

IF ONLY TO TASTE HER AGAIN

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THE WINDS WERE blowing low and remained warm when our five boats returned across the wine-dark waters of the Red Sea. It was late in the season – the winds should have begun to cool by then, for it was later than any of us planned, but the Queen of Punt had been exceptionally generous in her welcome of us. The days spent in her kingdom seemed longer than an age, the nights filled with wine, figs and the attention of slim, young boys. The Queen spared us no expense, so that we might return to Djeser-Djeseru with riches none expected; so that she might receive the grand favours of Hatshepsut, the King's Great Wife, the Lady of the Two Lands.

Our boats came into port with great fanfare. Though it was late into the night, Hatshepsut had roused a great portion of her court to bid us welcome home. Torches burned bright like stars to illuminate a path across the water for us and musicians sounded their rattles and bone clappers the nearer we drew. The oarsmen caught the rhythm and drew us closer to our homeland.

As it would slowly become known, these attendants and musicians had lived in the port for some weeks now, rotating their shifts so that some would be prepared when we appeared. From Punt, there had been little reasonable way to send word when our return was delayed. Did Hatshepsut believe the Queen of Punt had eaten us? She was a beautifully round queen, to be certain, but we had not witnessed such behaviours during our stay with her.

These attendants who welcomed us were weary-eyed. My own brother stood among the musicians and tucked his bone clapper away, to slip his hand around my arm and help me from the boat. The land seemed to rock under my feet, even with his support. He was tall, my brother; I would always remember him as such, even when the horror took him.

He made only one comment as to our late return, but there was no reproach in his low voice. Perhaps there was concern, but I said nothing of it, only nodding as the men I had traveled with these long weeks began to unload the cargo from the ships. Five boats, each packed to brimming with boxes of stone and baskets of reed; tall trees of myrrh and frankincense with their roots bound and kept wet during our journey, so that we might plant

them for the Lady of the Two Lands. Lapis and silver, panther skins and elephant tusks. Beautiful lengths of cassia were tied in fat bundles; soon, the cassia would perfume the halls of the court, wending its way into my own rooms.

Hatshepsut welcomed us at the palace, when, at last, we had made our long way there. She stood at the end of the long stairs which led to the temple. I could see only pride in her stance, the still-warm wind that carried us home now caressing the Queen's fine linen gown. Her dark hair was tightly wrapped, gleaming with oils. When she drew me into her arms, to whisper a welcome into my ear, I could smell these oils. Warmed by her body, they smelled of lotus and olive. I pressed my own lips against her cheek, tasting a trace of those oils. They tasted of home.

The world would speak of this journey and triumphant return for lifetimes to come, she told me, as the offerings were carried up the terraced walkways and situated so that Hatshepsut might explore each at her leisure. She stepped from my side to do just that, opening one reed basket to trail her hands through the grain inside. There came then a low whisper – perhaps from the grain as it slipped through her fingers – but later, I would have cause to doubt that. She opened the boxes and baskets at random, the air seeming to warm around us as she did. A shiver still skated over my skin, and I felt strangely sick, as Hatshepsut kneeled before a box wrought from gold and opened its chained lid.

The scent of myrrh lifted into the warm air, the box packed with gleaming globules of incense. It was perhaps the fatigue that gnawed at me; it was the length of the journey and the stresses encountered therein. These things combined to assault me then, to make my vision darken and fade. There was that low whisper, again – *Grain through the Pharaoh's fingers*, I told myself – but that sound rolled across my shoulders, down my spine, and then reached for Hatshepsut.

Perhaps she felt nothing, for Hatshepsut moved away without comment. It was easy to tell myself then that I was exhausted and fully believe it. Yet, I stayed by my Pharaoh's side as she moved down the line of baskets, as she reached a hand up to stroke a low-hanging branch of myrrh on one of the many trees. She began calling out then, orders to her men to see the trees planted in straight lines along the colonnades, by the pools of water. It was my brother who came then, drawing his hand around my arm to pull me gently away. He walked us back toward that golden box and, though I tried to pull myself up short, I was too tired.

Beside that damnable box we stood. Too long, too long, my brother spoke of things that felt inconsequential when compared to the box at our feet. The box seemed to radiate a heat, a presence, a *something* which reached for me

again and teased the hair at the nape of my neck. It was unholy and dark, this thing, and could my brother not feel it? He laughed low as he spoke of events that had transpired in my absence. I cared for none of them, wanted only to get away from the box.

When I could break free, it seemed too late. I felt somehow dirty and hopeless, my throat closed tightly. Nausea wrapped itself around my belly, sinking claws into my hips. I fairly ran for my rooms, brushing past concerned friends. Water, I wanted water and cried that everyone stay away, leave me be, give me only silence! Yet, once within my rooms, I found no sanctuary there. The walls seemed largely foreign, the floor uneven, and the fire sparked when I walked too near its warmth. I clawed at the linen which seemed keen on strangling me. Finally, bare of its treachery, I lunged for the pool of water at the room's far end. It looked nothing like water, then – it looked like liquid galena, black and thick, and I sank into it, onto my knees, wholly under the cool embrace.

There, I somehow slept.

In my slumber, the warm stroke of brush and fingers seemed to weave a complex lattice around my body. Strands of light and vein wrapped me and held me down. Small, strong hands pressed me into the tile at the bottom of the pool, but it didn't occur to me to struggle against these restraints. *Let me come through you*, a voice seemed to say. This voice sounded like everyone I had ever loved, something dark and terrible, with a weight I could not fathom.

