



JAY HARTLOVE

GODDESS
CHOSEN

Goddess Chosen

*Book One
of the
“Goddess Rising”
Series*

Jay Hartlove

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SAMPLE EDITION

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EGYPT

“WELL, SIR, HERE WE ARE,” the dark-skinned taxi driver said over his shoulder in Arabic. “Again, I’m sorry about the time. The riot was bigger than I thought.”

“That’s all right,” Silas forgave him in the man’s own tongue. “You said it could take as much as two hours to go around, and it took considerably less. How much do I owe you?”

“Sixteen pounds Egyptian. I charge you only for the regular distance.”

“That’s very kind of you,” he said handing the man a handful of bills. “That should cover it.” He picked up his black leather bag and got out. “Praise be to Allah.”

The driver, having quickly counted the money, smiled at Silas’ tip and called back through the open windows, “Praise be to Allah, and enjoy your stay in Cairo!”

As the cab drove off, the white suited old man quickly sized up his new environment. The Egyptian capitol at the beginning of the

twenty-first century carried the fruits of a modern educated nation in one hand, while in the other it clung to the baggage of an underdeveloped backward one. Along the narrow street Silas saw peddlers in traditional Bedouin rags selling their wares to the infrequent passersby in business suits. He noticed a half-naked child had fallen asleep against the post of a mercury vapor street lamp. The buildings were mostly decaying one and two-story offices with an occasional, very conspicuous, new four or five story unit. As if to add to the contrasts, everyone behaved as if there was nothing wrong, despite the deepening economic depression and increasingly militant religious fanaticism that spawned the almost daily riots just a few blocks away. The assaulting sulfurous smell of burning tires corrupted the breeze that blew dry dust down the street.

“O, Kemet,” he sighed. Silas wondered what Pharaoh Ramses would think if he saw how stumbling a step his kingdom had made into the modern age.

The short, very thin, olive skinned man answered the door of his second story office with a big smile on his face. “You must be Mister Alverado,” he said in English with only a slight trace of accent. “I saw you from the window. Come in, come in.”

He closed the door behind Silas and turned to face him. Silas noticed the man’s double take when he saw Silas’ bright blue eyes. Silas understood the superstitions about blue eyes and divinity among Islamic people. The man blinked, kept up his smile, and reached to shake Silas’ hand. When he felt the metal prosthesis through the black cloth glove Silas wore, he hesitated again but then graciously passed it over without mention.

“I am Hameel al Qabek,” he introduced himself. “Very nice to meet you in person.”

“The pleasure is mine,” the white-haired man said. “You come highly recommended.”

“Thank you for saying so,” the Egyptian smiled as he stepped around behind his dark wooden desk.

The office was one large room with windows across the far wall, gray metal filing cabinets stacked across one end, and al Qabek’s desk and chairs at the other. The windows were open, and two ceiling fans

blew the warm air around to very little cooling effect. The white plaster walls under the windows had the dinginess of always being exposed to dusty outside air.

"Please, have a seat. When I received your fax two days ago, I went to work on it right away. I had some photographs taken yesterday of paintings that may be what you're looking for. Before I show them to you, though, I have to mention that we have not discussed any terms. You said in your cable that you would pay more if I found what you wanted quickly."

"That's correct. I'm surprised you didn't have a photo already in your files. Your counterpart in England spoke glowingly of your portfolio."

"I must remember to thank him for such a complement. Alas, I had only notes as to what is said on these wall sections. But, as you will see, my photographer did an excellent job of correcting that deficiency."

"I'm glad to hear that. You will also remember in my wire I said I was only paying you for the expedience of not having to go to the dig myself. The photographs must be that good."

"Not a problem. That quality is what I have," al Qabek said positively. He began figuring with a pad and pencil on his desk. "Let's see, my finder's fee, plus what I had to pay the photographer, plus, shall we say," he looked up at Silas, "10% for the rush job?"

"That will be fine," came the gravelly agreement.

"That comes to 7,600 Egyptian," he said finishing his calculations. "That's 3,000 American."

