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WILBUR SMITH

WITH MARK CHADBOURN

HOUSE OF TWO PHARAOHS

ZAFFRE

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For my love
MOKHINISO
Spirits of Genghis Khan and Omar Khayyam reincarnated
in a moon as lucent as a perfect pearl

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This novel, like all of those published after his passing, originated from an unfinished work by Wilbur Smith. Wilbur worked closely with each of his co-authors on storylines that met his rigorous standards. Wilbur's wife, Niso Smith, his long-standing literary agent, Kevin Conroy Scott, and the Wilbur Smith Estate's in-house editor, James Woodhouse, continue to work tirelessly to ensure that the body of work that Wilbur left behind reflects his vision in his absence.

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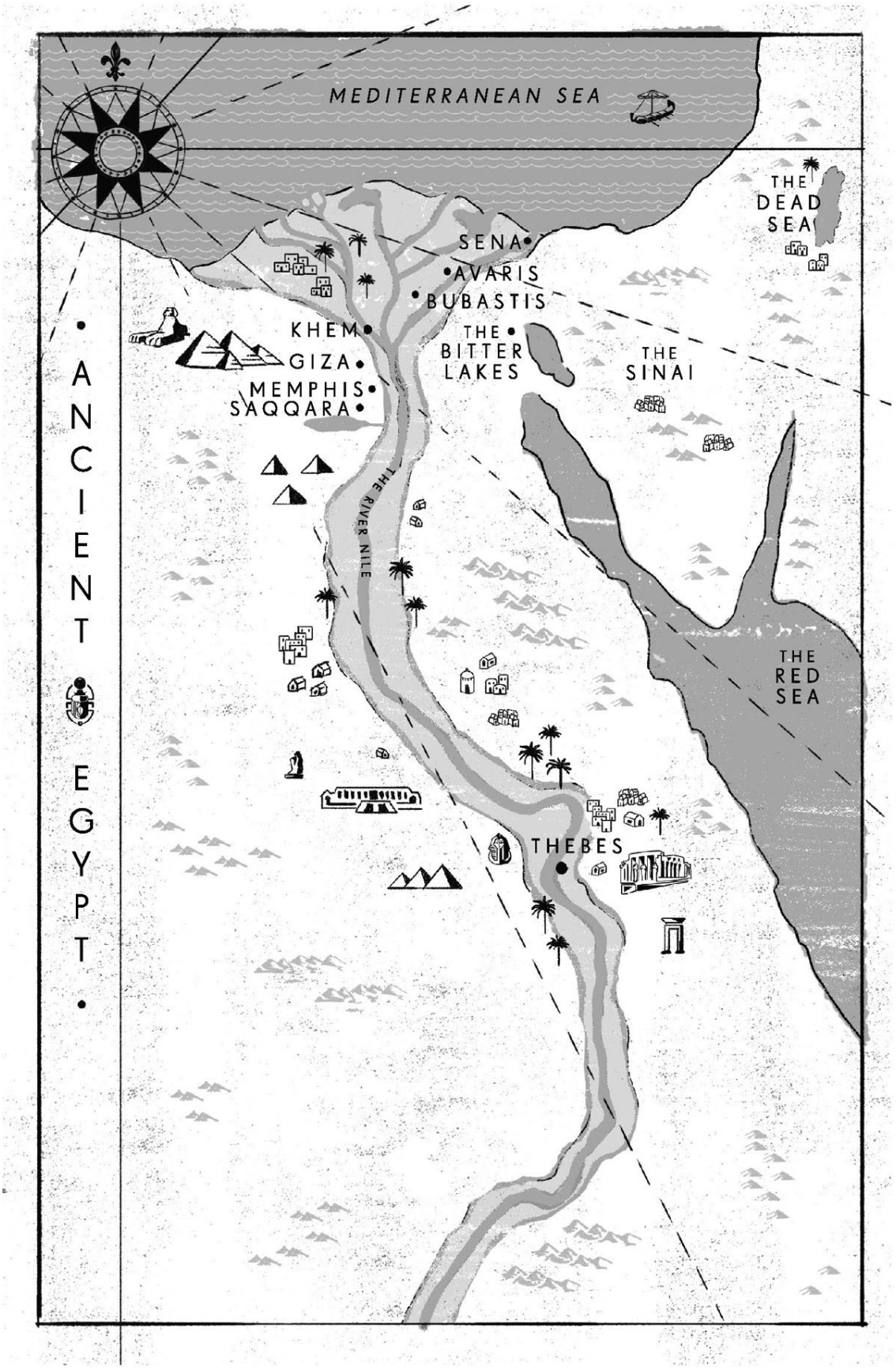
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Part 1

House of Two Truths

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The long, orange flame flickered and danced, casting an oily glow across the towers of gold and gems that filled the cavernous space. Clad in the white silk robe of a scribe, Djau-Aa sat cross-legged on the flagstones, hunched over the papyrus scroll that ran over his knees and out into the yellow pool of light surrounding him.

Djau-Aa had lived through many dark days in Memphis. He had been born during the Red Pharaoh's reign, growing up in the strife caused by the conflict between the Lower and Upper Kingdoms, and then coming of age in the fifty long years of the Hyksos occupation.

When the barbarians had first arrived in Memphis, they had torn down the ancient capital's marble statues, prising jewels from their sockets and shaving gold leaf into buckets. But that had been only the beginning of the looting. Once they were secure in the new territory, the taxes that the new masters of the Lower Kingdom had imposed on the citizens had slowly, year after year, stripped them of their finely crafted necklaces, their bracelets and rings, their anklets and pendants, until the finery that Djau-Aa remembered from his youth had seemed like something from a *shemshemet* dream.

