

Samira



In the cool of the evening, less visitors were seen to enter the temple of Sekhmet. Samira could finally sit down and rub her tired feet.

Life at the temple was always busy - sweeping away the ever encroaching sand, prayers and sacrifices that must be made to our Lady Sekhmet regularly to dampen her wrath, assisting the worshippers, and ministering to the needs of the haughty priestesses and the insufferable acolytes.

As she massaged away the tension in the tendons and muscles, Samira noticed a young man enter the temple, and approach the largest of the idols - our Lady Sekhmet in full battle dress, with the solar disk perched on her lion's head. She looked proud and fierce, but strangely, he didn't pray or prostrate himself at her feet - the young man merely regarded her thoughtfully.

Samira licked her lips as she regarded the young man. He was not someone she had seen before - no-one that good

looking would have evaded her sharp sight for long. He was beautifully built - almost a match for the god he stood before. His curly dark hair was cropped close to his head, and he was clean-shaven. His eyes seemed to be quite black, but that could just have been a trick of the late afternoon lighting. His bronzed body was muscular, clothed in the linen shift and leather skirt of a footsoldier - except of course he carried no weapons.

Samira felt some fascinating stirrings as she followed the shadow of dark hair from his chest down to where it disappeared beneath his skirt.

But her stirrings turned quickly to alarm when she noticed the young man take a surreptitious glance around the temple before stepping right up to the statue, and reaching up as if to touch something.

"Stop!" Her voice sounded across the temple floor, and the few people who were still there looked around to see what the disturbance was.

She swiftly walked over to the young man, ignoring the protestations of her feet.

"What exactly do you think you are doing?" she demanded.

"I was just admiring the statue." His tone was belligerent, but Samira noted the way his eyes raked her youthful body.

"You most certainly were not. I saw you - you were about to touch her."

"I would do no such thing."

"Why compound your guilt with lies? I saw you."

"I saw him too." One of the temple guards, Asim, walked up to them. Asim was enormous and terrifying. He made the well-built soldier look like a stringy boy, and his face was made fierce by a permanent scar that ran from temple to chin. But Samira knew that Asim's heart was kind and thoughtful, and she liked and trusted him.

"I think perhaps Asim, you should escort this man out."

"Indeed," said Asim, taking the man's arm.

The soldier shook him off, muttering under his breath, and walked quickly out of the temple.

Samira smiled up at Asim. "A good day's work, Asim. What do you suppose he meant by touching our Lady?"

"I don't know. It was foolish of him. I'm glad he left quietly."

"Me too. Thank you for your assistance, Asim."

"For you, Samira, anything." With one hand on his chest, he gave Samira a small bow and returned to his post.

Many questions crowded Samira's mind - why would anyone try to touch a temple idol? Who exactly was the young soldier? And why, even when he was no longer here, could she see every detail of his face?

It was very perplexing.

#

The young man was back the next day, not worshipping, but only staring at the statue. Samira's curiosity eventually got the better of her, so when she had a gap in her temple duties, she strode up to him, and faced him, hands on hips.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I'm permitted to be here."

"That's not what I asked."

The young soldier sighed heavily. "I need to borrow the sunstone."

Samira gaped at him. The sunstone was set into the solar disk that arrayed Sekhmet's head. It was worked into the disk in such a way that the sunlight could pass through it, sending rays of white, yellow and orange in every direction. It was a thing of beauty, and a prized possession of the temple.

"You can't just borrow the sunstone!"

"You don't understand." The soldier grabbed her by the arms and turned her to face him. The close proximity had the blood rushing to Samira's face. "My mother is dying. Our healer needs a sunstone to perform a rite to save her."

Samira noted the grief etched on the young man's face. Her heart went out to him. Her own mother had passed only a few years earlier, and the hurt from that wound was still sharp.

"But you can't steal the sunstone," she whispered. "It would mean your death."

"It will mean my mother's death if I don't." His eyes pleaded with her. Samira tried to think of a better solution.

