

## THE FIRST WESTERNER

(summary)

When Neithekret is assigned to serve Anubis during the fate-deciding Blooding Ceremony, she feels she has been sentenced to a life wrapping linens around the stinking bodies of the Dead. Her mother, a servant of the Great Magician, Isis, has been given a mysterious prophecy by the Oracle of Ra and is envied by many for the knowledge she is deemed to possess. Just as Neithekret is wondering if she will ever emerge from her mother's great shadow, she finds her mother vanished and the prophecy falling to her. But Anubis steps forward, declaring her too young, that she must wait, that the prophecy is too dangerous for a young girl to assume responsibility for.

Five years pass and within those years, Neithekret bides her time, preparing herself, becoming stronger in both mind and body. As a fully-fledged priestess, she finally embarks on her journey across the great cities, temples, and deserts of Kemet, the place the Hellenes who sit on the throne call "Aigyptos." Aided by her friends, she begins to unravel the secret her mother was left with — whispers of immortality in the clutches of a dead woman king — but it is an unlikely meeting with a Hellenic priest of Dionysus that allows her to put the pieces of the mystery together.

Together, Neithekret and Aleksandros venture from the young metropolis of Alexandria to the outer islands of Hellas to the polis of Athens. Their opposing temperaments and differing beliefs bring strife to a path already fraught with danger, but with time, they come to understand one another and learn that perhaps they are not as different as they first thought.

There are other lessons to be learned as well. Neithekret discovers that before becoming Lord of the Embalmed, Anubis was the First Westerner, a title with great implications that speaks of great power. But Anubis is not the only one around her who is not what they first appear to be.

Aided by gods of Kemet and Hellas alike, Neithekret and Aleksandros will unravel an even greater prophecy of their realms and discover that neither life nor death are at all what they seem.

## PART 1 "ON THE BANKS OF ITERU"

## THE TEMPLE OF HATHOR

1

Her first life began on the night of the Bleeding Ceremony.

For fourteen years, Neithekret had grown to womanhood on the grounds of the Temple to Hathor on the banks of *Iteru*, the great river that ran through the Two Lands, lands which her people called *Kemet* and the Hellenes who now commanded the throne called "Aigytos." Her aunt was Hathor's *hemet-netjer-tep*, her High Priestess, and it was she who had raised Neithikret alongside her own daughter, Ve-atu, when Neithekret's mother embarked on the Path of Seclusion by order of her blood god, Isis.

The Temple, built in the bounds of the village Nitentori, sat amid a great complex of mudbrick walls. With hidden passages, courtyards with flowering nooks, and gardens full of vibrant plants, insects, and animals, the temple was a place where two young girls could imagine themselves as anything, and so, they did.

Along the green-blue body of the river, she and her cousin Ve-atu chased the rodents and Caffre cats that lived in the reeds. They climbed the mudbrick walls and peered over the green fields the villagers tended, pretending they were the rulers of that place with austere gazes, their necks straight and heads held high. On other days they were soldiers parrying blows as they hid in the shrubbery. They sent messages to each other on the backs of dragonflies and knelt on the ground, feeling footprints and tasting the dirt to track the enemy. When the sunlight became too much, they played in the shade of the leaning juniper trees that dotted the grounds, trees that appeared as if a great gust of wind had once swept them in a singular direction until they resembled a horizontal brushstroke of tough green leaves and gnarled brown branches.

They watched the *hem-* and *hemet-netjer* of the temple as they walked the path of Hathor. When the priests and priestesses unfurled long scrolls across the grass, reciting history and incantations, Neithekret and Ve-atu rolled their reed mats in the shade and pretended to scribble on the flat leaves of the babel tree that they plucked and stuffed into their pockets along with fallen dates and figs from the bushes that lined the grounds. One of them scribbled while the other stuffed her face; they switched now and then.

It was not all fun, though. Hathor was the Mother of Mothers, a goddess of fertility, motherhood, and healing. From the nearby fields to lands as distant as the southern desert, people came seeking the advice and treatment of the priests and priestesses whose skill was known far and wide. From a young age, Neithekret and Ve-atu learned to dress wounds and apply salves. They knew which

plants to pluck for which remedies, how to grind them and mix them with other powders and liquids. With time, they learned things that required greater skill, like taking a heated instrument to an open wound to stop the bleeding or setting a broken bone with a wooden splint. Most important in the Temple was the skill of delivering new life. In this, they helped with menial tasks, the Hathor *hem-* and *hemet-netjer* handling the parts that required greater skill.

Thirteen winters they passed this way. During their fourteenth winter, the fateful day of the Bleeding arrived, a ritual that would determine the god or goddess they would bind themselves to. And so it was their unsettled minds that pushed them to seek solace in the quiescence of the contemplation lake. Erected in the southeastern corner of the temple estate, in the midst of a tight grove of cypress trees, the lake sat in the midst of four columns that supported a white dome and a single wall where a carved bust of Hathor emerged from the marble. Her face was wreathed in vines. Moss crept across her eyes. From her mouth a steady stream of water poured, collecting in the sunken form of the pond. It was a place where a priestess might look inwards and sit quietly with her thoughts. She could turn over her thoughts, meditating over past words and actions, sifting through possibilities; or she could let her thoughts go and listen only to the quiet chattering of the birds, the bubbling of the water, the wind shifting through the cypress grove.

Neithreket and Ve-atu knelt reverently beside the pond. Ve-atu closed her eyes, murmuring a calming chant. Neithreket tried to follow but found herself instead watching the toads that inhabited the pond lift their heads beside the white lilies floating softly over the glassy surface.

“I think I will catch a toad,” she said after a while.

“What?” Ve-atu asked, opening one eye to behold her cousin with dismay. “Why?”

Neithreket lifted a shoulder. “Better than doing nothing,” she replied. She dangled a finger towards the pond and touched the surface. Ripples spiraled outwards. The toads blinked.

“They are so still. It will be easy,” Neithreket observed, excitement lacing her tone. She bent down so that the wall obstructed her from the view of the toads. “Watch,” she whispered, glancing at her cousin who had closed her eyes tightly. Sighing, Ve-atu opened her eyes and turned her body to face the pond, resigned to see the whole thing.

The toads continued to blink, unbothered, and not even the least threatened at the girl that now placed one foot on the edge of the pond. Neithreket put her weight onto her right foot and lifted her left, balancing. A wave of tingling excitement passed through her. She imagined the wriggling form of the toad in her hands, the awed look on Ve-atu’s face! How surprised she was when amid her thoughts she found herself plummeting into the cold water of the pond, sending lilies and toads scattering in every direction. Spitting moss from her mouth, she ripped a coil of mildew from her braids and flung it behind her towards the offender. The strength of the arms behind her told her it was not Ve-atu, and indeed her cousin sat with a look of bewilderment on her face.

Standing with her hands wrapped around her stomach, shaking with laughter, was the priestess Rahmi. Behind her were Teaithi and Mehertiti. Three years older than Neithriki and Ve-Atu, they had formed a formidable trio shortly after joining the Temple of Hathor.

“Why did you do that?” Neithekret cried angrily.

Ve-atu was stepping into the water to help her up. She stood at Neithriki’s side, pulling algae from her braids and whispering to her, pleadingly, “No.”

“It is only a joke,” Rahmi said.

Neithekret took a step forward, but Ve-Atu held fast to her wrist.

“Stay away from us!” Neithekret said.

Rahmi snickered. Bending over, she struck her hand on the surface of the pond and splashed water into Neithekret and Ve-atu's faces, the priestesses at Rahmi's side soon coming forward to join in until they all tired of the joke and moved on. Rubbing water from her eyes, Neithekret glared at the backs of the retreating priestesses.

Ve-Atu tried to reassure her. “It is only because they are jealous of you.”

“I do not see why,” Neithriki said with disgust. She climbed over the wall of the pond and sat down on the grass. Ve-Atu settled next to her, hugging her knees to her chest. The sun reached down and warmed their faces, dried their damp clothes. Neithekret slipped her sandals off her feet, kicking them away carelessly.

Shortly after Neithekret’s birth, her mother had been called by her blood goddess, Isis, to walk the Path of Seclusion. It was a discipline of isolation in which the priest or priestess fulfilled a certain purpose given to them by their blooded god. She saw her mother only twice a year, once on her birthday and then again during the Summer Solstice.

Her father was a soldier in the king’s army. She saw him more than her mother, though there were often long periods when he ventured to war and she did not see him for many months.

“My mother has nothing to do with me,” Neithekret said bitterly.

“That might not be true,” said Ve-atu.

“Why would I be blooded to Isis? I am nothing like my mother.”

Ve-atu looked like she might say something.

She scrunched her face together determinedly. “When we have our blood ceremony, everyone will see.”

“See what?” asked a voice.