But now the mighty Lord Taita, with the armies of Upper Egypt and Sparta behind him, had routed the barbarians and driven them back into the east. This was how the first nome of Lower Egypt, Inebu-hedj, which contained both Memphis and the Great Monuments, had come under the authority of the God-Pharaoh Rameses, and how Piay of Thebes had come to be appointed nomarch of the City of the White Walls.

Djau-Aa put his reed brush between his teeth and chewed, reworking the writing tip, savouring the familiar sooty taste of the ink. Every day, caravans protected by the nomarch's loyal soldiers poured into the city, carting valuables reclaimed from across Lower Egypt. Djau-Aa smiled at the thought of being asked to catalogue the riches of Memphis, as they were returned and unloaded into the newly constructed city vault – it was a great honour, recognition of his standing as the city's longest-serving

administrator. But to Djau-Aa, however, it was more than just an honour. It was as if he were returning the city's dignity, handing his beloved Memphis a gossamer gown of cloth and gold embroidered with precious stones, a gown that would make her once again what she had been in his childhood – enduring and beautiful.

The scribe wrinkled his nose and sighed. He knew that the nomarch was a far better man than many of the previous governors whom Djau-Aa had served, but he was also unrelenting and joyless. He mourned a Kushite woman who had died during his battle to protect the city from a Hyksos sorcerer. Djau-Aa hadn't known the Kushite, nor did he know the circumstances of her death – though he had heard rumours of that dreadful day – but it was obvious to everyone that grief consumed the nomarch. He poured himself into the reconstruction of the city and drove his labourers relentlessly. It was as if he was determined to turn all of Memphis into a memorial for his lost love.

Djau-Aa glanced at the treasures piled around him, glimmering in the light of his oil lamp. Gold ingots stacked up to the ceiling, piles of sparkling jewels, silver chalices, ornate shields of gold and bronze – all waiting to be catalogued and employed in the restoration of the city.

Returning his eyes to his papyrus, Djau-Aa dipped his brush into his inkwell. As he did so, the flame of his lamp flickered and swayed, before returning to its upright position. The scribe paused and observed the flame, as a creeping sense of alarm prickled his skin. He had worked inside the vastness of the vault, alone, for five consecutive days, and not once had he seen the flame bend.

Djau-Aa glanced back in the direction of the great stone doors, to see if the guards had opened them, though he did not know how they could have done so without him hearing. As he suspected, the doors remained shut. The vault could only be opened from the outside, so all he could see through the shadows were a pair of flat slabs, discernible only by their sheer size relative to the smaller, precisely cut blocks of masonry around them.

The vault had been completed only six days earlier, constructed for the very purpose it now served. It was impregnable, Djau-Aa reminded himself. He took a deep breath and then exhaled, allowing the tension that had built up in his neck and shoulders to travel down his arms and out through his fingers as he flexed them, then returned his attention to his work.

But again, his focus was disrupted by the dimming of the lamp flame. It was as if it was shrinking in fear.

Djau-Aa began to feel that something was watching him from the darkness. He put down his brush and the papyrus on the flagstones and picked up the lamp. Standing, he raised the flame aloft at the end of rigid, quivering arms, and peered into the depths of the vault, his eyes straining to reassure him that he remained alone with his task.

It was not so.

To Djau-Aa's astonishment, a figure began to emerge – tall and lithe, dressed in black. As the creature approached, the light from the oil lamp illuminated its oddly shaped head.

It was a jackal.

Djau-Aa paled in terror-stricken recognition, stumbling backwards and dropping his lamp, which skittered on the flagstones but mercifully stayed alight. Turning, the scribe started towards the door. If he could only reach it, he could demand for it to be opened immediately, pounding on it with his fist as he had done every night – he could yet escape.

But as Djau-Aa scrambled past the towering treasures, closing the distance as fast as his old bones could carry him, he stumbled. He put out his hands, hoping to steady himself, but it was too late – his chin struck the stone and his mouth filled with the metallic taste of his own blood.

Lying sprawled against the cold stone floor, Djau-Aa felt his breath leave him as the jackal-headed monster approached with quick, loping strides.

The figure stood over him and drew a short blade from its cloak. Looking up, Djau-Aa felt as if his chest was being crushed, his soul extinguished.

This was no mortal standing above him.

It was the god Anubis.

Conductor of souls. Consort of Osiris. God of the dead.

• • •

Piay looked around the opulent feasting hall like a caged animal sullenly accepting its life in captivity. He was a handsome muscular man, clean-shaven in the Egyptian style and adorned with the

livery that marked his rank. As had been his custom before Pharaoh had appointed him nomarch, the silk fabric of his white kilt was embroidered with the golden orb of Ra’s fiery chariot. It served to remind Piay that though it seemed interminable, the sun would eventually set on his time as the governor of Memphis. One day, he would be relieved of his duty, permitted to return to a form of service that suited him more naturally, one where the ever-present threat of his own death could bring him respite from the loss that haunted him.

Piay was a man who could command a room simply by walking into it. In his earlier years, few of the women of Pharaoh’s court could resist him, but while he was still in possession of his good looks and strength, his many adventures had exacted a toll. Piay might be able to hide the rumpled skin under his eyes from his many sleepless nights with makeup, but there was no concealing the sorrow that had dimmed his once bright and mischievous gaze.