"Maybe you could ask to borrow the stone."

Even as she said it, Samira knew it would never happen.

"I already begged the high priestess to have some mercy. She has none."

"Is there not another stone you can borrow?"

"No - this is the only one in the region. I've checked everywhere."

Samira's heart was heavy. "You know I cannot countenance removal of the sunstone. I should be handing you over to the temple guards right this minute."

"But you won't, will you?"

"No."

"Thank you."

She moved as if to walk away, then turned back to the soldier. "What is your name?"

"Tariush."

"I'll pray for you, Tariush. Sekhmet isn't only a goddess of war and bloodshed. In her kinder moments, she is also a goddess of medicine and healing."

"I fear your prayers will be too little, too late for my mother."

She regarded him sadly. "Go in peace, Tariush." She turned to leave.

"Wait. I don't know your name."

"It's Samira."

"Go in peace, Samira." He gave a small half-bow, and turned back to his contemplation of the statue.

#

"Samira."

She heard her name whispered from a dark corner of the temple. Intrigued, she peered into the gloom, to see Tariush beckoning her over, his face set.

"Tariush? Why are you hiding?"

"Because your high priestess has set the temple guards on me."

Samira nodded. The high priestess protected what was Sekhmet's with a sometimes overbearing heavy hand.

"I need to borrow the sunstone today. And I need you to help me."

"What?" Samira was stunned.

"Please, Samira." He took her hands. "I can see you aren't like the others. I can see some compassion in you. My mother won't last another day without the healing."

"I can't."

"I need you." He cupped her face in his big hands, and her heartbeat ratcheted up. "I can't get close to the statue without one of the temple oafs trailing me."

"I can't." Samira pulled away from his hands. Only the priestesses were allowed to touch the statues.

"Yes, you can. You're the only one who can. Here." He handed her a stone, similar in size to the sunstone.

"I need you to remove the sunstone from its setting, and replace it with this. Then, when the ritual is finished, we will return the sunstone to its place."

"No, Tariush. I can't." She made to give the stone back to him, but he closed his hands over her smaller ones.

"Samira. You are strong and kind. I can't imagine you are happy to let anyone suffer when your actions could reduce their suffering."

"Tariush, I..."

"You yourself told me that Sekhmet is a goddess of medicine and healing. Surely she would not withhold her kindness."

"No, I..."

"Please, beautiful Samira. Help me." He placed a kiss on her cheek.

Samira found herself breathless. Tariush's closeness, his lips on her skin, and his words all jumbled up together in her heart. She felt a sudden rush of adrenaline - that it was the right thing to do - that Sekhmet would not punish her when she was administering aid to another human being. Probably.

"Very well, Tariush. When do you want me to do it?"

"We need to catch the sunlight when Ra is at his mightiest, when the sun is high in the sky. I need you to replace the stone just after the mid-morning prayer, which will give us time to get to my mother's house, have the ritual done, and get it back before late-afternoon prayers."

"But that means it will be gone for the mid-day prayer! That's when the most people are here!"

"I know, but it can't be helped." Tariush was grim. "Hopefully the replacement stone will fool everyone for long enough."

"It's dangerous, Tariush." Samira was terrified.

"Yes." Tariush took her in his arms. "It's very dangerous. But I need you, Samira. I need you to be strong."

She looked up into his liquid eyes, taking comfort from his confident gaze. He lowered his head to capture her lips in a gentle kiss, then released her and pushed her back out into the sunlight streaming into the temple.

#

She didn't hear a word of the mid-morning prayers, and received more than one jab from the vicious fingers priestesses for stumbling in her duties. She hardly felt them. Her hands were slick, the replacement stone heavy in her pocket.

Once the priestesses had taken the libations designed as an offering to Sekhmet to keep the wrath of the goddess at bay, and the sacrifice had been made, the prayers chanted and the prostrations ended, the temple became quiet again, as the priestesses returned to the cool of their inner sanctuary, and the good people returned to their toil.