From the shadows of the cypress tree emerged an immaculate figure in the amaranthine robes of Hathor. The gold headdress circling her head caught the light of the sun, as did the gold trim of her sleeves and skirt. A thin gold chain suspended a lick of onyx on her forehead and within that stone shone the black and gold of the night sky. Her features were feline in likeness. Sharp cheekbones. Thin eyes. Like the eyes of the caffre cats, her yellow irises rimmed with kohl glistened beneath dark brows. Her lips were rubbed with a red pigment, a vertical white line running them through. She was Kalvyna the High

Priestess of Hathor. Claspng her hands before her, she looked at Neithekret and Ve-atu, who had jumped to their feet in surprise.

“Auntie,” said Neithekret, bowing her head.

Ve-Atu inclined her head. “Mother,” she said politely. Though she was normally tight-lipped, Ve-atu always spoke freely with Neithekret and her mother. “Neithekret says she is nothing like Auntie, but I think that is not true.”

Kalvyna’s laugh was full of amusement. “And why do you think this, my daughter?”

“They are both strong in spirit,” she said.

Neithekret blushed even as she stomped her foot indignantly. “We are *not* alike!”

Kalvyna smiled. Picking up her robes, she sat before them with one knee bent before her, the other lying sideways across the ground. She was barefoot, and her robes lifted to reveal gold anklets embedded with jewels. She gestured for them to sit with her. “That you are both strong in spirit cannot be denied,” said Kalvyna. Neithekret felt her chest constrict, words bubbling at her lips, but Kalvyna went on, “This does not mean that you will be blooded to Isis.” She plucked a daffodil at her feet. Searching around, she plucked another yellow flower. “Similar but not the same,” she said, simply. “One can heal. The other will give you a terrible rash if you ingest it.” She hummed, twiddling the flowers between her thumb and forefinger. “If you desire a different path than your mother, I believe the gods will recognize this. But you must also seek to accept whatever path you are given and acknowledge it as your own, welcoming whatever may come your way. Remember: even if you are blooded to Isis, you do not have to walk in the footsteps of your mother.”

“And what if Isis calls me to walk the Path of Seclusion?”

“It is still your choice. Whatever your mother was asked to do, she felt that it was important enough to accept the Path.”

Neithekret frowned. “More important than me.”

“No,” Kalvyna said. “Never.”

Neithekret turned away. She sniffed. “If the gods are so powerful, why do they need us? They should do their bidding on their own.”

“I cannot pretend to know the mystery of the gods,” answered Deidra. “But I have often wondered as you do, my child. We do not know the way that the gods walk this world. Perhaps the stars move differently for them than they do us. Perhaps they *are* the stars.” Ve-atu nodded along as Neithekret rolled her eyes. *Vague as usual*. Her aunt smiled. “Sometimes I think of it that way and other times I think of this. Hathor has many responsibilities. But we can help with some of them. I think there is great honor in sharing the deeds of the gods. With our hands, our minds, and our hearts, we can do great things.”

Deidra lifted Neithekret’s sandal from the grass and held open the buckles, urging Neithekret to put her shoes back on. “But I know that this does not make you miss your mother any less.” Deftly, her

aunt slipped the buckles back into place with nimble fingers. “You must remember that she would always choose to be here with you.”

“Really?” Neithekret asked, unable to help herself.

“Yes, my love,” Deidra replied, touching her face softly. She stood and clapped her hands together. “Now it is due time to prepare for the ceremony. As usual, you two have gotten into trouble and will be *late* if you do not hurry.”

Ve-atu’s eyes bugged. She grabbed Neithekret by the hand. “No! No! We can’t be late!”

Neithekret let herself be dragged to her feet. As Ve-atu pulled her towards their living quarters, Neithekret glanced back to her aunt, but she was already gone, moving through the shadows to dispense of her wisdom elsewhere. Her words were often like the air, intangible yet strong, and Neithekret had long since resolved that there could not be anyone wiser than her.

When they arrived in the sleeping quarters, their Elder Sister Feshwar had scowled at their muddy feet and soiled clothes stinking of pond water. They endured an intense scrubbing by Feshwar before dressing in the ceremonial tunic. With her thick brows bent in a look of displeasure, the priestess had scowled at their muddy feet and soiled. She had drawn her fingers harshly through their hair. Ve-atu had sat first for the braiding of her hair. She had asked for a topknot. Feshwar had tied a series of braids into an intricate spiral adorned with gleaming silver beads. Now Neithekret sat on the stool before Feshwar wincing at the pulling of her hair. She had chosen to allow her braids to open into her natural hair below her ears. Feshwar placed a simple bronze ring over the crown of her head.

To their eyelids, she applied kohl and to their lips a rich red ochre. Their skin she rubbed with rich-smelling oils, tucking drops behind their ears and anointing their palms. “Stand straight. Do not be afraid,” she told them. “Now, go forth and let your fate be told.”

They passed the carvings on the Temple walls telling the story of the Founding Mother. In the days of the Old Kingdom, Queen Tahut-sen-u built the temple during the year her husband King Osirtesen took the throne. She wanted a place for her female descendants to cultivate power in the name of the goddess Hathor. The temple was built away from the temples of the priests, away from the prying eyes of men. They were not the first priestesses. There were already those who swathed themselves in virginal white and proclaimed their purity. Tahut-sen-u did not impose purity. Her priestesses were inelegant women who cultivated with dangerous methods, who hung lynx hooves from their necks and whispered in the ears of leopards.

Other temples arose as time marched on, each in service of a different god or goddess. Most were all male or all female, while a select few were mixed like the Temple of Hathor. The Bleeding Ceremony divided the eligible youth to cultivate when they were of age. They would first be *wab*, doing the common tasks of their temple. Over time, they would learn greater skills and find their niche: as an

*hour* priest, interpreting omens and dreams, keeping time; as a *swnw* or *sau*, practicing medicine or healing *heka*; as a *ka priest*, performing daily offerings.

But who did Neithekret wish to be bound to? She let her hand touch the walls of the temple feeling the rising and falling curves of the glyphs. This was the only home she knew. She was lucky enough to have grown up inside the walls of the temple. It was not unlikely that she be bound to Hathor. She shared the blood of Hathor's High Priestess.

*But so do I share the blood of my mother*, thought Neithekret with a grimace.

In truth, she did not have much hope to be matched with Hathor. Hathor was associated with many fair emotions and things. Dancing, Singing, Motherhood, Beauty, and Good Things all belonged in the realm of Hathor; Neithekret felt herself far away from all these things. She appreciated all of these elements but she felt that her purpose would stray from them. So if not Hathor, she thought a god like Bastet might suit her. The goddess protector of Egypt and an Eye of Ra, she was a fierce warrior who appeared in the form of a lioness. There was also Sekmet, goddess of Healing. Neithekret had become well-versed in the child-birthing skills that were taught in the Temple of Hathor. She could suture wounds much swifter than many of the experienced priests and priestesses. Surely she might use her skills to become a skilled healer. The smell of blood did not make her run.

They paused within the outer vestibule of Hathor. Only the High Priestess was allowed in the inner sanctum where the statue of Hathor was located. The gods used their shrine statues to inhabit the mortal world and only the High Priestess was worthy enough to look upon the face of the god. Every morning, they brought the blessings and offerings to the vestibule where Kalvyna would deliver them to the inner sanctum. When the goddess had her fill, they would divide the offerings among themselves.

*Be with me, Mother of Mothers*, Neithekret prayed.

Ve-atu rose from where she knelt, and they left the vestibule.

Above their heads, the citrus colors of twilight were deepening into the blacks of night. In the under chambers where the ceremony was held, the air would be cool and damp. Neithekret savored the warmth of the night as the murmur of voices breached the mouth of the entranceway to the under chambers.

"Neithekret," said a familiar voice.

She turned.

## THE NIGHT OF THE FULL MOON

*I am Atum when he was alone in Nun*

*I am Ra when he dawned, when he began to rule that which he made.*

— BOOK OF THE DEAD, PAPYRUS OF ANI, SHEET 20

“Father,” she said.

He put his arms out for her, and she ran to him. He picked her up to swing her around as they laughed in shared happiness. Long had it been since she had seen her father. He was the captain of the Pharaoh's Guard, and the army was engaged in the East, quelling border disputes with the neighboring kingdoms.

He wore his fine gold armor with a plait of jade around his neck and a colorful blue sash around his waist. His headdress bore the head of a falcon, the mark of the war-god Montu; the pommel of the sword at his hip bore the other mark of Montu, the bull.

“Are you ready, my daughter?” he asked when they had broken their embrace.

Neithekret could not hide her nerves from her father. “I...do not know,” she confessed.

Her father knelt before her. He put his hands on her shoulders. “I was afraid before my Bleeding. I knew that my life would not be the same. But the path I was shown has brought me great things.” He lifted one hand to touch her chin, a wordless sign.

Neithekret looked down at her feet. “Will she come?”

“I had hoped,” her father answered, his tone betraying sadness. “I received a letter from her when the seasons changed. She said she would ask the goddess to grant her leave.”

