goblet? Ranofer was thinking. What will he do with it? "Did—did Gebu—did they have anything with them?" he asked cautiously.

"Anything with them? Oh, gold, you mean. Nay, I think not, young one. I saw no pouch nor packet of any kind. Of course the reeds were in my way. Gebu carried something under his arm, but it looked to be a bundle of old clothes, nothing more."

"I see," Ranofer said, as well as he could for his heart jumping into his throat. A bundle of old clothes such as he had found in the chest last night? A bundle of old *shentis* with the golden goblet inside it?

He left the Ancient to his afternoon's reed cutting and hurried back to the shop. Gebu was not there. He had not been there during the midday, either, as Ranofer found out by casual questioning of Zahotep. He did not appear all day, though Ranofer watched for him constantly, his head buzzing with questions as he worked. At the day's end he hurried home, but Gebu was not there, either. A glance up the stairway showed the door at the top still closed but unsealed, exactly as it had been at noon.

What if he is gone for good? Ranofer thought as he walked slowly toward the storeroom. Nay, he could not be. He would not leave while he is growing rich, while there is so much stealing to be done. The whole Valley of the Tombs, with all the treasure in them.

He shivered and stepped into the storeroom. If only someone would catch Gebu! Suppose a soldier should see him sneaking into the Valley, or coming out of it with stolen gold, or should catch him walking about the streets right now, with that bundle under his arm. Suppose someone *had* caught him! It was not impossible, was it? It would explain his absence from the shop all day, his absence now. Suppose he was in Pharaoh's prison this minute, or being dragged before the judges, or . . .

Happy possibilities were still racing each other through Ranofer's mind when he heard the gate crash open and Gebu's heavy footsteps start across the courtyard. Slowly Ranofer put down the water jug, feeling his whole spirit wilt and the old burdens settle down on him again. The footsteps had almost reached the stair when something occurred to him. Darting to the storeroom door, he peered out cautiously. Gebu was just turning to climb the stair but, in the instant before the angle of the stairway hid him, Ranofer glimpsed a bundle under his arm.

So he had brought the goblet home again, because of the quarrel with Setma, no doubt, because he had so far found no other riverman who would smuggle his treasure out of Thebes. It might be days before he found another, it might be weeks, and meanwhile the goblet would have to stay in that room upstairs, hidden in the chest.

The gods have given me another chance, Ranofer thought joyously. And *this* time I will not bungle things!

I will not wait for any days to pass. I will take the goblet tonight, as soon as he goes out.

Gebu came down the stairs again almost immediately, carrying a packet of bread loaves which he had evidently bought on his way home, for they smelled deliciously of new-baked crust. He paused when he saw Ranofer standing in the courtyard.

"You're early home, for a change," he growled.

"I have only just come," Ranofer said, hoping the lie would be believed. He did not care to set Gebu's suspicious mind working on any unusual behavior of his. He must remember hereafter to come and go exactly as always, at the same hours, in the same way.

Evidently Gebu did believe, for he merely grunted and walked on to the storeroom, jerking his head for Ranofer to follow. There he untied his packet, and leaving the loaves scattered on a shelf, broke the seal on the barrel of dried fish, extracted two and put them on an earthen plate. Ranofer, who had expected to be asked at once for his coppers, stood holding them in his hand and watching hungrily as Gebu resealed the barrel, put a couple of loaves on the plate and, taking it with him, started out of the storeroom.

"Don't you want my coppers?" Ranofer asked in surprise.

Gebu halted, turned with an oddly abstracted air and held out his hand for the coins. An instant later he turned back again, gave Ranofer one of the fish, went on to the next storeroom, emerging an instant later with an oil-soaked torch. Without another glance at Ranofer, who was standing astounded with a whole dried fish in his possession and the knowledge of three bread loaves un-

guarded on the shelf, he climbed the stairs and banged the door of his room behind him. In a moment Ranofer heard the whining scrape of his firedrill as he worked to kindle the torch.