Samira's heart beat frantically. She sidled up to the statue, and took a good look at it. The sunstone was set above Samira's head height, however she could still reach it. It was held in place by a cleverly constructed hammock of straw, which held it still, but didn't detract from the stone's beauty.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" Samira started, and pulled back.

Asim's timing couldn't have been worse. He stood beside Samira, admiring the statue.

"She's the most beautiful in all Thebes."

"Indeed she is," agreed Samira. "In all of Egypt."

"Well, now, I don't know about that," said Asim with a chuckle. "I've not seen all of Egypt. But I have seen all of Thebes, and I know she's the most beautiful here."

"Asim?"

"What is it, little one?"

"If someone asked you to do something, and you felt in your heart that the goddess approved, but technically it was against the rules, would you do it?"

"It depends what it was, Samira. If it was a matter of life and death, I would probably break the rules. But then again, I'm rather large and formidable. Even if I do break the rules, I tend to be easily forgiven. Why do you ask? What rules are you seeking to break?"

Samira forced a laugh. "Oh, I wasn't talking about any rules in particular. I was just discussing this with Akela this morning, and wondered what you would do."

"And what would you do, Samira?"

"I still don't know. It's a terrible thing to break the temple rules. But if the goddess has given approval, who would I be to naysay her?"

"It sounds to me like you do know." Asim took Samira by the shoulders and turned her to face him. She couldn't look up into his rough, kindly face. Her tears would give her away.

But he put one finger beneath her chin and lifted her face to his. "Whatever it is, if you are sure in your heart that you are doing the right thing, and you are sure you have the goddess' approval, you should do it. Rules are made to bring order to chaos. But sometimes, circumstances fall outside the rules, and its then that we have to use our best judgement, and just trust the gods." He wiped the tear off her face. "Now, do what you need to do, little one. I will leave you alone." He gave her a quick smile, and moved off to the other side of the temple, careful to keep his back to her the whole time.

Samira moved quickly, her heart in her mouth. She prised the sunstone from it's hammock, and then replaced it with the other stone, taking up precious time to make sure it fit into the space snugly. She was dismayed to see that while the stone looked similar to the sunstone, it did not have the same power to throw many coloured rays across the floor. She knew, with a sinking heart, that the theft would be discovered before the mid-day prayers even started.

She pushed down her fears and walked quickly to the exit, only to be blocked by Hent-Ateh, one of the acolytes, and her minions.

"Where are you going, Samira?" she asked haughily, while her friends giggled behind her.

"I'm going about my duties, as you should be." Samira knew she should mask the asperity in her voice. Had Hent-Ateh and her friends seen her take the sunstone?

"I don't think you have any place telling me what to do." Hent-Ateh drew herself to full height. Hent-Ateh was tall and beautiful, the daughter of royalty, as were all of the acolytes. "I should punish you for your impertinence."

Before she could respond, Tariush joined the group. "Excuse me, my ladies, but Samira and I have an appointment." So saying, he grabbed Samira by the arm and pulled her out of the midst of the gaping acolytes and into the sunlight outside.

As they hurried along, Samira chided Tariush. "Do you know what you've done? Those girls won't be able to wait to tell the priestesses that I'm off with some boy."

"It was necessary. And really, what else were you going to tell them? That you were just off to use the sunstone for a healing ritual?"

Samira conceded she probably couldn't have come up with a better story.

They ran through the streets of Waset, to a small house in an avenue of middle affluence.

#

They entered the house and found Tariush's mother surrounded by other members of his family - his father, two sisters, aunts and the healer. The women were already beginning to ululate their distress, which would only get worse as Tariush's mother came closer and closer to death.

"Quieten yourselves. We have the sunstone."

They ceased wailing instantly, eyes wide. The healer, who had been seated by himself, seemingly defeated, suddenly sprung to life. "You have it?" he asked eagerly.