Shaking himself from his thoughts, Piay glanced up and down the feasting table before him. Every inch of the giant cedar slab was covered by plates loaded with mouth-watering delicacies. It was the first course of ten, the finest fare the palace kitchens could prepare, a feast to celebrate the conclusion of the trade talks which has lasted a week.

On one side of the table sat the broad-shouldered, black-bearded dignitaries from Lacedaemon, the land he knew so well beyond the vast sea that sailors called the Great Green. They were already laughing heartily and drinking deeply from their cups of Syrian wine as they recounted tales from the war against the Hyksos.

On the other side sat the venerable, clean-shaven men of Memphis: its Council of Elders. The chair to Piay’s right was occupied by the oldest and wisest man in Memphis, his advisor Ankhu, who rose to address the gathering.

‘Friends from far and near,’ Ankhu began, ‘we have much to be thankful for, much to celebrate these days in Memphis. Our nomarch, the man you know as Piay of Thebes, has defended our great city from not only the Hyksos threat without, but from its enemies within. He has rebuilt our high walls, restored our monuments and brought trade and prosperity back to our markets in the short time since Pharaoh raised him to his position. It is thanks to him that we are able to join in celebration with you today.’ Ankhu

paused, looking across the men in the hall. ‘As you may know, there are many amongst us who believe that this wine you drink today is the blood of those who once battled against the gods, the blood of our great forebears. It is told that it was from this blood that, in ancient times, the first vines grew. I venture to say that it is also this blood, the blood of our great forebears, that runs through the veins of the man who has returned our city to her former glory. Piay of Thebes! The nomarch!’

‘The nomarch!’ reverberated joyously around the hall.

Piay shifted uncomfortably in his seat at the head of the table as Ankhu led his guests in drinking their toast. The plush throne felt ill-suited to his lean, muscular body. It had been made for Zahur, the repugnant aristocrat who had been governor of Memphis until the citizens, starving and abused, had stormed the palace and torn him apart, before parading his head through the streets. To Piay, the throne was just another reminder of the pen he was forced to inhabit.

As the Lacedaemonian representatives and the Elders of Memphis returned to their conversations, Piay reflected on his arrival in the city, remembering his first sighting of its broken and scarred walls as he sailed into the port of Peru-nefer with Myssa at his side. It had been his master, the Pharaoh’s Lord High Chancellor, Taita, who had dispatched him to the old capital of the Lower Kingdom. And after he had safeguarded the city from the threats posed to it by the Hyksos devotees of Seth, after he had returned from the Great Monuments and the tomb of Imhotep – without his beloved, to a city in turmoil – it had been Taita who had recommended to the God-Pharaoh Rameses that Piay be appointed as nomarch, until a permanent replacement for his predecessor could be found.

Being appointed nomarch was an honour, but Piay was an adventurer, like the god Khonsu to whom he prayed, a warrior who raised his sword in service of Pharaoh. He had spent his life fighting to liberate and reunite the two kingdoms – the daily management of a great city was a job that held nothing for him. And though his freedom would eventually return to him, what Memphis had taken from him could never be returned.

She is gone . . . he told himself firmly, steadying himself against his emotions. There is only here. There is only now. No past. No future.

But without her nothing matters, a voice whispered back to him. Life itself means nothing.

‘Nomarch?’ Ankhu interrupted Piay’s thoughts by placing a hand on his shoulder, the concern in his voice evident.

‘Yes. Quite,’ Piay muttered distractedly, his gaze also drawn to the palace servant who had hurried into the hall and was now approaching his throne with some urgency.

‘My lord Nomarch,’ the man began carefully as Piay beckoned him forward. ‘A matter has arisen that requires your immediate attention.’

‘What is it?’ Piay asked.

The servant bent low, close to his ear: ‘The new city vault, my lord. There is blood coming from behind the sealed door.’

Piay frowned. ‘The scribe, Djau-Aa, who I assigned to catalogue the recovered treasure . . . Where is he?’

‘He is inside, my lord. The only one. The vault was sealed behind him, in accordance with your instructions.’

‘Well, has no one thought to open the vault, to check on him?’ Piay groused.

‘This is why I was sent to you, my lord. The guards . . . They will not open the doors. They believe something terrible has happened to the scribe. They have given up calling out to him – he does not answer.’ The servant paused reverentially, before summoning the courage to deliver the rest of his message. ‘There is talk of *djinn*s and spirits, my lord Nomarch. Of Hyksos sorcery.’

‘That’s preposterous.’ Piay narrowed his eyes and glanced at Ankhu, who, having overheard the servant’s message, returned a bewildered look.

‘Go, my lord,’ Ankhu said. ‘I will conclude proceedings here.’

Piay nodded, then stood and addressed his guests. ‘Forgive me, my friends. I am afraid that I must depart our celebration prematurely, but I invite you all to remain and enjoy the hospitality that Memphis offers to your heart’s content.’

Piay left the room as the gathered dignitaries cheered and raised another toast to the nomarch.

Striding out into the cool night air, he hailed the detachment of the Memphis Guard that had been summoned from the palace barracks, their torches held aloft, waiting for him to lead them out of the gates and into the city.

• • •

The line of torches flooded down the ink-dark street like a river of molten gold. Below the streaming flames, the faces of the palace garrison were twisted in apprehension, like men who had heard their names whispered from the depths of an open grave.