He spoke as a warrior. She knew her mother's speech well enough to know these words were not her own. Her father stood, gesturing towards the entranceway. “I will be with you,” he said.

If the temple grounds were great above, they were even greater below. Vast passageways with towering columns and great statues of the gods lined the halls of the temple. Neithekret passed under the stony gazes of Ra and Bastet, Horus, Anubis, Osiris and Thoth, her father following behind her. The whisper of a cold wind slithered through the marble passageway and Neithekret rubbed her bare shoulders.

The doors to the Hall of the Gods were lit with two great goblets of fire. At the doorways were the priests and priestesses of Shai, the deity of fate and destiny. They wore sand-colored robes embroidered with a black cobra, one of their eyes covered to symbolize an eye towards Destiny. Part of their induction into the Cult of Shai involved removing one of their eyes. In exchange, they were given a Third Eye that allowed them to look into the Beyond and ascertain an individual's fate.

Into Neithekret's hands was placed a ceremonial dagger wrapped in cloth. She bowed to the dark-haired priest who had given it to her and proceeded into the hall. It was a vast room with a domed ceiling. Rows of stone seating descended to an altar resplendent with offerings. Her father had brought with him a jar of incense from the borders. Together, they walked down the steps to the altar. Her father gave her the jar and knelt as she continued forth to present the jar to Mehar, Senior Priestess of Hathor and second to her aunt.

“The gods accept your offering,” said Mehar.

They bowed to one another.



Neithekret and her father walked to the dais where Ve-Atu sat with her father.

“Jabari,” said her father.

From the Western parts of Egypt, her uncle was a shade darker than Ve-atu. His brown eyes found Neithekret and her father and recognition showed in his gaze. With the stoicism befitting his status as High Priest of Horus, her uncle rose and clasped the forearm of her father in a warrior’s embrace. Across Jabari’s bare chest was the golden falcon with wings of lapis lazuli. Blue and gold bands encircled his upper arms, wrists, and ankles. The pharaoh was the flesh divination of Horus. As High Priest of Horus, Jabari led the Pharaoh’s Guard that protected the King of Egypt and carried out the most important of undertakings.

There was a gentle touch at Neithekret’s elbow. Even before Neithekret turned to see her, she recognized the cinnamon and myrrh of her aunt’s perfume. The High Priestess had exchanged her normal tunic for a deep black tunic. The sash across her breast was set with glimmering garnets. “Senu,” she said warmly. “I have missed you.” They embraced. When they parted, the High Priestess gestured to the dais. “Sit,” she said. “The moon has risen and we will soon begin.”

The murmur of voices grew as other families arrived. Neithekret and Ve-atu sat shoulder to shoulder between their parents, whispering about the ones they recognized. Senu exchanged words with Jabari and Kalvyna, telling of his endeavors in the West.

“Tonight, the young men and women of Nitentori will give themselves to Fate. We have taught them the minor ways of cultivation. Now the gods will lead them and show them their purpose in this world and the world beyond. Before we proceed, let us remember how this world came to be.”

The Shai priests and priestesses processed onto the altar. Two of them carried a great black and gold brazier between them which they placed in the center. Kneeling around the cauldron, the priests and priestesses tilted their faces upwards as one priestess with a long earring dangling from one ear raised a flute to her lips and blew a deep, rasping note. That note slithered through the hall, winding around the alabaster columns with the faces of Hathor: the soft face of the woman and the round head of the cow. It ascended to the ceiling of painted stars that exemplified one of Hathor’s many names, Lady of the Stars. It plunged into the hushed throng of people watching, waiting eagerly. Neithekret felt goosebumps rise on her arms as the temperature in the room seemed to plummet. Ve-atu grasped her hand and held it tight.

One of the Shai priests rose. “In the beginning there was naught but an infinite expanse of dark waters that flowed in chaos. In this chaos there existed four gods and goddesses, the so-called Ogdoad of Khmunu, the realm of the gods. Amun and Amaunet were in and of what cannot be seen, the life force of creation, Nun and Naunet subsisted in the waters, Heh and Hauhet spanned the infinite nature of Time and Space, and Kek and Kauhket brought darkness.”

Now the flute player played a series of eight notes. From within the cauldron, sand rose in tendrils to form a haze over the priests and priestesses. Then, with each note formed a god or goddess.

The gods had the heads of snakes, while the goddesses had heads like the cobras that slithered along Iteru.

“Together, the Ogdoad brought together their domains to create the first earth mound, Benbet, and on this mound Atum brought himself into existence from Nun and Naunet, the waters of chaos. Bound within the petals of a great lotus, encased in the world egg, he emerged with the blinding light of the sun wreathed about him and in him. Amun-Re emerged, and, as the others withdrew, he began to forge the earth.”

The sands writhed to depict the mound. Amun-Ra’s world egg rose from the sweeping waves of chaos and passed through the mound to burst open through the mouth of a lotus. At that moment, the skylight in the center of the chambers was opened as another priest held a mirror to catch and refract that light. The light of the full moon was reflected into the sand particles as Amun-Re broke through the lotus: the blinding light of the sun.

The priest waited for the “oohs” and “ahs” to subside before continuing. One of Neithekret and Ve-Atu’s peers ascended to the altar, holding a tray stacked with almond cakes baked by his family. He bowed his head and joined the chant that rose up among all those who sat in the hall.

*“Your offering cake belongs to you, Nun and Naunet*

*Who protects the gods,*

*Who guards the gods with your shadows”*

A pause of silence and then the thundering voice of the priest returned. “The First Time began as Ra created his children, Shu and Tefnut — Wind and Rain. As the new world began to form, Shu and Tefnut went out to explore the waters of Nut in hopes of creating the world, but, alas, they became lost. Amun-Re shed tears for them, mourning his children, and through these tears, the life-giving blood of Amun and Amuanet instilled in Amun-Re gave rise to the first humans.”

As a sorrowful note brayed through the mouth of the flute, small figures rose in the shadow of Amun-Re, tiny and helpless, trapped on the mound of Benbet.

“Atum-Ra saw that there was nowhere for the men and women to live. And so from the Wind and the Rain came the Sky, ‘Nut’, and the Earth, ‘Geb.’ Geb and Nut were immediately intertwined, infatuated with one another. Their relations angered Amun, for they shirked their duties of creation in favor of worshiping one another. Finally, Amun-Re separated them, Nut above and Geb below, the skies and the earth, close but never more able to reach one another. The tears of Nut’s eternal sorrow reach Geb as rain, the only way he can touch his beloved. In turn, Geb shakes the Earth or causes molten heat to rise from the mountains.”

Mountains and plains, valleys, waterfalls, streams and rivers; all with winds caressing them and clouds and rain covering them were shown with the sands of Shai. The figures of men and women began to walk over the land, collect together, disperse, and journey on. Suddenly, towering above them, two figures emerged. “From Geb and Nut, Osiris and Isis,” said the priest. “Atum appointed them King and Queen to rule over mankind and show them the path by which they might enrich their lives to enjoy

eternity in \*A'aru. To watch over mankind, Atum was reborn each morning in the sunlight that rose from Geb as Ra and is thus known as Atum-Ra.

“Man learned and grew. He came together and broke apart. Along the waters of the Great River, two kingdoms emerged, each powerful in its own; to the North, the Red Land, and to the south, the White Land. A powerful king arose to unite these kingdoms. Time has seen the rise and fall of many kings in the Two Lands. Now we follow the leadership of a man whose blood is not of our ancestors, and though we mourn the days long gone, when we were our own rulers, we are still proud.”

*Aleksandros*, thought *Neithekret*. *And before him, the Persians*. They had taken advantage of the weakness of bickering rulers to take control of the Kingdom. Now the Hellenes seeped into the Two Lands, raising statues and temples of their own gods beside theirs. The sands of Shai showed this.

“But our gods stay with us. Hathor, goddess of this great temple, mother, wife, and daughter of Amun-Re is with us from birth and stays with us until death. We look to Horus to lead our foreign king.”

Her Uncle Jabari inclined his head. He served Ptolemy, advising him on the traditions of their people.

“Isis protects and heals us. Osiris, the First Westerner, lords over the dead. Multiplicitous are our gods who assist us in every aspect of our lives. Today, the young men and women of Nitentōri shall discover which god they will bind themselves to. With this binding, the spirit of the gods, the original spirit of Amun-Re, lives within us. Whatever foreign rule may come will not steal the spirit of our people. Our temples may one day be desecrated, our lands stolen. We may be forbidden to speak in our tongue. But as long as the gods are within us, in our Blood, *Kemet* (3.) shall live on.”

Sounds of agreement rippled through the crowd. The sands of Shai were returned to their vase. The flute player withdrew his instrument and slipped it into a pocket in her kaftan. As the priests and priestesses withdrew from the altar, Kalvyna rose from her seat and ascended the steps to take their place. A train of Hathor disciples followed her. They took their places across the altar. Kalvyna's Senior Priestess crossed to the back of the altar. In her hand, she held a great torch. The light passed onto her forehead where she had drawn a red circle to emulate the red sun Hathor wore upon her head.