Samira produced the stone, and handed it to the healer, who cackled. "Straight from the hand of a temple attendant." She pulled her hand back, unwilling to make contact with the strange man, but she was of no more interest to him.

"Quickly," the healer said. "A hole in the roof to allow Ra's strength to flow through."

To the protestations of his father, Tariush replied "The roof can be fixed." He climbed to the roof, and beat a hole through the mud brick. Pieces of dirt and straw fell into the room in a choking cloud of dust. Tariush's sister quickly pulled a blanket over her mother's face and wound to keep her free of the debris.

The sunlight came through the roof, and settled in a stream on the bed. The healer instructed everyone else to assist with moving Tariush's mother into a position where her injury - a stomach perforation - was directly in the line of the sunlight. Moving the poor woman was torture for her - the increase of pus pouring out of the wound accompanied by her screams of pain. The light sheen of sweat on her brow became enormous drops, running down her pain-etched face.

Under the light, the injury was horrific - her stomach was distended, the skin blackened and cracked close to the wound, and red and swollen further away, with vile-smelling green effluent almost pulsating out of the puncture. Samira's stomach turned to look at it, but she had seen worse when people had brought their loved ones to the temple for blessing when they had been injured or ill, so she kept her stomach under stern control, and continued to look on.

The healer held the stone gently in his fingers about a metre above the wound, in the path of the sunlight streaming through the roof. It splayed the light out over the woman's exposed

belly in dancing lines of whites, yellows and oranges. He began to chant, quietly at first, then louder and louder.

Samira felt the stirrings of energy before she really comprehended what was happening. Samira twitched - she felt what she thought was the light touch of fingers across her neck. A swoosh of air flowed through and around the room, buffeting all within. The rays from the sunstone seemed to work their way into the healer and then back out and down toward the woman, getting more brilliant with each verse the healer chanted until it was impossible to look at them. The watchers held the woman's limbs down as she writhed on the bed, her screams becoming louder and louder the more intense the sunstone's rays became. Amazingly, the wound seemed to pull upwards, creating almost a volcano on the woman's stomach, discharging more and more disgusting, liquidy pus until suddenly, several large chunks of greenish-yellow goop shot out of the wound, followed by what seemed to Samira to be litres of clear liquid. The woman's stomach returned to being a flat surface, with a trickle of liquid still drooling from the wound.

But the healer wasn't done. He brought the stone down close to the woman's skin and focussed the blinding rays on the wound. Smoke seemed to appear as the woman continued to writhe, her screams now groans of agony. In front of their eyes, the wound seemed to settle down, the black skin turning rosy and the bruising fading. There was still a hole there, but it looked clean and fresh, not festering as it had done before.

The healer slowly brought his chanting back down to a whisper and then finally stopped. He swayed on his feet, perspiration pouring off him. "Cover the wound," he gasped, before teetering over to a chair and falling into it, his face grey.

The room was a sudden hive of activity, as several people moved to wrap the woman's wound, and others went to tend the healer.

Tariush moved toward his mother's head, wiping the perspiration from her face, and gently murmuring.

To Samira's astonishment, the woman opened her eyes - the same almost-black as her son's - and smiled, before falling into a healing sleep.

The effect in the room was profound. All of the occupants fell silent, giving thanks for the skill of the healer, and the saving of their mother. They gave thanks to Ra, to Sekhmet, and they gave thanks to the little temple attendant, who had risked much to bring them the healing crystal.

The healer beckoned Samira over, and returned the stone to her care. "Go back now, good lady. May your goddess' love shine on you."

The others murmured "Go in peace," as Samira and Tariush turned to hurry back to the temple.

#

When they arrived, the place was in an uproar. They could hear the screeching of the

high priestess from streets away. The theft had been discovered.

Samira and Tariush screeched to a halt. "What are we going to do?" asked Samira, panic in her voice.

Tariush thought for a moment, then said "If you can create a distraction, I can get in from the other entrance and put the stone back."