Piay jogged at the head of the detachment with a resolute expression on his face. He had seen too many genuine terrors to be frightened by a simple report of blood coming from beneath a door, however strange the circumstances. Once he laid eyes on the scene for himself, he was certain that an obvious explanation would present itself.

Piay glanced over his shoulder at the column of soldiers behind him. The palace garrison were not the Blue Crocodile Guard, but then, few could match the men of Pharaoh's own bodyguard. The Blue Crocodiles had served as valiantly as any unit in the Egyptian army in the wars against the Hyksos, and Piay had retained the services of three companies of the elite corps – under the command of the formidable General Kamose, a veteran of the victory at Thebes and the siege of Memphis – to help him maintain order. But they were under strict instructions to remain in their barracks unless called for by the nomarch himself. They, like Piay, wouldn't be in the city forever, and the Memphis Guard had to be able to uphold the law when that day came.

The Temple of Ptah, said to be the greatest of Egypt's shrines dedicated to the Master of Truth, soared up against the star-sprinkled sky, the twin columns that guarded its entrance glowing in the light of the torches the priests had lit as soon as darkness had fallen. Ptah was the god of craftsmen and architects. He was also the father of the Great Architect, Imhotep, the legendary chancellor to Pharaoh Djoser, and the mastermind behind the pyramid that bore the ancient god-king's name. It was said that Imhotep had ascended to the realm of the gods upon his death. A thousand years had passed since then, but the Great Architect had left clues that had led Piay to discover his tomb and the powerful spells it contained.

Arriving at the steps leading into the temple, Piay turned to face his men. 'You are soldiers of Memphis!' he shouted. 'Be brave, and steadfast!'

'We are with you, Nomarch!' Ahmose, the commander of the palace garrison, called out as he led his men past Piay and up the steps into temple.

His leathery skin was a mass of scars from the battles he had fought with the Hyksos, yet despite Piay's exhortation, his voice wavered.

Inside the temple, Piay's eyes quickly adjusted to the torchlight. In the hall where the vault had been constructed, beyond the heap of half-cut stone still to be removed by the masons' gangs, the four men who had been on guard duty stood together, glancing every now and then at the great doors of the newly completed structure. At the sight of them, Piay's soldiers were beset by renewed anxiety. Piay stared at Ahmose, waiting for him to find his courage. The man looked at the floor, then raised his eyes to meet the nomarch's. In them, Piay could see his doubt and trepidation.

Taking the captain's torch, Piay made his way to where the guards waited. He had ordered the vault's construction as one of his first decrees as nomarch, and had arranged for the finest mason in Lower Egypt to oversee the work. And Ptah himself would have been proud of the new addition to his temple, Piay thought, as the shadows swooped away from the immaculate wall of pale limestone.

'Tell me what happened here,' Piay commanded.

One of the guards, a broad-shouldered man with a nose that had been broken more than once, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and said: 'As you ordered, Nomarch, we admitted the scribe Djau-Aa soon after the sun was at its highest. Once he was inside, we sealed the doors behind him.'

'As has been done for the last five days?'

The guard nodded. 'Every night he would hammer on the doors, and we would let him out, searching him before sending him on his way.'

'And this night?'

'There was no knock. We thought nothing of it. We thought he was working late to make up time.'

'Show me the blood.'

The guard moved hesitantly towards the vault, raising his torch as Piay followed. In the small anteroom that had been constructed in front of the doors, the guard pointed down to the flagstones where a dark pool was slowly congealing.

'The vault was empty – every man who entered during the day was accounted for. And no man went in after Djau-Aa,' the guard croaked. 'Only some sorcery could have caused this.'

Piay sensed the eyes of the Memphis Guard upon him. They were men who had proven themselves in battle, but they had been reduced to frightened children here – their deepest fears had been stirred.

‘Open the door.’

The guard reached out his trembling hand, then hesitated.

‘Open it!’

Muttering apologies, the guard stepped forward and, with the aid of one of his comrades, heaved away the three heavy drawbars that lay across the door. The keyholder pulled the wooden key from the pouch at his hip – the torchlight gleaming off the bronze pins protruding from the shaft – and twisted it in the lock, so it turned the tumbler, enabling the final bolt to be drawn.

The four men glanced at one another, then, together, they gripped the hide-rope handles and dragged the doors open, swinging them wide.

Piay stared into the darkness, then pushed his way forward, holding his torch high.

The body lay just beyond the threshold. Djau-Aa was sprawled on his belly in a sticky pool of his own blood, his neck twisted grotesquely so that his final vision would have been the doors, beyond which the four guards were waiting, had he only been able to reach them.

His throat had been slit from ear to ear, and his pristine white robe was soaked with gore. Piay imagined the scribe staggering towards the door with his life flowing from his wound. ‘Get your men to bring their torches,’ he shouted back to Ahmose, who had followed him into the anteroom. ‘Search the vault.’

Muttering a prayer, the soldier flexed his fingers to ward off evil.

‘All of them. Or is every man here afraid of shadows?’

The captain gave a heavy nod and barked to his command: ‘Search the vault. No man goes anywhere inside it alone.’

Suppressing their fear, the men moved into the vault, each one stepping carefully around the corpse as they crossed the threshold. As Ahmose organised his men into teams, Piay watched the thick black smoke billow up from the flames that flickered atop their torches, roiling around the heads of the columns that held up the heavy stone of the ceiling. If this had been Djau-Aa’s tomb, the roof would have been painted with stars, Piay thought to himself. Instead, it was as if the goddess of the sky had been immolated.