“The Wall of Gods,” said the Senior Priestess. And she lowered the touch to light a sizable brazier from which sprang forth a great flame that illuminated, behind the altar, a towering wall of busts that ascended to the ceiling. There were hundreds of them carved into the rock. The great faces of Osiris, Isis, Set, Nebt-het, and Horus overshadowed many. The greatest of those faces was Atum-Ra, but the last to be blooded to Ra was a pharaoh hundreds of years ago, Ramses II. Close to Ra was the beautiful face of Hathor, Mother of Mothers.

Kalvyna stepped forward. “Do not doubt yourselves on this night, my children. You have prepared your whole life for this moment. Now is the moment that you seize your destiny. As you go forth, let yourself be ruled by your heart and you will never lose your way,” said she. She raised her *was* scepter, forked at the bottom with the horns of a cow. “Come forth, Daughters and Sons of Ahket.”

They would proceed by the seasons: *Akhet*, when Iteru was inundated with waters from the tears of Geb as he mourned for Nut; *Peret*, the growing season, when the floodwaters receded to reveal rich, black soil; and *Shemu*, the harvest season when the flowers bloomed and the sun was mild.

Neithekret was born in Akhet. She rose, feeling her legs shake as she did so. Ve-atu squeezed her hand for a moment before letting go. Her father stood behind her. She felt his hand on her shoulder, firm and reassuring. With a deep breath, she walked forward.

The torches along the aisle warmed her face. She stepped to the back of the line that was forming. Ahead of her, a boy stepped onto the altar. His mother and father stood beside him but paused beside Kalvyna as their son continued on to stand beside the Senior Priestess. The priests of Shai had returned. They stood now beside the boy. *Zagret*, Neithekret remembered.

Zagret handed his ceremonial dagger to the Senior Priestess. She chanted:

*The tears of Amun-Re*

*Blood in thy veins*

*Spirit of the Two Lands*

*Seize your destiny*

With a cry, the priestess swept the dagger across Zagret's hand. Holding his hand over the flames, she guided the blood into the fire. The priests of Shai grasped his shoulders, faces upturned. Suddenly, the flame leapt high with a flurry of embers and divided itself. The new flame raced up the rocky precipice towards the Wall of Gods. The flame curved this way and that, climbing and climbing until illuminating the face of Ma'at, the god of justice. It lingered there briefly before sputtering out. Zagret stumbled backwards as the Shai released him.

"The gods have spoken!" Shouted the Senior Priestess.

Drums were beat. Voices of celebration rose up. And the line began to move as the gods called forth their new followers from among her peers.

Finally, Neithekret found her feet climbing the stairs of the altar. Kalvyna smiled at her and raised her chin. *Be strong*, her eyes said. Neithekret handed her dagger to Mehar and stood before the fire, feeling it warm the front of her body through her kaftan. Beside her, the *hem* of Shai moved closer. They had unveiled their faces to reveal the pupiless Third Eye which they would now use to discern her destiny as they communed with the gods. Holding out her palm, Neithekret let her gaze rest on the Wall of Gods as she forced her mind to be free.

There was a stinging pain on her palm as the blade slipped across her flesh, tearing a red ravine into the crossmarks of her skin. Her hand was tipped; the blood dripped into the flame. The *hem* of Shai reached out, their fingertips on her shoulders, gently, then tight, grasping, making indentations in her skin. They would act as a connection between her and the gods. When she closed her eyes, she heard the whispering of the Shai within her mind. Then, dim but audible, countless other voices whispering back and forth.

*The gods*, she realized, awed.

From among those voices, one grew louder than the rest. A hiss and the flame moved, jumping outwards. Neithekret opened her eyes to watch it ascend, curving around different busts. At last, it stopped beneath the pointed head of a familiar animal: the jackal.

“Anubis!” said the Senior Priestess.

In a daze, she turned, allowing the familiar faces of the Hathor priestesses to guide her to where her father waited for her in the wings of the altar. Her hand was cleaned and bandaged tightly. The dagger, wiped of her blood, was given to her in its sheath. Her father took it and together they returned to the dais to sit beside Jabari and Ve-atu.

“Mysterious,” Ve-atu whispered as she sat.

Neithekret nodded dumbly, still overwhelmed at having heard the voices of the gods. Soon those born in Peret arose, Ve-atu among them. The horned bust of Hathor shone brightly after her cousin’s blood was offered to the flame. Afterwards, they went upstairs to the courtyard. Lanterns strung between palms illuminated wisps of colorful paper. Tables laden with fish and meat, sweet dates, bread, and amber honey were pushed against the outside of the courtyard to allow for dancing in the center. Neithekret saw these things as if through a fog. Within her, however, a feeling rose, clear and strong as she sat by her father: disappointment.

## THE LORD OF THE PLACE OF EMBALMING

### 3

Anubis was the offspring of Osiris and Isis. One would think this lineage would beget greatness, Osiris being the Lord of the Underworld and Isis a supreme goddess of life and *heka*, but Anubis was, by Neithekret’s account, merely the glorified Undertaker, the middleman who prepared the body after death and conducted the judgment of souls alongside Osiris and the forty-two judges.

Neithekret understood the importance of preparing the body for the next journey but she did not seek to stand around touching dead flesh and embalming ointments for the rest of her life. She was struck that she had been given something so...banal. What trick or art was there in mummification? She had heard the tales of her mother’s flame blossoming tall beneath the statue of Isis; she had been the only new addition to the Temple of Isis during the year of her bleeding. The initial curiosity among the *hem-netjer* had only deepened when Isis had called her to walk the Path of Seclusion.

Anubis was often called the Mysterious One, but two other youths from Nitentōri alone had been selected. There were bound to be others. For so long she had wanted to be nothing like her mother, singled out from the others to walk a lauded path. Now, a single reed of papyrus unseen in a field of many, she wanted nothing else.

*What a fool I was*, she thought.

Neithekret turned where she lay in her bed. She buried her head in her pillow and let out a groan of exasperation. Flopping onto her back, she opened her eyes, and, feeling the warmth of the morning

sun on her face as it streamed through the open window, rose from her place beside Ve-atu and went outside. Bougainvillea vines overflowing from tall vases wound around the columns of the inner vestibule, sunlight spilling into a shallow reflection pool where a blue sky smattered with clouds rippled in the water. She followed the hallways to the dining pavilion. In the far corner, her aunt was speaking to a woman with a shawl pulled over her head. When Kalvyna saw her, she smiled. The woman turned; it was her mother.

Kalvyna rose. Saying something to her sister, she bowed her head and left, leaving them alone. Neithekret walked to the table. Sometimes, she felt that her mother's features slipped her memory. As they stood facing one another, Neithekret looked at her anew, memorizing what she looked like. Unlike Kalvyna, who had feline features, Yeset's features were more harsh and pronounced. She had wide, deep set eyes that she now fixed upon Neithekret. "A season brings such change to your face," her mother said quietly, her brow furrowed. She reached out to smooth her finger across Neithekret's cheek. An emotion Neithekret could not understand crossed her mother's face, pulling her lips downward.

*I disappoint her,* Neithekret thought, averting her gaze.

Her mother dropped her hand. "Your father tells me Anubis has called you."

Neithekret nodded. "Yes."

"I am sorry I was not present at your ceremony. I traveled as swiftly as I could after Isis said I might see you this once."

Neithekret took the seat her aunt had abandoned. A bowl of fruit sat enticingly before her, and she plucked a berry to push between her lips. "Isis speaks to you?" she asked.

"In a way," Yeset replied.

"Can I know the way?" Neithekret wondered.

A soft smile curved her mother's lips. "Someday, perhaps."

"But not this day?"

Yeset shook her head. "Not this one. But do not be so disappointed. Soon you will have your own secrets, Neithekret."

Neithekret scoffed. She tore a piece of bread and pressed a piece of cheese into it, shoving both into her mouth. "Of anointing dead flesh," she said.

Yeset laughed. Neithekret smiled despite herself.

"My two favorite priestesses in one place," came a deep voice. Her father entered the pavilion with a smile on his face. He sat beside her mother, extending an arm around her shoulders. It was clear from their movements and the way they looked at each other that they had already found one another during the night. "Now, what makes you laugh this way?"

"Our daughter does not find her new Temple so alluring," said Yeset, turning away from Senu to look at Neithekret who pursed her lips unhappily.

"No?" said her father. "Anubis is very important. He has many grand temples. Wait until you see his temple in Hardai."

“He is important for dead people, father. I am *alive*.”

“Hmm. Are you sure?” He reached across the table to pinch her cheek. He laughed when she threw a berry at him in return; deftly, he caught it and placed it in his mouth. Neithekret took one and crushed it in her mouth, unable to help herself from smiling as her father’s mirth and the sweetness of the berry filled her with happiness.