Silas looked him straight in the eye and let his breath out slowly in disappointment. "No it isn't," he said in a low flat tone. "It's 2,920."

"Oh, is it?" Hameel said innocently looking back at his pad. "Oh, so it is. I'm sorry, you're right, 2,920 American."

Silas did not release his iron gaze. For a long tense moment, the only sound was the quiet whirring of the ceiling fan which did nothing but redistribute the smell of nervous sweat. "Let me make one thing absolutely clear to you. No one has ever successfully

cheated me. A bargain made with me is as binding as an oath to the Almighty. I am just as relentless if you should go back on it.”

The antiquities dealer chuckled as innocently as he could muster, insisting, “But Mister Alverado, it was just a simple mistake.”

“The eighty dollars means very little to me. I would have gladly paid the full 3,000 American, if that had been your honest quote. You will deal with me fairly or not at all. As good as your catalog may be, there are many other brokers in Cairo who would love to please me.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” al Qabek smiled nervously. “Let me show you what I have.” He took a large manila envelope out of a desk drawer and handed it to Silas.

The six 8-x-10 photos were obviously taken with a flash inside dark tomb corridors. He quickly glanced over each one, checking names and key phrases.

“These were definitely written by Royarna,” he conceded with a slight nod. “This one wall panel appears to be what I want.”

As he scrutinized it more closely, al Qabek inquired greedily, “Then you are satisfied?”

Silas’s brow furrowed as his eyes danced back and forth across the photograph. Ignoring the dealer’s question, he asked one of his own. “Are you sure there hasn’t been any restoration done on this tomb?”

Surprised and alarmed, Hameel asked, “What do you mean?”

“It appears that someone has attempted to repair part of the painting.”

The dealer was on his feet reaching across the desk. “Let me see.” Silas handed it to him, and he turned to the window to examine it in the daylight. “It looks all right to me,” he said while still looking at the picture.

“Oh, it’s a good job, and undoubtedly done with only the best intentions. Some overzealous scholar probably thought he was doing the right thing.” The old man did not try to hide the disdain in his voice.

“But how can you tell?” the Egyptian asked, completely baffled.

“The meter of the language changes suddenly on the seventh line. It’s grammatically correct, but it sounds stiff, like a non-speaker

was using a dictionary to write it. The writing stays that way down to the fifteenth line where it changes back to Royarna's fluent speech."

The raised-eyebrow, wide-eyed look of resigned confusion on Hameel's face would have been comical if Alverado were not so genuinely disappointed.

"If you say so," the dealer sighed, shaking his head slightly. "But you must appreciate that it is not my fault the tomb has been tampered with." He handed the picture back to Silas and sat down.

"That is true," the older man admitted unemotionally. "We agreed to a price for a product which you have delivered."

With that point settled, al Qabek couldn't help but ask, "Is it not at all useable?"

"No," Silas sighed, looking at the photo. "My misfortune in this case is quite complete. From what is said before and after, it is clear that the altered passages did contain the information I require. What is written here now is essentially idle filler, nothing more than expansion and repetition of what came before." Reaching inside his white suit jacket, he quickly counted out fifteen 500 Egyptian pound notes and a 100. "I assume cash will suffice."

The man's face lit up. "Oh yes, that will be fine." Catching himself on the edge of a conspicuous display of greed, he added in a more subdued tone, "I am sorry you couldn't find exactly what you seek."

"I appreciate the sentiment," Silas gave him a small gracious smile as he stood up to leave.

"I do know an archivist who might be able to find drawings made by the people who discovered the tomb," the dealer offered. "That wall may have still been intact then."

"No, I have a feeling the painting disintegrated centuries ago," he said, bending down to pick up his bag.

Having put the money in a desk drawer, al Qabek moved to see him to the door. "So your cause is lost?"

"Oh no, I'll keep looking. I may go look at these ruins myself to see if there are other panels I can use."

"No, you mustn't," Hameel said a little too quickly. "I mean, it's much too dangerous," he covered more calmly. "My photographer

said the stonework was in very bad condition. He feared for his safety the whole time he was inside, and there are guards. My man had to sneak in and risk arrest as well.”