There would be no protection for Djau-Aa's soul on its journey to the afterlife.

Ahmose gave a final command and the soldiers scattered, darting in pairs around the edges of the chamber while a phalanx progressed down the central aisle. Piay listened to them calling to each other as they disappeared from view, but their bluff assertions that nothing was amiss did not reassure him, instead he felt his unease grow.

Finally, the soldiers marched back out and Ahmose stood in front of Piay. 'We have scoured the vault. It's empty. There is nowhere anyone could be hiding.'

Piay stared at the corpse of Djau-Aa, trying to gather his thoughts. 'How could a man alone in a sealed chamber be murdered?' he murmured to himself.

He looked around the faces of the Memphis Guard, pale and drawn in the torchlight. For them, clearly, there could only be a supernatural explanation.

Perhaps they were right.

Something appeared to catch the commander's eye, and he frowned. Lowering his torch, he bent down over the body. 'Look,' he breathed.

Piay crouched beside the soldier, looking down at the symbol he was pointing at, thick lines against the white limestone. 'Djau-Aa must have written it in his own blood. To do that with his last breath, it must be important.'

Piay leaned in, squinting at the smudged outline.

'A message from beyond the grave . . .'

Ahmose was a simple man. He could not read. But Piay had learned to understand some of the *medu neter*, the gods' words, during his time in the classroom of his esteemed master, Taita. He wanted to dismiss the captain's eerie assessment, but as he traced his finger along the blood-black lines and in his mind made sense of the scrawl, he found that he could not: it was a jackal's head, arms, a staff.

'That is the mark of Anubis,' he said quietly.

• • •

here is only one person who can unwind a riddle like this,' Piay exclaimed,

‘T staring down at his hands, which gripped the back of Zahur’s gilded throne.

‘Taita,’ a gruff voice answered confidently.

At the sound of his master’s name, Piay inhaled deeply, but he did not turn to look at the man who had spoken.

‘You have finally sent word to him, then? After more than six new moons?’

‘I have.’

When at last Piay finally turned, his eyes settled on the short, muscular man leaning against the wall.

‘I’m glad to hear that you have finally come to your senses,’ Hannu said dryly.

Piya grunted. ‘I am the Nomarch of Memphis. In a few hours, rumours of the scribe’s death will be coursing through the streets like poison through a man’s veins. The city will be gripped by terror. Taita’s arrival will help to calm the people.’

‘You are right to realise that you could use your master’s help,’ Hannu asserted. ‘Perhaps he will also release you from your duties, finally allow you what you desire.’

As a young man, Hannu had been drafted into Pharaoh’s army. It wasn’t long before his skill with a sword had been recognised and he had become part of the elite Blue Crocodile Guard. For twenty years all he had known was war. He had fought the enemies of Egypt across the Upper Kingdom until a Hyksos axe had shattered his leg. Piay had found him begging on a dusty street and quickly discerned that Hannu still had much to give – he was courageous, knowledgeable and wise, three things that an even wiser man valued. Piay had offered him employment, and he liked to think that the two of them had become friends in their time serving Pharaoh.

‘You mock me, but have I not transformed this city since I was made nomarch?’ Piay swept his hand out across his imaginary kingdom.

‘You have.’ Hannu’s withering stare only served to fuel Piay’s irritation.

‘I re-established the trade routes, the people of Memphis are no longer starving, and the Memphis Guard have been trained by General Kamose and the Blue Crocodiles, on my order. The city wall is rebuilt, the many damaged homes repaired and the monuments and temples are being restored to their original glory. The treasure that the Hyksos looted is being

discovered where it was hidden in the desert wastes and returned to the city, cartload by cartload . . .'

'All true,' Hannu conceded.

'Memphis has been pulled back from the brink!'

'And there has not been a single day in all that time when you have not been dark-minded with bitterness and resentment towards the city and people you have been ordered to serve. Despite your accomplishments, you are a pitiful excuse for a ruler. You long for nothing, but to leave this place and to destroy yourself. The only reason you remain in Memphis is because Pharaoh appointed you nomarch and you cannot disobey him.'

Piay clenched his jaw.

Hannu was right. It was an annoying habit of his – telling the bitter truth.

'Is it any wonder that I wish to join her?' Piay took a deep breath, his shoulders sagging forward with the weight of his immense loss.

'I understand your grief. I, too, lost my beloved, but I did not let my sorrows overcome me.'

'You were begging on the streets of Thebes when I found you. Tell me how you were not overcome.'

Hannu frowned at Piay. 'I was begging because of the wound I suffered sending my wife's killer to his own wretched afterlife. You know this . . .'

Piay threw up his hands in frustration. 'I do not know how you found a way to recover from the loss of your beloved. I will never recover from the loss of mine.'

'You *choose* not to,' said Hannu. 'Do you think Myssa would have wanted you to live this way?'

Piay flinched as if he had been burned with a hot coal. 'Do not presume to know what she would have wanted.'

His thoughts drifted back to that first time he had seen Myssa standing on the slavers' block in the port in Lacedaemon. She was a Kushite, possessed of an unearthly beauty; she carried herself like a queen and her skin shone like polished ebony. Soon, though, it was her sharp wits that he came to most admire, along with her courage and fortitude. He had freed her from slavery only to become enslaved in turn, his soul bound to hers for eternity.