Her mother spoke now. “Only those of a truly pure heart can work alongside Anubis. An impure heart could not deliver souls to the Forty-Two judges to have their heart measured against the pure heart of Ma’at. Death is not the end, only a beginning. You see Man at a Crossroads in his life. And you will guide those who need you to Duat.”

Neithekret listened, clinging to her mother’s words. She and Kalvyna had a way with words. Yeset’s words were softer and given more sparingly but held the same power.

“Better said than I,” her father remarked. “You must understand that the gods have a purpose beyond what we can comprehend. They choose us because they see things within us that we do not see ourselves. Not only what we are, but what we can be. When Montu called me, I was not a warrior. I was afraid of everything. A snake slithering in the grass,” he said, putting his hands together and moving them side to side, “could make me weep and cry for my mother. I do not think anyone would have thought I would have gone on to fight. When I ventured to Montu’s Temple in Medamud, I was certain I would be the smallest one there. Yet, I was wrong. It is true that there were strong boys there who would have beaten me ten times over in any feat of strength or speed. But it is also true that there were boys even smaller and more frail than me.

“Over time I grew stronger,” he went on. Here he paused to flex his arm, the sinewy muscles there showing beneath his skin. Yeset rolled her eyes as Neithekret laughed. “I stood taller and prouder. But this is not the power that Montu saw in me. You know that Jabari and I fought under Aleksandros after he liberated *Kemet* from the Persians. He was a lion amongst men. To see his resolve gave us hope. We had been practicing in the cover of darkness under Artaxerxes and his wicked successors. Now we could again be in the light! We could restore our temples, free our people, and return *Kemet* to its glory.

“Now my strength had purpose. It had purpose because I had *hope*. I felt that my actions would be worth something. That is when I felt my resilience and courage awaken within me. Long we fought, but when we put our swords down, the victory was ours. I knew that I wanted to awaken this courage in others. I wanted to be a leader among men. That is the purpose I believe Montu saw in me. I will protect our country so that we will never live in darkness again. I will lead others to this end.”

Neithekret knew that the people of *Kemet* had still not recovered from the humiliation of the Two Lands under Persian rule. While the first Persian rulers had respected their ways, the last of them had desecrated their temples, stolen statues and riches dedicated to the gods, and enslaved their people. The *hem-netjer* were reduced in numbers. Many of their people had taken up craftsmanship or moved into the fields to remove themselves from the lash of the Persians. Long before the Persians or the Hellenes or the

Noba people who built their kingdoms, *Kemet* had existed. Before man walked the earth, *Kemet* had existed in the spirit of the gods.

“Do you understand?” asked her father.

“I do,” she said.

Voices were filling the dining pavilion as the Hathor *hem-netjer* arose to greet the day. Kalvyna returned with Jabari and Ve-atu.

“The procession to Karnak begins soon,” said Ve-atu, excitement written in her features.

“Do you have your dagger?” Senu asked.

“I left it beside my bedroll,” Neithekret replied. She hurried to retrieve it.

With her mother and father behind her, Neithekret accepted the black onyx stone that was placed in the pommel of her dagger, marking her as a *hemet-netjer* of Anubis. They joined the procession of the newly-blooded *hem-netjer* and their families that would be led by the Hathor temple, as it was the principal temple of Nitentori. They would all go to the city of the gods in Waset, where hundreds of temples were erected for the gods. She stood beside the other two Nitentori youth blooded to the Lord of the Embalmed. Khendjer, thin-boned with a soft gaze, stood beside his grandfather, a skilled flute player who had long worked in the service of the Temple of Hathor. She knew little of him aside from when he accompanied his grandfather to the temple, speaking in quiet tones to the *wab* priests. Neither did she know well Merineffera, daughter of two farmers.

They regarded each other silently, exchanging glances but not words. Merineffera adjusted her kaftan over her shoulder and nodded her head. Neithekret saw that she held her knife in her hand with poise as if she might wield it given the chance. Neithekret eyed the blade in her own hands warily. The only time she had used a knife of any sort was to sever the organ that connected mother to child. She rubbed her finger over the onyx stone before tucking the dagger back into her belt. She wore a black kaftan around her shoulders, already envying Ve-atu in her red kaftan.

The procession went outside the temple walls into a foray of noise. Nitentori’s people thronged along the pathway observing the new *hem-netjer* and their hues of dress. When Ra in his sun-bark hung in the middle of the sky, they stopped to eat, sharing fruits and fish, nuts and bread between them. Neithekret stepped into a slow-moving ribbon of *Iteru*, broken off from the fast-moving rapids reddened with silt, the clear water grabbing her ankles in a cold vice. She cupped her hands to drink, then poured the cool water over her face. It raced through the layer of sandy grit and sweat on her face, carving tributaries over her skin until collecting in the dip of her collarbone only to race down her skin with renewed speed.

Again, they walked, passing through a village where more people gathered to meet them. A miniature statue of Anubis was pressed into her hand. With the head of a jackal and the body of a man, Anubis presented a daunting figure. Jackals ravaged the graves of the dead and picked at the carcasses of



dead animals shoulder to shoulder with the scavenger birds. Walking the road to the Land of Temples with her father after sundown, they had passed within a stone's throw from a deceased horse. In the blackness of night, all that could be heard was the snapping of the jackals' jaws as they stripped meat from the bone and the fierce growling between them as they fought for a place.

Her mother came beside her. She looked at the statue, then at Neithekret. "He would not appear to you in such a way," she said.

"You know the likeness of Anubis?" she wondered, her voice rising in excitement. At long last it seemed her mother might betray some of her secrets.

"Shhh," her mother hushed her. She leaned toward Neithekret. "One of them. The gods tend to have many likenesses."

"What does Isis look like?"

Her mother gave her a look that told her she would not receive an answer to this. "She appears as a woman?" Neithekret tried instead.

After a moment, Yaset nodded. "Sometimes."

The land was curving around a rocky outcropping. Iteru swept towards them, her waters rushing swiftly. In a few weeks time, her shores would begin to recede but now they still passed high into the fields, inundating them. The earth was wet. The leaves of the trees were a deep emerald color, sweating droplets of water.

"As real as you or I?" Neithekret asked.

Yaset laughed. "Yes. Very much so."

Neithekret was quiet. It was not uncommon to hear stories of the gods revealing themselves to their blooded who showed true loyalty. Neithekret recalled the whispering of the gods during her bleeding ceremony. Her father had once hinted that once he had seen one god, he began to notice them more often. But Neithekret had yet to see a god, and so she asked, the questions overflowing, "Do they speak as we do? Have they shown you things? Will they speak to me?"

"They speak in tongues we understand but not always ones we can speak ourselves," her mother answered, words that only inspired more questions for Neithekret. "They have shown me things. I cannot speak of those things."

Neithekret frowned.

"I cannot say whether they will speak to you. The gods have different ways of conducting themselves. Some prefer to remain distant, others closer to their followers. They also identify themselves as befitting the needs of the individual they seek to communicate with — or who seeks to communicate with them. Your father spoke of the gods knowing our purpose. This I believe as well. But what I will say to you is that this purpose may be difficult. Sometimes we must pay a price. Your father had to learn to take lives to fulfill his purpose. And I had to reckon with —" Yaset looked away. "There are many things I must reckon with."

Neithekret saw the darkness sweep over her mother. “Will you ever tell me what you seek on the Path of Seclusion?” she asked.

Yeset turned to her. Neithekret was surprised to see that her eyes were hard. “Never,” she said without hesitation.

Neithekret stopped walking. Her mother saw the look in her eyes and went on, though not before Neithekret saw a flash of sadness in her eyes. When she turned to find her father, she saw Khendjer watching her. He held her gaze for a moment before looking away, saying something to his grandfather, who smiled widely.

She passed them without a thought. Her father, standing beside Jabari, frowned when he saw her storming towards him. “What has happened?”

“She is so cruel!” Neithekret exclaimed.

Senu and Jabari exchanged a look.

“I will find you at the temple,” Jabari said, patting Senu’s shoulder as he excused himself and disappeared into the throng of dust and people.

Jabari waited until he was gone to ask, carefully, “What did she say?”

“She said she will never tell me what she seeks in the Path of Seclusion! I am her daughter. Why does she not trust me?”

“Ah,” said Senu. “I see.” He scratched his chin, something he did when he was thinking. “It is not that she does not trust you. Tell me, Neithekret, what do you think she seeks on her path?”

Ahead, two ships waited to carry them down *Iteru* to Karnak, the City of Temples. She considered her father’s question. They passed onto the first ship and stood at the side of the ship watching the men dress the ship with rope and cloth sails.

Isis was a great wielder of that-which-was-not-seen and an esteemed healer who had once brought her husband Osiris back from the dead. “Healing knowledge,” she offered. “Powerful *heka*.”

“So you assume that this Path can only have good things,” said Senu.

Neithekret opened her mouth. “I...” she trailed off.