Silas acted as though he hadn’t noticed al Qabek’s clumsy apprehensions and decided to play along. “Thank you for the warning. I’ll be sure to keep it in mind. Now if you’ll excuse me, it seems I have much work to do.” He held out his gloved steel hand and al Qabek shook it.

“Good luck to you, sir,” he concluded, sounding relieved by Silas’s agreeability.

• • •

The white-haired magician sighed and rubbed his temples. Sitting at the desk in his hotel room, he looked with tired disappointment from one item before him to the next. The photograph of Royarna’s writing had been faked. Hameel al Qabek, whose business card sat next to the photograph, was a man forced to act against his will. Lastly, he looked at the map of the tomb digs, a place that would be a trap if he went there. He sighed again and, with practiced fluidity, scooped up the Tarot card spread and put the deck away.

To think clearly and get away from the maddening three pieces of paper, he walked out onto the balcony and looked up at the moon and stars. A deep chestful of the cool desert air did nothing but assault him with the smell of burning wood that hung over the city from the day’s violence. “O Egypt!” he said softly to himself. “How I long to bring you back to your former glory.”

Why had he not foreseen the obstacles his adversary had put in his path since he began this quest? Clearly his precautions to keep his research and preparations secret all these many years had worked. But now, with the visit to Osiris, his enemy knew without a doubt what he was after. Still, he should have seen these stumbling blocks coming. Was Faen-ka capable of putting obstacles in his path that even the cards could not see? Now he was being led into the petty personal

entanglements of a slimy little art dealer. Unfortunately, knowing who was responsible did nothing to help him overcome the barriers.

He looked at his watch and, knowing sleep would not come easily this evening, decided to retire early. He didn't know what might try to stop him tomorrow, but surely he could face it better with a few hours of sleep.

• • •

The next incline sent the rear of the Land Cruiser fishtailing around like a one-oared rowboat despite the clawing attack the knobbed tires made on the sand to find traction. Turning the wheels into the side-slip and downshifting even further, Silas brought the jeep under control halfway down the slope. When he reached the bottom, he considered how easy it would be to characterize the 120-degree heat and the unforgiving arid terrain as a version of hell. The notion of having to travel to hell to pursue a demon struck him as amusingly appropriate.

An hour east of the ancient city of Thebes he found his destination. The tomb was closer than the map had led him to expect. He slammed on the brakes as he crested the edge of the rocky canyon and furtively looked around to see if he had been spotted. But there were no guards. As he drove up to the chain link and barbed wire fence, he wondered how much more of what al Qabek had told him was false.

After making short work of the padlocks with meter-long bolt cutters, Silas retrieved from the car his black bag and a tool he had once thought he'd never use again: a Weatherby hunting rifle. He paused and surveyed the landscape again but found no trace of human company.

The gaping maw of the excavated opening narrowed quickly to the dark, low-ceilinged throat of the outer corridor. The blue-white light of his neon lantern threw out a sphere of light that he moved down the square, smooth-walled painted hallway, step by step, while he examined the walls and ceiling for clues left for him by his own previous incarnation three thousand years before.

He cared little about the distant cousin of Ramses who once laid here. Section after section he read of the illustrated hieroglyphic text, ignoring the details of the man's boring life of luxury, looking for the reference he knew once was here.

Around a corner, in the hall to the long-ago looted treasure annex, he found the panel in al Qabek's photograph. Rather, he found what was left of it. The top layer of plaster just below the paint had been mixed improperly and had separated and peeled off, tearing the center of the text away. He compared it to the photo and realized the forgery had been expertly crafted in a darkroom.

Relieved to find the original unmolested, he opened his bag. He turned on a small voice-activated tape recorder and slipped it into his shirt pocket. Then he pulled out his Magus Crown, with its multi-colored metals and all-seeing eye. He kissed its crest and put it on. Lastly, he unclipped a canteen from his belt and opened it. After extracting his right hand from its metal case, he rinsed it with the sun warmed water. Facing the damaged text, he closed his eyes.