But there were to be no happy endings in this life. Taita had charged

Piay, Myssa and Hannu with uncovering the location of the tomb of the Great Architect, which contained enchantments that could break the veil between this world and the realm of the gods. In the final contest Myssa had lost her life, and Piay felt as if his own had been extinguished in the same instant.

‘Myssa –’

‘I said, do not presume to speak for her!’ Piay raised his voice in anger.

‘You have never been one to listen to sense,’ Hannu shot back.

Piay snorted. ‘Well, then leave.’

‘I will.’ Hannu allowed his words to hang in the air, to see if they would spark a response. When they didn’t, he continued: ‘There have been attacks on some of the caravans returning the looted gold and gems to the city. The military escorts have managed to repel most of them, but it is still troubling. I have been thinking it would be wise to scout the trade routes –’

‘Go, then,’ Piay said, waving his hand dismissively.

‘Very well.’

Piay could feel Hannu studying him, as if expecting him to say more. When he remained silent, the old soldier nodded, turned and walked towards the door.

‘At least you have finally sent word to Taita,’ Hannu said, over his shoulder. ‘I hope you are also ready to admit that Myssa’s death was no more his fault than it was yours.’

Piay glared fiercely. ‘Have you forgotten that it was Taita who sent us to Memphis in the first place?’

Hannu sighed. ‘Perhaps your master can knock some sense into your thick head. I have better things to do.’

And with that he was gone.

• • •

Like a lion prowling through the morning mist that shrouded the Nile, the galley drifted towards Memphis. The merchants on the quayside at the great port of Peru-nefer paid little attention to it, flapping their palm fronds at flies as they haggled over bolts of silk from the east and spices from the lands beyond the Great Green. It was just another vessel from the Upper Kingdom – there were many such galleys,

now that the new nomarch had made the city a safe place to do business once again.

The vessel overshadowed the skiffs that flitted along the channel. It was constructed from cedar wood from the mountains beyond Byblos, with twenty men heaving on the oars on either side.

As the galley neared the port, drums began to pound. Their steady beat was accompanied by the blare of trumpets, heralding the arrival of a dignitary.

Turning towards the sound, those on the dock squinted into the brassy light until they saw the two trumpeters standing on the deck, one to port with an instrument made of silver, and one to starboard with its twin wrought in copper.

The great square sail of the galley was unfurled, and as it caught the breeze the Eye of Horus, emblazoned in cerulean blue on the creamy linen, appeared for all to see. The crowd that had started to gather along the water's edge now had no doubt of the identity of the new arrival – the nomarch had sent criers into the streets to proclaim that the Lord High Chancellor and Chief Minister to the God-Pharaoh Rameses had been called upon to investigate the death of the scribe in the Temple of Ptah.

In confirmation, the heralds on the watchtower added their own welcome, their instruments echoing those of the trumpeters on board the vessel. A cheer went up amongst those who now thronged the quayside and was taken up by the men in the warehouses behind the docks.

Lord Taita had arrived.

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The tall, elegant man who stood in the prow with his hands folded behind his back wore a white robe, tailored from the finest linen. Against his chest hung a pendant set with the finest dark green emeralds and fiery rubies that sparkled even in the dim morning light – Horus in his falcon form, with regal wings outstretched. His features could have been called beautiful, for his cheekbones were high, his jaw strong and his lips as full as plump grapes. But it was his eyes that caught the breath of anyone who beheld them. They danced like quicksilver, bright with fierce intelligence.

Taita smiled as he looked along the restored walls of Memphis. The last time he had seen the city, its defences had been shattered and blackened by fire; the vultures had clouded the sky and the air had been thick with the reek of decay.

Taita's smile faded as he remembered the siege. It had been fifty years since the Hyksos had first thundered in from the east on their gleaming chariots, flooding across the Lower Kingdom with the speed and power of the annual inundation of the Nile. Though the false pharaoh of the Lower Kingdom, the Red Pretender, had fallen in the first battle, in the Upper Kingdom a robust defence had been mounted. The fortunes of war had ebbed and flowed during that half century. Finally, with new allies and a formidable army from beyond the Great Green, a decisive battle had been won and the long war in the Upper Kingdom was ended as quickly as it had begun.

When Memphis had been liberated, Taita had prayed to Horus that a new age would be ushered in by the victory, and so it now seemed. The ancient grandeur described by the scribes once again seemed to emanate from every part of the sprawling city and the docks teemed with activity.

Listening to the cheering of the crowd that had begun to gather on the quayside, Taita raised a hand and waved to them. The gods had seen fit to bless him above all other men. His life had been uncannily long, and while those around him saw their faces crease and their hair turn grey, the years had not visited any decline upon Taita. In that time, he had been able to amass deep knowledge to help steer Egypt through turbulent times as the advisor to successive pharaohs. There were days, though, when he felt as if he had never known peace. He had stewarded the land he loved through so much, and for so long, that although the fire within him still burned brightly, he sometimes felt a weariness deep in his bones. He yearned for a time of reflection and study.

Perhaps, finally, this was that moment. Egypt was rising from the blood of the battlefield. Pharaoh once again wore the double crown. An era of peace and prosperity beckoned. Taita nodded, pleased with what he saw as the steersman guided the galley towards the wharf. Piay had exceeded his expectations. He had discovered Imhotep's tomb, hidden for a millennium, which contained the invocations that the Great Architect had left to protect Egypt from its enemies. He had reopened the trade routes with their allies,

rebuilt Memphis and cleared the waterways to the Great Green of the last of the Hyksos.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Taita saw a knot of soldiers pushing through the crowd, making space for the palanquin that followed behind them – the Memphis Guard and their commander in chief, the nomarch. He watched as the litter was lowered by the eight naked Kushite slaves who carried it and two men stepped out and began to organise the soldiers on the wharf.