There was a sense of emptiness when I woke at the edge of the pool, hours later. The fire had burned to embers, the sky full-dark beyond the balcony. I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling, at its interlocking patterns of lotus and star, and breathed. The fatigue of the journey seemed to have left me and so, too, the strange sensation I'd had upon seeing that golden box.

The rooms were heavy with the scent of myrrh, which made me vaguely nauseated until, at last, I regained my feet and stood. I found fresh clothing, the cool linen a comfort over my skin, and painted my eyes with the darkest galena before I left my rooms. The halls were quiet yet, but I felt assured in my path. When I thought of the night before, there were strange absences in my memories, but I brushed these aside and focused instead on the tall form of my brother as he lay in his bed, breathing low like the warm wind outside.

Warm wind, warm water and the incessant whisper of grain through fingers. I reached for my brother with arms that seemed no longer like my own. My fingers wriggled and elongated, curled around his arm and his throat until the tapered ends vanished into his ebony hair. He was sweet – I could taste him through my fingers – sweet like roasted figs and dripping mango, and some buried part of me drank its fill, until this sweetness burst apart and

the shell of my brother shattered. Terrible fingers pasted him back together, blackened tongue sealing the seams until one could never tell what horror lurked within.

Amber sunlight spilled into the Pharaoh's rooms and over her shoulders by the time my brother approached her side. He had spent the morning making the brightest music for her, while she sorted through the gems and other stones the Queen of Punt had sent. She found great pleasure in everything that glittered with a hint of blue. She wanted to polish every bit of lapis and cover her body in a coat of it.

How beautiful she would look, my brother told her, which drew her darkening gaze. How dare he? The Pharaoh waved him off – foolish musician – but he came onward, bare feet silent against the floor. That old whisper tickled the back of my neck, ran down my arms and slithered against my belly the closer my brother came, though, when his hand befell the Pharaoh, the whisper fell silent. There seemed some strange fulfillment at only that touch.

The Pharaoh shrieked; my brother had begun to dissolve before her eyes. Those seams came apart and a thing that none of us could imagine broke out of him. A creature that seemed made of wine-dark water clawed its way up and out, discarding my brother as one might a robe of linen. My brother pooled against the floor, blood and water washing over the Pharaoh's feet, while this monstrosity lunged for our beloved Hatshepsut.

She pushed backward from the thing, her chair toppling. The Pharaoh's guards stepped forward, but they seemed baffled as to where they might attack the creature without harming Hatshepsut in the fray. The thing spilled her into the bounty of treasure from Punt, into baskets and boxes, into linens and incense. Crying, she crawled through the fortune and, all the while, the living horror stalked over her, reeking of the deepest Nile, black with fertile revulsion. Purple-black water oozed around them, soaking the Pharaoh's linen gown until she looked bruised. Many-limbed arms (Oh, they were the arms beneath the water of my pool, pressing with small, warm hands) latched onto her legs and pulled hard, bringing her back from the treasures, the gems and daggers and dishes. But, in her shaking hands, Hatshepsut held a broken ivory dish and she slashed its ragged edge against the grim ovoid head of the thing upon her.

The creature fell apart with a cry that felt to me like that voice, that dark and terrible voice. That scream seemed to reach deep inside of me, to curl around my heart and pull. As the creature flailed, still trying to reach the Pharaoh in its death, I crumpled to the floor. Now the guards rushed forward to Hatshepsut, hacking at each long, watery arm as it whipped free from her body. These arms came apart, splattering everyone within reach with a thick liquid that smelled to me like the stars. Clear, cold, stinging. Vast and empty.

The silence afterward was peculiar. The women in the room had leaped away from Hatshepsut, but now they moved forward; the drenched guards stepped warily back and made to secure the entries to the chamber. But it was too late, I thought, watching from narrowed eyes. Those small, warm hands pressed against my heart and that voice ... that fathomless voice ... whispered its plea in my ear. *Let me come through you.*

My gaze focused on the discarded skin of my brother, on the bloody footprints near the edge of the table. My tall and beautiful brother, with his hands that could make music. That blood called me as much as the voice did; that blood anchored me as much as those small hands. And my Pharaoh ... the Lady of the Two Lands ... struggling to her feet, unable to rise because her legs shook so terribly ... I ached for her, for the lotus and olive taste of her. It was that ache which became the seam, the seam which broke me apart with a scream that tried to shatter the heavens. *Let me come through you.*

I let it come, if only to taste her again.

— *For Joseph*

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The author speaks: I've always had a soft spot for Egypt and I'm not sure why. I wish I could retrace the steps that got my brain to thinking, "Oh, wow" about the place for the first time, but that is, alas, lost. Still, all those ruins that were once not ruins were absolutely fascinating. In doing research for a novel, I came across the Pharaoh Hatshepsut and my interest deepened. A female pharaoh? How could that be? Her image largely destroyed after her reign? Why in the world ...? One intriguing part of Hatshepsut's reign was the ships she sent to Punt, which returned with Many Fabulous Things. In some accounts, the fish that came back could be identified down to their very species from ancient drawings ... Fish from strange lands? *O, what other marvels might have come back with them?* I wondered and therein found this story.

