

Lower Nubia, Aswan – 1600 B.C.

From atop his horse, Pharaoh Amonmose stared down at the fires ravishing the city of Aswan. He watched long enough to see the leaping flames slowly transform into angry red embers glowing eerily against the dark horizon. His long cloak fluttered in the warm night breeze as he felt the blood racing through his veins. Tonight, he and his men had raided three towns and taken them all by surprise. They were covered from head to toe with black smoke and dirt, but none of them seemed to care. They were focused on one thing – conquering their Nubian neighbors.

Egypt seemed to attract enemies like flies to a pile of dung, but the Nubians were perhaps their most deadly foes. Egypt had the misfortune of sharing a southern border with Aswan, which was located in Lower Nubia. The proximity of the two kingdoms invited constant warring. His royal council had informed him that fierce Nubian warriors had been mercilessly attacking small towns on the outskirts of Thebes. Two days ago, Egyptian temples had been desecrated and in one town, the wife of a government official had been abducted.

He rode into battle tonight determined to have his vengeance against the Nubians. Yet, strangely, his army had not been met with any opposition. Thus far, he'd seen none of the Nubian resistance his royal advisors had told him existed.

In the distance, he heard a deep rumble of loud shouting. He'd heard that particular sound before. It was the way the soldiers celebrated when they'd found precious booty. He abruptly turned his mount around and sped in the direction of the noise.

When he arrived at the edge of the village, he saw a battalion of his soldiers huddled in a thick circle. Whatever prize they'd found had totally enraptured them so that they were unaware of his approach. As he neared the melee, he saw one of the soldiers fall back and crumple to the ground. The man's loud yelp of pain could be heard above the din of the noise. The ring of soldiers parted slightly as two of the men stooped down to help their fallen comrade, giving Amonmose a glimpse inside. *A woman!* She was hopelessly surrounded and the men were closing in on her. In a desperate attempt to thwart their advance, she was hurling rocks. Her last effort had landed a soldier on his backside. The woman was fighting for her life. He was impressed by her bravery.

"Enough!" his deep voice prompted deafening silence. The soldiers respectfully parted to allow him entrance into the circle. He addressed his chief commander. "Nadesh, what goes on here?"

"We found a survivor, Sire," Nadesh answered. "A Nubian traitor or probably a harlot."

"I am neither!" the woman hissed.

Amonmose turned his attention to her. Up close, she was breathtaking, despite the dirt and soot. She had a graceful form and hair the color of ebony. She held a shredded white dress like a shield in front of her. It did little to conceal the ample curves of her body. With her narrow waist and wide hips, she looked like one of the exotic dancers that often entertained at the palace. Her skin was the darkest of browns and smooth as the slopes of the Sinai Desert. He could see her slim legs outlined beneath the thin fabric of her torn garment.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Kama Nubemheb," she answered boldly. "I hail from Kerma."

Her full bosom was heaving up and down. She was obviously exhausted by the heroic effort she'd made to fight off her attackers.

“You are named after the Egyptian goddess of love,” he said. At that moment, their gazes locked, his amber irises battling with her onyx-colored eyes. Her look told him she was surprised by his observation. In the midst of battle, most men were consumed with looting and killing, not matters of minor theology.

“Yes,” she said warily. “Nubians worship many of the same gods as you. My mother named me after the Egyptian goddess of love. But that is not an invitation. I have no wish to service you or your filthy soldiers.”

Amonmose smiled to himself. She did not seem like a harlot. In fact, from her outraged behavior, she acted as if she were royalty. His gaze roamed over the long, thin braids surrounding her face. She stood wary, ready to spring at any moment. She was like a crocodile. Silent and calm, but deadly when provoked. Her eyes were dark as a midnight sky and shiny as the stars in the heavens, and glowing with the anger of a raging fire. It was entrancing.

Her body language silently rebuked him with shockingly open hostility. She was almost as fierce as a man, arrogant and haughty. But her looks were striking and her body was lush.

“Do you know who I am?” Amonmose demanded.

“No, I do not, and I am certain it is no concern of mine,” she spoke bravely. “I ask only for safe passage. I can make it well worth your trouble,” she added.

“Oh?” He did not bother to hide the suggestive tone of his remark. “And what of your cherished maidenhead?”

Kama flushed. “You misunderstand my words. My cousin was to be married on the morrow. Her dowry waits at the river. If you let me go, it’s yours.”

He deliberately advanced his mount toward her. He was so close he could smell her sweet scent intermingling with the foul smell of smoke in the air. “What makes you think I won’t simply take the dowry, along with anything else I desire?” He watched as she took a step backward, obviously trying to put distance between herself and him.

“You seem like a man of great importance,” she said. “If you say you will release me in exchange for the dowry, I know every man here will comply with your wishes.”

Nadesh interrupted. “She lies,” he warned. “She is probably no more than a slave giving away her master’s goods to earn her freedom.”

“No! I am slave to no master!” Kama shouted.

Amonmose watched her shake her head vigorously, her free hand clenching into a fist. He wondered if she was always so passionate. Suddenly, he had a vision of her beneath him, arching her hips to his and clasping her legs around his back. He fought the rise beneath his tunic. Her wild-spirited nature had inflamed his desire, and slave or not, he wasn’t ready to release her yet.

Keeping his heated gaze on Kama, he spoke to Nadesh. “Bring her back to Thebes,” he commanded. “She will be mine.”

He saw clear indignation written on her comely face. “You are making a mistake,” she told him. “I am not for sale.”

He smirked. “Then I shall take you for free.”

Her eyes became narrow slits. “You shall never have me!”

He was accustomed to his subjects bowing before him. That this mere *slip* of a woman had the audacity to ...She needed to be put in her place. He gave his full attention to Nadesh. “Take her to my vessel, but I want her treated well,” he admonished. “No one is to touch her.” He spared the woman a quick glance before spurring his horse back in the direction he’d come from.