Silas stood there for a long moment, working his mind deeper and deeper into the sympathetic trance. He imagined himself as Royarna, working with his scribes, watching himself meticulously paint one glyph after another. He opened his eyes, but he did not see the neon-illuminated wall. He reached up and gently began tracing the missing symbols with his hypersensitive hand, speaking aloud what he felt without allowing his consciousness to interfere with the words that flowed from his lips in the ancient Egyptian language. When he was done, he began the long walk back to consciousness, through the centuries, until he again saw himself standing by his electric light.

Something was wrong. He heard nothing, but he clairvoyantly felt the presence of another. He unslung the rifle from his shoulder as he ran around to the main corridor.

Looking out the length of the main entrance corridor, Silas instantly understood the man's intention as he crouched down over a small metal box on the far side of the narrow canyon. To steady the barrel of the left-handed rifle, Silas had to grab the gun with his naked hypersensitive right hand. It took every ounce of self-denying

concentration Silas could summon to ignore the staggering, searing pain that lanced all the way up his arm. In the brilliant sunlight outside, the glint of purple in the man's eyes was unmistakable.

His forehead exploded long before the sound of Silas' shot reached him, but not before the message had already left the man's brain and depressed his thumb on the detonator.

Silas's view of the world vanished in a deafening torrent of dust. He ran back into the recesses of the tomb ahead of the billowing cave-in cloud. He grabbed a kerchief and pressed it over his nose and mouth. Rounding the corner, the cloud overtook him, and he had to stand there with his eyes closed in the dark, waiting for the air to clear. The sounds of falling rock behind him went on for a dishearteningly long time. When he ventured a glimpse, and saw the dust had settled enough to see and breathe, he sat down and sighed.

He arrested the growing anger and frustration that threatened to choke off his objectivity. He was convinced that only through strict adherence to his quest could he see the opportunities to succeed. He decided the task of escaping was a lower priority, and returned to his work. He tied the kerchief around his face and tried to ignore the taste of dirt that filled his every breath. He took off his Magus Crown and dropped it into his bag. He replaced the metal glove on his still throbbing hand before rewinding the tape recorder. Translating from the ancient Egyptian, he pieced together the entire panel's text:

May the Ka of Nocutautan fly freely to and from this place, may the Ba of Nocutautan be seen and heard by men, may Nocutautan always speak clear and true that he may be admitted through all the gates of heaven. The body of Nocutautan is made ready for his visitation in this the fifth year since Great Horus-Ramses has shed his wings and become Great Osiris-Ramses. In this year the condemned one whose name may not be written has still not been found in the lands above the Cataracts to where he fled after his betrayal. Royarna, High Priest of Amun to Great Horus-Ramses, has given Nocutautan what keys are remembered of Aeth, that he may command greater mastery in the Land of the Dead. May Nocutautan, in whom flowed the blood of the gods, rejoice with his cousin, Great Osiris-Ramses, and may he always be welcome in the Great Hall.

Silas beamed. Though disappointed at having to extend his quest on yet another leg, finding that he had, as Royarna, actually seen the Tablets meant he would recognize them, maybe even remember them, as soon as Faen-ka's barriers were broken. This put Silas closer to his objective than he had thought. With renewed enthusiasm he got to his feet and reached for his bag.

Dressed in his complete evocational attire, Silas Alverado stood barefoot within his chalk-drawn circle on the sealed tomb's stone floor and smiled a pleasant greeting at the coalesced spirit held within the summoning triangle.

"It is good to see you again, Bebait," he said telepathically.

"The honor is mine, Your Grace." The man-sized praying mantis tilted her head down and swiveled forward on her four hip joints to bow to the human. "If I may say so, I find it most delightful that I may be able to serve our Highest Priest after such a long respite, and on consecrated ground, no less!"

"I had a feeling you would appreciate the beauty of this circumstance, o Guider into the House of the King, given your love of orderly things."

She bowed again, saying, "Your Holiness flatters me with titles. What may I do for you?"

"Kheprera scarabs." Silas pointed past the summoned god at the cave-in at the end of the hall. "I need some earth moved."