She gave him the stone, but was still worried.

"Distraction? What's going to be more distracting than the loss of the stone?"

"I know you'll come up with something, love," said Tariush, and with a quick kiss on her lips, he ran around the side of the temple.

Samira had no idea what she was going to do. She walked up the temple steps, spying Akela, another attendant, looking white and distressed.

"Samira, where have you been? The sunstone is missing. The high priestess thinks you took it."

"Me? Why?"

"Hent-Ateh and her cronies told her you left with a boy."

"If I left with a boy, what would I need with the stone?"

"So you did leave with a boy?"

"Yes." Samira knew she had to create a distraction, and Akela was using up precious time she might have used to think of an idea.

Then it came to her.

She collapsed suddenly, writhing on the floor and groaning loudly. The people round about stepped away from her, but she continued to writhe and moan, and then she went totally stiff, and chanted in a stentorian tone:

"I am Sekhmet, goddess of wrath and war, and medicine and healing.

Worship me.

I am the sunstone, I am it's healing rays.

It heals for I am medicine.

Prostrate yourselves before me, for I am vengeance."

The high priestess pushed through the crowds, followed closely by the goggling acolytes. "She's faking it," scoffed Hent-Ateh, until another screeched "But the light? Where is that yellow light coming from?"

"She is channelling Sekhmet," proclaimed the high priestess, who fell on her face in worship, quickly followed by the rest of the people in the temple.

As Samira continued her tirade, Tariush crept toward the statue, noticing that the fake stone had already been removed.

He was just about to replace the stone when a massive hand clasped itself around his wrist.

#

"What are you doing, young soldier?" asked Asim, his quiet tone more menacing than if

he had shouted.

"Let me go, you fool, I'm returning your sunstone." Tariush tried to shake off the big man's hand, but to no avail.

"Why did you involve our little Samira in your schemes?"

"Because I needed her. And she is smart, and kind and compassionate - much more like Sekhmet than the priestesses."

"Do you care about her?"

Tariush paused for a moment. "Yes. Yes, I do believe I do."

Asim smiled, and let go of his arm. "Treat her well, young soldier. Or know that the entirety of the Sekhmet temple guard will be on your tail. Now finish what you started."

Asim melted into the background, as Tariush settled the stone in its place. The familiar rays of white, yellow and orange splayed across the floor, but no-one noticed, still being preoccupied with Samira's performance.

"Look!" shouted Tariush. "The sunstone! It has miraculously returned!"

Everyone turned to gape at the stone, and Samira sagged, every muscle in her body aching and her throat raw. She would slap Tariush the next time she saw him - he took far too long to get the stone back in place. She was only happy that she had been able to keep up the charade as long as she did.

The high priestess herself helped to sit her up and give her some water. "Quiet now, Samira. You will feel a little giddy as the spirit passes." The acolytes looked on in respectful silence as the priestesses huddled around Samira and took her into their inner sanctum.

Their silence was only broken by the complaining voice of Hent-Ateh - "Why was she chosen to be the spirits vassal? It's not fair."

#

After hours of questions and examinations by the priestesses, Samira was allowed to leave. Her entire body was worn out by the events of the day and all she wanted to do was sleep.

Waiting for her in front of the temple was Tariush.

"Good work," he said, winking at her. She grinned back.

He gathered her up into his arms, and kissed her thoroughly and joyfully.

"My mother is going to be fine, and you are amazing and wonderful and I think I love you."

Samira looked at him in shock. He loved her?

"I think I could be in love with you too," she confessed, her face scarlet.

"I only have one question for you, Samira."

"What is that?"

"How did you get that yellow light to shine on you when you were pretending to channel the spirit?"

"What yellow light?"

Tariush was silent for a moment. He took Samira's hand, and started to lead her back to

her house.

"It would seem that the goddess was pleased with our work for the day, love."

They didn't notice, but as they walked, the same light beamed down upon them, bathing them in the love of Sekhmet herself.