Obviously Gebu had a great deal on his mind or he would never have forgotten the coppers or those other loaves or permitted his gutter-waif half brother to keep a whole fish for himself. Ranofer thought he could guess the causes of this strange preoccupation, and his guesses gave him considerable satisfaction. It could not be comfortable, having a stolen treasure in one's possession and no way to get rid of it. It could not be pleasant, either, to realize one had made an enemy of a rogue like Setma, and to wonder how soon and in what way that rogue might inform against one.

Ranofer thought about that a moment, hopefully, then decided he dared not count on Setma's malice to help his own cause. It might be a long time before Setma found a way to inform on Gebu without informing on himself as well, and during that time Gebu might have found another smuggler, and the goblet would be gone.

Nay, tonight is my chance, Ranofer told himself. Let him seal the door or not. As soon as he leaves for the wineshop I'll go up those stairs, then I'll take the goblet and run to Zau, even if it's midnight. I can wait.

Meanwhile, he had a feast to eat and plenty to save for morning, and the enjoyable knowledge that Gebu had a few burdens of his own for once.

Hours later he finally accepted the dismaying certainty that Gebu had not the slightest intention of leaving his room at all that night.

Very well, then, he told himself uneasily. I will come

here tomorrow, at midday. The goblet will still be in his room tomorrow, it must be! Let him hide it ever so well, I will find it somehow.

He woke the next morning just in time to see Gebu cross the courtyard and let himself out the gate, with the bundle of *shentis* under his arm.

Ranofer was up in a moment and after him, pausing only long enough to assure himself of a safe margin of distance between them. Gebu walked down the Street of the Crooked Dog toward the river, turned on a broad street leading southward, passed the fish docks and ferry landing, with Ranofer never losing sight of him a moment. Presently he turned again, at an all-too-familiar corner, and in another five minutes was walking straight into the stonecutting shop.

Ranofer stopped in a nearby doorway and stared after him, bewildered. Of all the moves Gebu might have made, this was the least to be expected. Why would Gebu take the goblet to his shop? How did he dare to? Where would he hide it? The whole idea seemed insane.

As soon as Ranofer felt reasonably safe in doing so, he walked quietly into the shop too, trying to appear as if he had merely come to work as on every other day. He did not risk so much as a glance in search of Gebu, but shortly after Pai had set him working at his first task, he saw Gebu emerging from the scroll room. His hands were empty, swinging by his sides. There was no sign of the bundle. He walked straight through the shop, spoke to Pai a moment at the entrance, then vanished into the street.

It was an hour before Pai needed a plan from the scroll room. The instant he bellowed the familiar order, Ranofer was flying across the gritty floor as fast as his feet would

move. Once inside the little room, he looked frantically for some sign of the bundle, some place it could be hidden. There was nothing. In the dusky light that filtered through and under the roof thatch, the shelves looked the same as ever, several tiers of them lining three of the walls, and a cupboard beside the door on the fourth. Ranofer looked more closely at the cupboard. It was as dusty as everything else in the room, and its small doors were not sealed. Nothing could be in it except tools and cutting sand, as always. He looked to make sure, opening the doors gingerly with his fingernails so that he would leave no signs of his prying in the dust. Inside were tools and cutting sand, no more.

Still, Gebu had come into this room with the bundle, and come out without it.

"Ranofer!" came Pai's bellow from the shop.

Ranofer snatched the scroll he had been sent to fetch, and ran. He would look again, he would search whenever he got the chance. It must be there, it must, it must! he told himself, ready to burst into frustrated tears. But where? How could anyone hide it on those open shelves? It was not in the cupboard, it was too big to thrust into a scroll.

Later that day he searched again, prying hastily through piles of scrolls and hastily restacking them, staring defeated into that dusty, innocent cupboard. Gebu did not return to the shop that day; and when he came home at sunset he had no bundle with him. For all Ranofer could find of it, bundle and goblet alike had vanished into the air.