Senu raised his eyebrows meaningfully. Then, he said, “Whatever she encounters on that Path, only she knows. I understand that it is difficult to be kept from her Truth. I struggle with this myself. But I trust your mother. She is strong and good. And so we must be strong and good and honor her silence.” He swept a strand of hair behind her ear as the ship pushed away from the banks of *Iteru* and they began to cross the heart of the great river.

As Shu filled the sails and carried them down the river, Neithekret and her father found Yeset on the starboard side of the ship. Neithekret touched her mother’s hand. She waited until her mother looked down at her to entwine their fingers, taking her father’s hand as well.

They reached Karnak as the sun sank a few positions shy of the horizon. Leaving the ships behind, they walked the short distance to the great pylons marking the edge of the temple complex and proceeded to enter.

Inside, there were hundreds of shrines for the gods. The greater deities had large temples dedicated to them; the minor deities associated with them had smaller shrines or temples in the vicinity. — was a goddess-helper of Hathor who ensured the safety of women with child from —, devourer of infant spirits. There were also independent shrines for certain gods like Serket, who protected children from scorpions, — goddess of River Crossings, and — Finder of Lost Things. Plots of irrigated soil planted with rows of duam palms, thin willows, and flowering bushes divided the temples and lined the main esplanade.

They separated to find their individual temples, the unblooded going forth to wait at the doors to the Temple of Ra where they would later pay their respects to the local god of Waset. Khendjer and Merineffera waited at the steps of the shrine to Anubis. His was not a great temple like that of Isis, a pristine white structure with red embellishments that her mother had stepped into. It was similar in size to the temple of Montu which her father had ascended into with a few other men from Nentori, but while Montu's temple was stout with carvings of bulls, this one was no bigger than a small shrine from the outside. A single jackal statue marked the entranceway, sitting lazily on its haunches as it observed them with its onyx eyes. Like most temples dedicated to Anubis, only the front vestibule sat above the earth. Standing side to side, the three of them covered the breadth of the structure. Khendjer carried a torch handed to him by one of the *hemet-netjer* and lit the brazier along the wall. A flight of stairs descending below ground was cast into light, and their three shadows lengthened across the stone.

"I will go first with the light," said Khendjer, his voice low but sure.

Together, they descended.

The bowels of the temple were filled with cobwebs and rat droppings. The remains of a slaughtered fowl were in a corner. As they covered their noses, Neithekret made a sound of disgust. "The priests should have cleaned this," she said.

Mereneffera glanced at her sidelong. Her gaze flitted away. "Perhaps they are otherwise occupied," said she.

"With what?" Neithekret snorted.

Khendjer was stooping to light the brazier at the altar. The jackal head of Anubis observed them over the carved chest of a man.

"Tending the dead," Mereneffera responded irritably.

Neithekret crossed her arms. "Hathor has plenty of duties. Once we had nearly ten and five mothers in our temple at the same time and not once did the *hem-netjer* shirk their duties to maintain the cleanliness of the goddess's shrine."

"This is not the main shrine," Khendjer said.

Neithekret looked to cast him a searing gaze of annoyance and tell him that *of course, she knew this* but found his back still turned as he bent to arrange the incense they had been given at the feet of Anubis.

“They might have sent a *wab*,” she sniffed. “They knew we would come here after the bleeding.”

Mereneffera reeled on her, her dark hair flying outwards as she turned narrowed eyes upon Neithekret. “By the gods, would you cease your complaining? This is not the Temple of Hathor!” she seethed. “I assumed you would be spoiled, seeing that you are born of *hem-netjer* and daughter of a Chosen, but I see now that you are bitter as well. Did you seek a higher path? Do you wish to cry now that you are down here with us, away from the gilded halls of the Great Mother?” Her words were mocking. A sneer turned her lips over her white teeth.

Neithekret had grown accustomed to the teasing words of Rahmi and the others at the Temple of Hathor, but in Mereneffera’s words she felt true malice. Here her aunt would not come to her aid. Still, she hardened her face and stepped forward. “You will not speak to me this way,” she said.

Mereneffera’s eyes gleamed in the darkness. Her hand hovered over the hilt of her dagger.

“This behavior has no place in the presence of Anubis,” said Khendjer, stepping between them.

“Why not?” asked Mereneffera. “I will simply embalm her when we are finished.”

“The only thing you have done with that knife is strip grain,” retorted Neithekret.

Mereneffera’s nostrils flared in anger. Pushing Khendjer aside, she rushed forward. Neithekret raised her hands over her face, stumbling backwards. Descending into the cave suddenly was the pounding of drums.

“It is time for the ceremony,” said Khendjer. He stooped to blow out the lights beside Anubis and removed the torch from the wall.

Mereneffera was smirking at her when Neithekret lowered her hands. She averted her gaze in shame, wordlessly following in the back behind Mereneffera and Khendjer.

Outside, the sun had set, blanketing the complex in darkness. Silver braziers were blooming with firelight as priestesses scurried in the shadows of the shrines and temples with torches in hand. These were the *hem-netjer* of Mut, creator goddess and wife of Amun-Re. A blush tinged her cheeks when she remembered that it was these priestesses of Mut and the priests of Ra who tended the temples of Karnak. Her shame deepened knowing she had been wrong to blame the *hem-netjer* of Anubis.

*But all the same, she thought, it is dishonorable to leave the temples in such disarray.*

Other *hem-netjer* were emerging from the temples, their faces turned towards the towering edifice of the Temple of Amun-Re. A colonnade of columns of great height and width, painted with a rich green, and a row of flagstaff tipped with golden flags fluttering in the wind marked the way to the grand pylons etched with a number of the faces of Amun-Re: the crocodile, snake, ram, and goose.

Deep reds, rich blues, and shimmering gold paint accentuated the inside of the main hall where the ceiling towered far over their heads. The central columns stood even taller than those of the wings and opened at their top like a papyrus flower in full bloom. Sphinx statues peered at them from between the columns, poised to ward off any evil *heka* or beings that might enter the hall.

The High Priest of Amun-Re, Unkethethr, accepted the offerings for the Hidden One. Only he would proceed forth to the offering hall where the ceiling and floor came inwards to mimic the closeness of the primordial earth womb from which Amun had first emerged. But even Unkethethr would not cross the boundary into the *naos* to behold the face of the Hidden One, for neither Unkethethr nor the other priests of Amun were true *hem-netjer* of Amun. They were high-ranking members of other temples sent temporarily to serve Amun. Unkethethr was a *hem-netjer* of Thoth, the Wise One. Long had it been since Amun had called any man or woman to serve him. He had recognized the Macedonian Aleksandros when he visited the Oracle of Ra, and as Ra, he had accepted him as ruler of *Kemet*.

Once many *hem-netjer* had been blooded to Amun. In the Temple of Karnak where Neithekret and the others stood, the Amun *hem-netjer* had built a prosperous center. They had amassed a great estate with much land, wealth, and power. But they had abused their position and turned against Amun. When Ramesses XI passed, the high priest of Amun-Re, Herihor, ascended to the throne in his place, so great was the prestige of those priests. And yet, rather than acknowledge that all this had come to them through Amun, the *hem-netjer* of Amun began to pass their power to their sons, shirking their duty to listen to the voice of the Hidden One to call new followers. Their own greed was the end of them. From this day on, Amun ceased to call man to serve him after this despicable betrayal of his trust.

Unkethethr returned to the main hall. “The offering is done. Now we will go to the courtyard to eat.”

There were many murmurs of relief at this announcement. The hall emptied, and Neithekret found her parents by the exit, speaking quietly to one another. Their expressions were serious. One of Montu’s *hem-netjer* approached them, calling out to Senu. After a short exchange, the *hem* of Montu nodded and left, his steps quick and purposeful. Neithekret frowned, sensing something was amiss. By her mother’s expression, she was not alone; and yet, when her mother noticed her watching, she smoothed her expression. She touched her father’s arm, murmuring something. He turned and smiled, but her father was not a good liar — not like her mother. His smile did not reach his eyes.

“Shall we go eat?” he asked. He rubbed his belly. “I am starving. I could eat a whole pig!”

Neithekret felt a conflict of forces within her. *But we have only just made peace*, she thought, her eyes meeting her mother’s. Inexplicably, she knew that her mother was aware she sensed something.

“You cannot be as hungry as me,” she said. “My stomach has consumed itself.”

Relief was written in her mother’s eyes.

Neithekret and Ve-atu slept at the edge of the tent with the Hathor *hem-netjer*. With mats pulled close together, they each took turns telling the other about her day.

“Mereneffera is so mean,” Neithekret said, telling Ve-atu about what had occurred.

Ve-atu listened. Afterwards, she pursed her lip, thinking, then remarked, "I think something happened between her mother and mine. I remember once I saw them speaking. They were both angry."

"Really?" Neithekret wondered. She seldom saw her aunt in a sour mood.

Ve-atu nodded. "But I do not know why they argued."

They were both quiet. "There are ten who come to Hathor. They spoke very loudly. I tried to join in, but I could not find my voice. They spoke so quickly!"