As Bebait shuffled her feet to turn around in the triangle, the magician noted how her shiny, green plated body and wings glistened, not from the light of Silas's lantern, but from the unseen light source above the apparition, the Akasha light of heaven.

"More elegant yet!" the god intoned mentally. She turned back to the old man with a grandiose flourish of her huge serrated claws and insisted, "It will be a pleasure to do such a thing."

She then folded them in front of her thorax and lowered her head, which made her look even more like she was praying. Bebait stood motionless for several seconds while she did her work on the astral and mental planes. At last she requested, "I will need your will power to bring them across."

“Of course,” Silas agreed knowingly and held out his sculpted amber wand.

The wand was carved to form two snakes wrapped around one another, eating the tail of the other at the ends. He concentrated and smiled with his kind blue eyes and a single shiny black dung beetle solidified within the translucent wand, floated to its surface, broke the surface, pulled free, and dropped to the floor, leaving the wand unmarked. As soon as the first one cleared the wand’s surface, another appeared to take its place. Silas concentrated harder and soon there were two appearing at a time, then three, and so on, until the entire foot length of the carved rod was continuously covered with them. Within minutes they were falling to his feet in a steady stream. Most of them scuttled around aimlessly while some found Silas’s feet interesting. He ignored the pricking sensation of their spiny little claws as they poked among his toes and clawed up around his ankles. He pushed harder and formed a flood of the hard, black bodies. They piled up around his legs and out over his hand and arm. Soon they were climbing on the fabric of his robe, both inside and out.

When Silas had brought in a sufficient army, the mantis god opened her huge green claws and made a sweeping gesture toward the cave-in. As one, the horde swept down off the human’s body and back out from the interior of the tomb to where they had wandered. With an audibly violent scrabbling, the beetles attacked the mound like hundreds of tiny drill bits.

Silas lowered his wand, and Be bait turned back to face him, awaiting his next command.

“I think I shall let them be when I am done with them,” the magician announced.

“A most wise decision, o Highest Priest. Let them die a natural death here in the desert and return to the Land of the Dead from whence I retrieved them.” The rationale was given with an undeniably maternal tone.

“It pleases me that you agree. You have done me a great favor, one which I will not forget.”

“Nor will I forget your kindness.” She bowed again, offering formally, “We move together in the same cycle.”

“Yes, we do. Return now to the fields of Sekhet-Hetepu. The triangle no longer binds you.”

Out of long practice, Silas’s grip automatically tightened around the dagger in his left hand in case something went wrong as the dimensional barriers opened and the spirit faded away. He relaxed when he felt he was alone.

Within the hour the tiny black army reduced the blockage enough to allow spears of sunlight and trickles of fresh air into Silas’ prison. Seeing how tirelessly they obeyed the god’s command and not wanting to confuse the mindless creatures by intervening, he decided not to help them. He passed the time reviewing the entirety of his plan.

As the space above the rubble grew, though, his thoughts turned more and more to settling his differences with Hameel al Qabek. He had warned the Egyptian, yet he had acted against Silas anyway. This was a matter of honor. Even though he was far behind schedule, it was still unthinkable not to punish such insolence. His position as a Master of Creation demanded it. An hour later, when Silas stepped out into the fading twilight, his eyes flashed blue fire and his face was painted with the shadows of anger and grim determination.

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The magician’s face remained coolly expressionless as he surveyed his ransacked hotel room. He knew he’d get no help from the hotel. He had very little luggage to go through, so the thieves had probably only been here a few minutes. The police would be a waste of time. In such a strife ridden city, a case like this wouldn’t rate a high enough priority for them to even take a report. Besides, Silas already knew who had robbed him.

He walked directly to the bathroom and examined his shaving kit. Indeed, the false bottom had been discovered and his cash was gone. His passionless mask cracked as the muscles of his jaw knotted. Murdering a man and then robbing him was as low as a creature could get in this world. If he had harbored any reservations about pursuing revenge, they were gone now.

He picked up the phone and dialed a familiar series of numbers.

The call didn't go through, and after a series of clicks a voice came of the line. "International operator," the bland female voice said in English.