The nomarch barked orders to his men as Taita watched. For all that had been accomplished, Taita reflected, the task of reuniting the Upper Kingdom with the Lower – of reunifying Egypt after an age of division and occupation – still remained incomplete. Memphis had fallen and the Hyksos had abandoned their capital at Avaris, but the terrible divide that had begun with the Red Pretender, and the lies he had peddled, persisted. Perhaps Imhotep's spells would provide the antidote? The time had come at last for Taita to look upon them.

At the captain's command, the oarsmen heaved up their blades and locked them into place. Yet as he watched the crowds, the men and women of Memphis craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the most powerful man in Egypt, second only to the God-Pharaoh Rameses himself, Taita felt a strange melancholy creep into his mind.

The price paid for the liberation of this great city had been steep. The contest that had won Piay the allegiance of the Sons of Apis – an ancient order founded by Imhotep and named after the great bull that served as an intermediary between men and the gods – had also cost him his beloved Myssa. Taita, too, had mourned her loss. Like Myssa, his beloved had passed through the gate to the afterlife before her time, and in the many years since, there hadn't been a day that passed without Taita thinking of his mistress, Lostris. He had christened his new galley the *Breath of Horus* in her memory.

Even now, so long after her death, Lostris was still alive in his mind. When he closed his eyes, he found himself back with her, on the day of the hippopotamus hunt, when her singing had entranced every single soul aboard Tanus' ship as it sped along the edge of the reed beds. Fifty years had passed since that day. She had been just fourteen and her name was newly given – her baby name recently discarded, for her red woman's moon

had flowered with the arrival of that year's flood. Taita could still see the dark green of her eyes and the coil of her hair falling across one breast. He could see Tanus, too, his one-time pupil who had overcome his father's disgrace, whom Lostris loved, and who had returned that love in a way Taita wished he himself could. But his two young charges were never to realise the boundless happiness Taita had envisaged for them. Lostris would be betrothed to Pharaoh Mamose. And even after Mamose had been killed in battle, by a Hyksos arrow, their love would have to be hidden and their children declared as having sprung from the dead king's seed. Tanus would become Egypt's greatest general, leading the flight into the land of Kush, beyond the sixth cataract, to Qebui, the meeting point of the two rivers that co-mingled to form the black Nile. But he would make the journey to the afterlife after his duel with the warlord Arkoun. And then Lostris would also be taken from Taita, by a sickness he could not cure – a sickness that she had hidden from him.

One day, perhaps, the gods would allow Taita to see his beloved mistress again, in the afterlife, where all the struggles and miseries of this mortal realm were forgotten. But for now, Taita knew, they had different plans for him.

As the galley drifted towards the limestone wall of the wharf, sailors leapt to dry land and pulled the vessel into its berth with ropes.

Once the *Breath of Horus* had been moored, Taita strode down the gangplank, towards those who gawked in awe at the God-Pharaoh's Lord High Chancellor, the ageless mage, hero of the wars against the hated Hyksos. Piay stood waiting to greet him, beside a wizened advisor. The nomarch forced a thin smile and bowed stiffly.

'Welcome to Memphis, my lord.'

When Piay raised his head, Taita saw his face properly for the first time. He had aged noticeably since Taita had last seen him. Deep lines had been carved into his once boyish features, his skin was grey and a dullness clouded his eyes.

Before he could express his concern, the older man stepped forward with alacrity. 'We are honoured and encouraged by your illustrious presence at this uncertain time, Lord High Chancellor.'

Taita could see that despite his appearance, the advisor was not frail. His movements were strong, vigorous. 'And you are?'

‘Ankhu is a long-serving advisor to the governors of Memphis,’ Piay explained.

Taita heard the weariness in Piay’s tone, but he chose to brush it aside, lest it sour their reunion. When he had first accepted Piay as a young student, Taita had recognised something in him – a strength and courage – and he had instantly known that this questing boy would accomplish feats equalling the greatest of Egypt’s heroes. He furrowed his brow, mulling the worrisome transformation that grief had wrought on a man who had once acted as if there was nothing in this world that could defeat him.

Pushing aside his concerns, Taita held out a hand and Piay kissed the gold ring of office. ‘Where is Hannu? I don’t think I have seen you separated from your shadow since the day you took him into your employ.’

‘Hannu is gone. On a scouting mission.’

‘And Myssa?’ Taita said carefully. ‘Where have you lain her?’

‘Myssa is here,’ Piay said without emotion.

Again, Taita frowned. Myssa had not been born in Egypt, but it was nevertheless unconventional for her body to be interred anywhere but the necropolis.

‘May I see her resting place?’

‘That is not why I sent word to you,’ Piay said sharply.

‘No. But she was dear to me, as she was to you.’

Piay snorted derisively, and Taita felt his own anger flare at the petulance of his embittered charge.

‘I did not love her as you did, Piay, but I still mourn her loss. I would like to pay my respects.’

Piay eyed him inscrutably. ‘Very well.’

Leading Taita to the waiting palanquin, Piay allowed his master to settle himself before he took his place and the eight muscular slaves heaved the litter to their shoulders. Ankhu trailed behind on foot as they made their way from the port to the city and the fabled Gate of a Thousand Stars.