Neithekret touched her arm assuredly. "They will come to like you. I do not think anyone could not like you," she said.

"That is not true," Ve-atu argued. "I am sometimes far too quiet and —"

"Shh," Neithekret hushed her.

Outside, a group of people passed between the tent and the fire lit outside, casting shadows onto the canvas. Neithekret recognized the veiled head of her mother, and it was not hard to recognize the others — her father, Jabari, and Kalvyna. There was one other she did not recognize among them.

She waited until they were out of earshot to whisper, excitedly, "We should follow them."

"No!" Ve-atu said. "We should not. We are to be in bed. Look, I am sleeping!" Squeezing her eyes shut, she flopped onto her back and feigned sleep.

Neithekret made a face and, reaching over, pinched her cousin's nose until Ve-atu swatted her hand away with a groan. "I do not want to get into trouble. We are hemet-netjer now, Neithekret!"

"We will only get in trouble if we are caught, and I would never allow that to happen," Neithekret promised. "My parents were speaking of something earlier that troubled them, but they did not tell me what it was. Can you truly resist such a mystery?"

"Yes," Ve-atu hissed. "I truly could."

Neithekret rolled her eyes. Slipping from her sleeping bag, she crawled around the sleeping bodies of the other hem-netjer and out of the entrance. Ve-atu crawled out after her as she was standing, brushing the sand from her knees.

"I will regret this," her cousin grumbled.

Moving fast but at a distance, they followed their parents as they crossed the courtyard where the tents had been erected and entered a side vestibule. Through this vestibule was a narrow hallway, a side passage to the main shrines. Skirting the temple of Osiris, they ascended the steps of the Temple of Isis, Neithekret's mother leading the way. As she and Ve-atu peeked around a column of Osiris' temple, she recognized the other figure as Ukethethr.

Frowning, Neithekret waited until they had gone inside to continue on. Ve-atu grabbed her arm. "Wait," she said. "This is not for our eyes. They have come under the cover of night."

"It is our parents," Neithekret argued. "They should not keep secrets from us!"

Bending low, she moved to creep out of the shadows when Ve-atu grabbed her again. She spun around, words of dismissal on her lips, but Ve-atu was shaking her head and pointing at something. She followed her gesture to see one of her father's guardsmen posted at the foot of the Temple of Isis. He was

coming around the far side of the steps. Quickly, she hid herself behind the column again, Ve-atu ducking with her. She waited, then tilted her head enough to see.

“A night watch,” she said. “There must be something there they do not want us to see!”

“Why does this excite you so?” Ve-atu groaned.

“There are two of them,” Neithekret gathered, ignoring her cousin. The second guard now passed, moving along the outside of the temple. She waited until the first guard came again, then counted the seconds until the other was in sight. “Ten and three seconds. When he passes us, we will walk and hide over there. Then when the second comes, we will go up the steps and hide again,” she said, pointing to a column closer to the Temple of Isis. The first guard passed. With their hearts pounding, they raced to stand beside the other column. When the other guard passed, they ran again, taking the steps two at a time. They were almost to the top when Ve-atu stumbled.

“My ankle,” her cousin hissed.

Neithekret turned to heave her to her feet. With an arm around her back, she helped her cousin limp the last few steps. They hid behind a huge brazier. Ve-atu touched her foot. She winced in pain.

“Go without me,” she said. “I will only slow you down.”

There was no time to lose. Neithekret kept out of the light of the torches, moving from shadow to shadow until she reached the lip of the temple. It was there that a horrible smell began to assault her senses. She gagged, throwing her hand over her nose and mouth as she tried to concentrate. The way diverged into two passages. She listened for the sound of voices, then chose the right one. An undulating pathway took her to a central chamber. All the while, the smell grew stronger and stronger. She could hear her mother’s voice. At the end of the passage she could see their shadows, but she could not round the corner without exposing herself. Looking up, she saw a partition in the wall. Beside her was a bust of Isis on top of a stone platform that came to her waist. Biting her lip, she put her foot on the bevel in the wall for a foothold and pulled herself up. She swung her leg to the platform and, with a moment of maneuvering and quiet huffing, stood up high enough to balance her chin on the lower edge of the partition.

What she saw made her nearly lose her footing. Her blood went cold. On a stone slab, in the midst of a dried pool of blood, was the source of the foul smell: a deceased infant. And yet, perhaps it was not an infant, for what infant had a face like this one? Deformed into a long snout with long ears like a hare, that face was affixed to the otherwise normal body of a male infant. Neithekret felt bile rise in her throat. She stumbled backwards, flailing her arms, but could not stop her pull towards the earth. Arms caught her.

“Foolish girl,” said a voice.

Senu lowered her down to the ground. The look he gave her was one of disappointment but certainly not surprise. “I found Ve-atu outside nursing her foot. I am sure this was her idea.”

“Ah,” said Neithekret, rubbing her neck. She tried for a smile.

Her father rolled his eyes. "Of course I know it was yours." He gestured towards the room. "There lies the end to your mischief, but, having glimpsed what lies ahead, are you certain you wish to proceed? You cannot unsee such things," he said.

"I want to see," she said, firmly.

Niethekret felt her heart pick up again as they rounded the corner and entered the offering room where the others were gathered. Kalvyna hid a smile behind her hand as Jabari observed her with a curious expression. Her mother and Unkethethr did not appear happy to see her.

"She has already seen too much," her father said, before either of them could protest.

Unkethethr sighed. "Then she may stay. Yeset?"

Her mother hesitated. Her face was unreadable behind her veil, which she had wrapped over her nose and mouth. But, glancing at the dead infant, she spoke, "A sign of Set," she said. "The face marks it. It means he is trying to lie with mortal women as he has done in the past. But Amun's curse holds."

Set was the brother of Isis, Neptet, Osiris, and Thoth the Elder. Chaos in corporeal form, he had once been great, channeling his destructive nature to protect the Night-Bark of Re during its descent into Duat each night. It was his sister-wife Neptet who had unleashed his dark nature. Taking the form of her sister Isis, she had lain with Osiris. Refusing to believe that Neptet had been the deceiver, Set had slain Osiris in a fit of rage and later chopped his body into many fragments that only Isis and a repentent Neptet had pieced back together long enough for Isis to bear Horus the Younger with her husband's final living seed before he descended to Duat to reign there. Until Horus avenged his father, Set had ruled *Kemet* under his cruel hand, famine and war ravaging the Two Lands. A trial of the gods had deemed Horus the rightful ruler, and Amun, condemning Set's abuse of *Kemet* revealed by the trial, had relegated him to the desert, forbidding him from coexisting among mankind. When he had Unabled to resist, he had lain with a mortal woman and bore a son. Amun cursed him in punishment, making it so that he could not deceive another.

"Every child of Set will die with the true face of the father," said Neithekret.

"Yes," her mother said. "This child was stillborn." She looked at Unkethethr. "There is something I must ask you, though it might seem strange. What is the day?"

Unkethethr frowned.

"Yeset," said Senu, his tone betraying embarrassment.

"Please," said Yeset. "I mean no insult."

Unkethethr held up his hand. "I understand. It is the third day of Chioak."

Neithekret's eyes widened as the others exchanged glances.

"No, my friend, it is the fifth day," said Yeset. "And this confirms my suspicions."

Unkethethr was visibly disturbed. "What do you mean?" he wondered.

Kalvyna, sensing something was not right, put a hand on Unkethethr's shoulder and gestured to the stone bench at the edge of the chamber, "You should sit. I fear my sister shall unveil unfortunate things."



Unkethethr, his face white, looked very much his many years in that moment. Nodding, he let Hathor's *hem-netjer-tep* help him down. "Go on, please," he said to Yeset.

She bowed her head. "I was first unsettled when the *hemet-netjer* did not meet us at the ship like they had done in the past. Then when we entered the pylons Mut's *hem-netjer* were not there either. I have always known the servants of this temple to be thorough in their duty. Last I came to this temple, the floors were swept clean, the oil in the lamps freshly filled. Today I found no oil, as if the lamps had been left to burn for hours — or days. There were other things. Rat droppings. The gossamer of a spider blocking my way. A spider can spin its silk quickly, this is true, but not such a great web as I saw.

"And of course, the last thing is the child. He is not recently deceased. His mother did not slip in while you ate your midday meal as you suggested. He is bloated. There is a smell. His skin begins to turn colors. He has been dead for at least a few days."

Unkethethr was deep in thought. "I felt that something was strange when I woke this morning. I felt stiff. I brushed the thought away. 'You are old,' I told myself. It must be a trick of Set," he said.

Kalvyna spoke now. "The Betrayer's hand is certainly in this, but a mortal hand must have helped." From the folds of her kaftan, she produced a vibrant indigo flower. "Geb's Tears," she said, twirling the flower in her fingers. "Used in a very powerful and very forbidden sleeping potion."

A flash of silver caught Neithekret's eye, and she looked down to see her aunt press a dagger into Unkethethr's side.

"Was it you, dear friend?" Kalvyna asked.