Silas' voice was businesslike and pleasant, and showed no trace of the storm raging within him. "I'd like to place a call to Switzerland. Thank you."

While he awaited the connection, he pulled the two-year old telephone directory out of the desk drawer and flipped to "Photographers."

"Hello, Switzerland? Please connect me to the Royal Bank in Berne. No, just station to station will be fine. Thank you."

He glanced through the listings until he found one claiming surveying capability.

"Allo, Banque Royal? Directeur, s'il vous plait."

"Samir Dallafa," he read to himself. "Do I have a job for you."

• • •

Hameel al Qabek broke into a cold sweat when he saw the silver Rolls Royce pull up outside his office. For once he had the money, but that didn't stop his nerves from dancing on edge. He loathed everything about Raghashi, and tonight he was taking the first step toward ridding himself of the drug pusher's awful influence. The art dealer was halfway to his door when the knock came. Before he could reach it, though, the tall, extremely thin, pale skinned Arab arrogantly let himself in. He was accompanied by a man of equal height, but who must have weighed 300 pounds, all of it muscle.

"Ah, Mister Raghashi," he said with purposely strained courtesy. "Why don't you come on in?"

The tall man walked right past him. "I believe you have something for me," he said in a very low, very quiet rasping croak. He lowered his six-foot four frame straight down into one of the chairs without being asked.

The little man quickly stepped behind his desk but remained standing, trying to regain control of the situation.

“Yes I do. In fact, business has been very good. Not only do I have this week’s payment, I have most of what I owe you from before.”

The visitor reached up with one very long bony finger and stroked the humped blade of his nose that jutted out between his small, dark, close-set sunken eyes. “Where would such a payoff leave you?”

The loaded question didn’t escape Hameel. He jumped at the opportunity.

“Free of you!” he sneered openly, leaning forward on his desk with straight arms.

“Oh,” came the almost inaudible, totally unemotional response. “How is your lovely wife, anyway?”

“You know very well she’s still hooked on your poison,” he hissed.

“Yet you want to end our business?”

“Business is business,” he stated flatly. “What I do about my wife’s addiction after I’ve paid you off is none of your concern.”

Raghashi held up a skeletal hand. “There is no need to raise your voice. As you said, business is business, and ours is private,” he added, indicating the open window behind al Qabek.

The broker turned to it absentmindedly, insisting, “There’s no one out there; we’re on the second floor.”

His attention was caught momentarily when he saw a man with a camera on a tripod across the street photographing Hameel’s building. He dismissed it as inconsequential and turned back to his unwelcome guest.

“Say whatever you like. Money talks louder than any of your words.” He took an envelope out of a drawer and slapped it down on the desk. “Go ahead, count it. It’s all there — save fifteen hundred pounds and I’ll have that by the weekend,” he stated indignantly.

The tall, thin man slid the envelope off the desk and looked through its contents.

“You never thought you’d see that, did you?” Hameel gloated.

“One doesn’t get over a heroin addiction like a bad cold,” Raghashi rumbled without looking up from the cash. “Just because you get current with your payments doesn’t mean our business is over.”

"The hell it doesn't," the short man said through gritted teeth.

"We shall see," the pusher said as he slipped the money into his inside coat pocket and stood up. He turned at the door as he left and said, in all earnestness, "Allah be with you."

"May Allah piss on your grave!" Hameel called after him.

For the first time the art dealer had ever seen, Raghashi smiled a mouthful of perfect white teeth before his silent bodyguard closed the door behind them. It was not a pretty sight.

• • •

Seated at his hotel room desk, Silas looked up from his maps of East Africa and glanced at his watch when he heard the wailing evening prayers echoing from a nearby mosque. He hoped Samir Dallafa wasn't devout and hadn't stopped to bow to Mecca. Time was running short. Almost as if on cue, someone knocked on the door.

"Yes, who is it?" he called out in English.

"Uh, Mister Avadado?" came a very youthful, very unsure voice.

He opened the door and the bright faced young porter struggled to explain himself in extremely broken English. "Man ... wanted ... bring ..."

"Yes, yes, is that for me?" Silas demanded in perfect Egyptian.

"Yes!" he said, obviously relieved. He handed the large envelope to Silas and continued. "The man wanted to bring it to you himself, but said you had told him not to come here, and so he gave it to me to bring to you."

Silas didn't know if the youth's prattling was an attempt to fatten the tip or just exuberance, nor did he care. He snatched the package from the boy, shoved a five-pound note into his hand and slammed the door in his face.

He cleared away the maps and went immediately to work setting up an array of items he had spent most of the day gathering: a smooth, hand-blown, lead crystal bowl, a matching platter, a small bag of plaster, a tin of denatured alcohol, a bottle of purified water, and an artist's precision knife. He slipped the stack of enlarged photographs from the envelope and read Dallafa's note.

Thank you for what must be the most demanding, yet fascinating job I've ever done. I didn't think my equipment was accurate enough to enlarge or reduce all the views to exactly the same scale, but I think you'll be pleased with the results. All in all, I think hiring the airplane for the top shot on such short notice was the most difficult. Thank you again. I enjoyed the challenge, not to mention the chance to earn such a generous fee. If you ever have any other jobs in Cairo, please remember me.

Silas looked at the five photographs and smiled. They were perfect. One of them even had al Qabek looking out of his window. Silas took up the knife and started cutting.

When he had trimmed the images down to the edges of the building, he lightly taped the pictures together, edge to edge, to form a box. He then took this model and the plaster into the bathroom and sealed the edges on the inside. Once the plaster was hard, he gingerly pulled the tape off the image faces. All the while he worked, he quietly recited litanies to himself, charging his simulacrum with the essence of the original building.

A few minutes later his preparations were done. The model sat on the platter, the pure water was in the bowl, the lights were out, and each of the two glass vessels were surrounded on the desktop by four lit black candles.

Silas began a different kind of work. He withdrew a small vial from his black bag and dripped four drops of pungently floral smelling yellow liquid into the water. He then withdrew his magical dagger and pricked the end of his left thumb and dripped four drops of his own blood into the bowl. Sitting down to face the bowl, he dipped in his left index finger, stirred it, and then ran his finger around the lip until it sang. He closed his eyes and let the clear ringing sound permeate his mind, let his mind become tuned to the vibration. He continued the dipping and stroking for several minutes before he opened his eyes. He tore open a small envelope of dirt he had collected from in front of Hameel's building late the night

before, upon his return to Cairo. He poured the soil onto the platter around the photographic model and the candles flared.

The magician resumed sounding the bowl but this time he concentrated deeply on the surface of the water. The microscopic ripples threw reflections into his eyes, reflections that congealed to become images. As the images clarified, the harmonics of the bowl's tone wavered and became voices.

Hameel was in his office, walking quickly to his door, looking at his watch, a confused look on his face. He stepped back apprehensively as two very tall men, one sickly thin, the other built like an ox, moved commandingly into the room.

"Raghashi," al Qabek nearly gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"I've considered the offer you made me this morning. I'm here to renegotiate."

"And," the little man hesitated and looked furtively at the huge man, "Is he part of the new deal?"

At first Silas was apprehensive about killing these other men, but now it was obvious they were ultimately responsible for Hameel's deceit. He decided to watch further.

As the art dealer retreated behind his desk, the phone rang. He grabbed up the receiver like an escape hatch. "Hello, yes. Oh, hi. What!?" His face blanched and his eyes shot wide. "No, it can't be. How? Oh God, no." He slumped into his chair and grabbed his forehead with his free hand. "Oh God, what have I done?" he asked no one in particular. "Yes, yes," he returned to the person on the phone. "No, I don't know what to do next," he barked, his voice cracking. "Yes, all right. Goodbye."

"What's that all about?" Raghashi asked dispassionately.

Hameel pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his glistening brow. "Nothing, family business," he dismissed, muttering at his desktop. Looking up at his would-be assailants, he asked in an honestly pathetic voice, "Could we discuss this later? I really have to be alone for a while."

"Absolutely not," he stated flatly. "How do I know that call wasn't planned to get me out of here?"

The little man frowned indignantly. "Because I had no idea you were coming by."