Neithekret did not recognize the menace in her aunt's expression. She took a step back.

"No!" the High Priest gasped. "I promise you! It was not me!"

"Prove it," said Senu, stepping around Neithekret. Jabari, silent but quick, had already moved to stand at Kalvyna's side, his sword drawn.

"I — how can I?" Unkethethr cried, his eyes darting back and forth. Sweat blossomed on his brow.

"You all awoke from this spell this morning. But would not have messengers come? Villagers coming to pay their respects or ask for a blessing? Who would have made a pretense that all was well when the rest of you were struck into a great sleep?"

"I was asleep!" Unkethethr shouted. "How would I have known? Oh Thoth, strengthen my mind. Make my mind sharp so I might see," he said desperately. Closing his eyes, he was quiet. His eyes opened. "Sesenebnef woke me. My Senior Priest. 'Master, you must have remembered the date of the procession wrong,' he said, telling me he had seen you approaching. I have begun to forget things, so I did not question him. The sun was already so high in the sky. I felt disoriented and strange. But I rushed to dress myself and prepare the incense. I told the others to prepare the meal. I was ashamed to have misled us all."

"This Sesenebnef, where is he?" asked Senu.

"Closer than you think," said a voice.

And as Neithekret turned to see to whom that voice belonged, a dagger whirled through the air, skinning her cheek before it buried itself in the nape of Unkethethr's neck. He choked on his blood as it spilled from his lips. Then his head sagged over his chest.

"I truly thought his mind was gone," said Sesenebnuf. "What a shame to see he still had a flicker of intelligence."

It happened in the blink of an eye. Her father crossed the room to cross his short sword with Sesenebnuf's as a throng of men moved in from the other side of the room. They wore the telltale red masks of Set's cursed face. Jabari and Kalvyna rushed to meet them, Kalvyna bearing a scimitar and Jabari brandishing a bronze khopesh. Her mother stepped in front of her without a weapon. Blades clashed. Her father forced Sesenebnuf back with heavy-handed strokes. Senu was strong as a bull, with a cruel, biting sword style that quickly overtook many of his enemies, but Sesenebnuf matched his blows, throwing his sword forward with a crooked smile on his lips. His dress indicated he was blooded to Aker, though it was obvious he served Set. He was young, perhaps ten years Neithekret's elder, with a clean-shaven face. On the other side of the vestibule, Kalvyna and Jabari fended off an endless wave of intruders — but they were losing ground, forced to walk backwards closer and closer to the center of the chamber. Soon enough, one of the intruders escaped their reach and charged her mother.

Yezet reached into her kaftan and brought something into her fists with both hands. When the man lunged, she cracked that something in her fist and opened her palm. A flame blossomed high from her hand, startling him. Raising a hand, she blew something into his eyes. He screamed, falling to his knees and clutching his head.

There was no time for celebration, however. Neithekret stood beside her mother, frozen in fear. She wanted to act but found herself terrified. Her mother made quick movements to defend herself, throwing dust to confuse, jabbing her fingers into eyes. She sent a swift blow to the back of one man's head that left him unconscious. Neithekret was so distracted by her mother that she failed to notice the hand curling around her neck, brandishing a blade at her throat.

The room came to a halt. "Unhand her!" bellowed Senu.

Jabari and Kalvyna watched with heaving breath, their sword tips pointed outwards. Her mother watched with narrowed eyes.

"You are outnumbered. Drop your weapons and the girl will live," said Sesenebef.

"Numbers are arbitrary," said her mother. "But I see the time for mere tricks has passed." Pushing her hands together, she chanted, "Eset, lend me the fire of Duat as you have done before. Let the blood of innocence shed here be not in vain." When she opened her hands, an ethereal white flame bloomed, expanding outwards.

Awe and fear struck the invaders dumb. Such powerful displays of *heka* were rare among the *hemet-netjer*.

Yezet made a sign with her hand, and the fire shot outwards. For most it did not need to touch their skin for them to flee, but others screamed when the flames licked their fingers. Her mother was

generous in her wielding of the flame for them. She turned to the man holding Neithekret. He was brave, for he pushed the knife into her flesh, drawing blood as Yeset strode forward. She pulled her hands back, then sent them forward. He stumbled back when the flames pushed at his shoulders. Then her mother was hurling her hands over Neithekret's hands, capturing his face in her hands. Neithekret scrambled away, watching as his skin peeled and flaked when Yeset removed her hands.

The scent of burning flesh writhed around the pungent order of the deceased child. Niethkret, her heart racing, dizziness overcoming her, staggered against the wall and retched up the contents of her stomach. Her aunt was at her side, pulling her up, smoothing her hair as Jabari stood before them. Sesenebnef backed away, his chin upturned. It seemed he was not fool enough to cross Yeset. Touching the side of the temple, he muttered his own enchantment, the sandstone there crumbling away.

"Senu!" warned Yeset.

Her father jumped backwards as Sesenebnef did the same. The pillars turned to sand, compromising the integrity of the doorway which came down in a shower of sand and stone.

"The other passage!" shouted Senu.

They raced out the other way, stepping over the bodies of the wounded servants of Set. But Sesenebnef was gone. At the foot of the temple, the crumpled bodies of the guards lay.

"He is gone," said Senu, anger in his tone.

Neithekret looked around. "Ve-atu! Where is Ve-atu?"

"Here!" said a voice faintly.

She followed the sound to the corner of the upper platform. Wedged behind a statue of Isis was Ve-atu. "I am stuck," said her cousin, trying and failing to pull herself from behind.

Jabari and Senu pulled the statue forward as Neithekret and Kalvyna pulled Ve-atu out. Her cousin thanked them. "What is going on?" she breathed as she sank against the wall, her mother examining her foot.

Neithekret turned. Her mother stood with her hands on her hips, breathing deeply.

"What did they want?" asked Neithekret.

"To revive the infant, I believe," said Yeset. "Before I came to Nitentori, I was at Ma'at's temple, studying the work of a hem-netjer a century before me who associated this temple with divine revival. I hoped to investigate this while I was here."

"How did they know this?" Senu asked.

"There is a traitor in Ma'at's sect," said Yeset. "If Set intends to return, he has chosen the right way in seeking the priests of Amun. They are privy to a vast network of temples with a wealth of resources and information."

"Can this temple truly revive the dead?" Neithekret asked.

"No," said her mother. "Whoever relayed them the information must have overheard my conversation with the Keeper of Knowledge. This *hem* wrote that 'Blood shed upon the altar of Isis in the Place of the Gods shall flow towards the sanctum of life.' The *hem* of Set thought this indicated

resurrection, but this is not so. The altar and the chamber form a crude map of *Kemet*. The table is angled in a way that the blood flows behind the source of *Iteru*.”

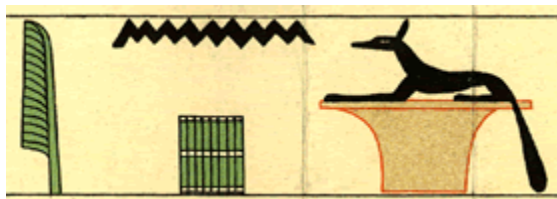
“They believed the altar would resurrect the child, thus subverting the curse of Amun,” Jabari said.

“Yes, *akh*,” said Yeset.

“You might have found the way with mere water,” observed Senu.

“Perhaps,” she said. “And yet I do not believe this hem meant to embellish. His words are carefully chosen. I could not have otherwise wielded the serpent Dwentef’s flame.”

#### THE OLD PRIEST OF ANUBIS



4.

As Ra, in his old, wearied form, left the night-bark moored in Duat and crossed the horizon to the sun-bark as a youth, rejuvenated and strong, Neithekret stood with her mother and aunt, speaking quietly to one another. Senu and Jabari would patrol the grounds until dawn in case Sesenebnef returned. Kalvyna had sent Ve-atu to rest her injured foot before the long journey in the morning. With Ukethethr dead and the halls of Amun noticeably emptier, implying a great number of defectors, it seemed impossible to conceal the truth of what had occurred. Two of Senu’s men had sustained serious wounds that would take months to heal.

Kalvyna looked out at the tents of their people and said, her expression grave, “It must be made known to them that the First Murderer is among us again.”

“You must not speak of the infant or the altar,” Yeset said.

“I will not,” said Kalvyna. “My greatest fear is for you, sister. Surely they will come for you. Let Senu send a guard with you like he asks.”

Yeset shook her head. “Sesenebnef may be suspicious of me — I could see it in his eyes — but I do not think he knows the nature of what I seek. Sending a guard would only confirm his suspicions. It is better that I go alone. By myself, I can easily come and go from a place unnoticed.”

Kalvyna shook her head, but she knew better than to argue with her sister. “Do you know the end of what you seek?” she asked.

Yeset was quiet for a moment. “What I seek is unclear even to me,” she said and Neithekret knew that in that moment, her mother told the truth. “The direction yielded by the altar is vague. I will travel