"Not good enough. You either tell me what that call was, or we get back to business."

"All right," he said, screwing in his courage. "All right, I'll tell you. That money I gave you today? It belongs to a man I cheated yesterday. I sent my brother-in-law to stop him from uncovering my fraud, but apparently he got carried away and tried to kill my customer. Well guess what? My wife's brother is now dead, and this man is free. You don't have to worry about doing business with me anymore. You're talking to a dead man," he spat passionately.

"Just how dangerous is this man? I could kill him for you, for a price," the drug dealer offered with characteristic coolness.

"Ha!" Hameel blurted out nervously. "Akbar buried him under a mountainside, and he still got out! He told me that if I crossed him he would hit me like the wrath of God. Go ahead, stay here," he insisted broadly. "I'd love for you to meet him."

"What's that ringing sound?" the giant muscled man spoke up.

"What? I don't hear anything," Raghashi dismissed him.

"No, wait," the big man insisted. "It sounds like an air raid."

"I hear it too," Hameel agreed. "Only it's too high pitched for an air raid." He turned to the open window and listened. "It's getting louder."

"I hear it now also," the thin man commented. He started to waive his hand as if to get back to business, but he halted when the sound grew much louder. "It's coming from all around the building," he observed, worry creeping into his usually overcomposed voice.

Silas continued circling the bowl with his left hand while he popped open the tin of alcohol with his mechanical right and poured it into the platter.

The sound was now so loud the men had to yell to hear one another. "Let's get out of here!" Raghashi demanded and headed for the door.

Silas lit a match and dropped it on the platter.

The thin man howled as his palm seared and stuck to the suddenly red-hot doorknob. He ripped it free of the smoking flesh and shot Hameel a look of terror that made the little man squeal with joy.

“It’s him! It’s Silas!” he screamed with glee.

An instant later, though, his expression matched his enemy’s. The entire outside of the building exploded spontaneously into flames.

“Don’t just stand there!” Raghashi yelled at his man. “Kill him and kick open the door!”

But before anyone could move, their zippers, watches and rings all flashed white hot and ignited clothing or melted into flesh. The bullets in the gun the thug pulled out exploded inside the weapon, sending shrapnel into his face and chest. The metal buttons on Raghashi’s linen suit sent a burst of flames up his front, setting his hair on fire.

Apparently so thrilled to see his tormentor in such agony, Hameel acted as if his own pain were insignificant. “Go ahead Alverado!” he screamed out. “Kill me! I welcome Allah’s judgment!”

In an instant, the floor, walls and ceiling were all consumed in flames. Hameel just laughed maniacally as he watched Raghashi rolling about, futilely trying to put himself out.

Soon, Silas could hear the laughter no more, and all he could see was the reflection of the burning crumpled mass in the plate next to him. He stopped stroking the bowl and drowned the fire with the water.

That night he slept soundly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Hartlove is the award-winning author of the urban fantasy “Goddess Rising” trilogy (*Goddess Chosen*, *Goddess Daughter*, and *Goddess Rising*) and the fantasy romance *Mermaid Steel*. He is also the playwright, director and producer of *The Mirror’s Revenge*, the musical sequel to the Snow White fable, which had its theatrical run in the San Francisco Bay Area in August 2018 to rave reviews.

His stories are filled with conspiracies and the supernatural, gods, dreams, angels, and hidden connections. His creative motto is “Dark Secrets Revealed”. He loves to take stories where the reader does not expect, with sympathetic villains, heroes with very dark pasts, and lots of plot twists. He was selected as one of the “50 Authors You Should Be Reading” by *The Authors Show*.

Jay is a former competitive costumer, having won Best in Show at both San Diego ComicCon and WorldCon. You can read more about Jay’s creative adventures, including much of the research he put into his books, at jaywrites.com.

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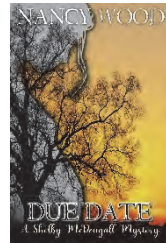
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Jay Hartlove is an award-winning author, playwright, record producer, competition costumer, and theatrical director. Read about his exploits and future projects at jaywrites.com.