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As the litter bobbed and swayed, Taita leaned back and watched the roofs of the temples and palaces of the ancient capital appear above the city walls. He could see men on the scaffolding that clad the

nomarch's many restoration projects, but glancing at the man himself, sitting opposite him, he realised that Piay had no interest in their work.

As the litter plunged along the main thoroughfare, curious citizens stepped out of their homes to watch it pass. Taita could read the unease on their faces, apprehension no doubt prompted by the rumours of the bizarre occurrence in the city's new vault.

As the slaves bore them through the palace gate and into the expansive garden beyond it, Taita looked around the calm oasis. Avenues of lofty sycamore trees offered shady respite from the sun's fierce heat, and red roses and yellow chrysanthemum bloomed alongside a lake where egrets waded in the shallows. The air was filled with the rich scent of flowering jasmine.

When the litter was set down, Piay did not offer a hand to help his master stand. Instead, without looking back he made his way to what looked like a monument. Taita rose to his feet and followed him.

As he approached the structure, Taita noticed that it was newly constructed, built over the entrance to a small tomb, and adorned with a glorious spread of narcissus, the mass of yellow petals mirroring the sun overhead.

'So, this is where you have placed her,' Taita said softly, a wave of sadness washing over him. 'But you know that she belongs with her people, Piay.'

'She belongs with me,' Piay snapped.

For so long Piay had pursued the women of Pharaoh's court, one after the other. But then Myssa had entered his life and Piay had found his heart suddenly full. When Taita had watched them together, he had foreseen a long union full of happiness and joy. For a time, he had believed that their connection would be something on which they could both build a better future. But it was not to be.

'I was filled with sorrow when I heard the news.' Taita was tempted to ask Piay for a full account of the events which had led to Myssa's death, but he restrained himself. It was not the time or place.

'She is gone,' Piay said, ignoring Taita's words. 'We have other matters to discuss – matters that affect the here and now.'

'The mystery of the murdered scribe.'

Piay nodded. 'I know you like your puzzles. I have seen my fair share,

but I have encountered few as baffling as this.’

Taita was eager to find out more, but he held himself back.

‘Your message also said that you had started the next task that I set for you. The Great Monuments are being restored?’

‘Work has already begun on the Pyramid of Khufu and the Sphinx. They will shortly recover their eminent position as symbols of the glory of Egypt.’

Taita leaned in so none of the slaves waiting by the litter could overhear. ‘And the other matter?’

‘The spells hidden by the Great Architect are yours to decipher.’ Piay looked back at Myssa’s tomb. ‘She gave her life for them. I hope they prove profound.’

‘Myssa was like a daughter to me,’ Taita said, ‘just as you are like a son _’

‘The Sons of Apis maintain their guard,’ Piay said, interrupting his master. ‘When you are ready, I will take you there.’

Taita studied his pupil. ‘Grief is the price we pay for love, Piay. We must accept it, but never let it consume us. Myssa would not want that.’

‘The finest chamber in the palace has been prepared for you,’ Piay said, as if he had not heard a word Taita had said. ‘Every comfort shall be yours.’

Piay’s eyes alighted on Ankhu, strolling through the gate and into the palace garden. He beckoned the old man to join them.

‘Yes, my lord?’ Ankhu said.

‘I need you to look after the affairs of the city, preside over the Council of Elders in my stead for a time,’ Piay commanded.

‘It would be my honour. Where are you going?’

‘We will be here. I simply need you to attend to my responsibilities while I am indisposed. Our distinguished guest has come to investigate the matter of the murder in the vault. For as long as he is here, I expect he will demand much of my time.’

‘Only until the architect of this great mystery is revealed, and brought to justice,’ Taita said. ‘Then you can have him back.’

Ankhu smiled and bowed. ‘As my nomarch commands.’

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As Taita and Piay walked the broad street from the palace gates, the noise of the city filled their ears: the mallets in the workshops pounded a steady beat; the gulls shrieked as they dived and feasted on the middens; the voices of the apprentices rang out as they heaved and hauled, measured and weighed.

Taita was never more alive than when his mind was tested. With so many years rolling out behind him, there were times when he thought that he had seen all that life had to offer. Boredom was the great curse. And so he was grateful when the gods presented him with a fresh challenge.

He eyed his charge, hoping that a similar distraction would help him, too.

‘Tell me about the scribe,’ Taita commanded.

‘He was a solitary man, lost in the chambers of his head, as most scribes are.’ Piay’s eyes flicked towards his master. ‘No wife, no family, few friends.’

At the gates to the Temple of Ptah, Taita and Piay passed two old men who were waiting for the priests to allow them entry to make an offering. A young woman swayed past them, carrying water in a clay pot balanced on her head.

‘Then there seems no compelling reason why anyone would want to take his life,’ Taita said, more to himself than Piay. ‘Perhaps Djau-Aa’s death has no meaning.’

‘Why then would he paint a message in his own blood? Why –?’

Taita raised a hand to silence Piay. ‘We must gather the facts of this matter one by one, so we can examine them. Otherwise, we risk missing a vital detail.’

Piay blinked at his master in bafflement. ‘A man murdered, his throat slit, in a sealed chamber where no other mortal hand could reach him. Those are the details. You see now why so many believe that Djau-Aa could only have been killed by supernatural forces.’

‘Do you believe that?’

‘I have seen enough in my life to believe that many things are possible. But I do not believe this is the work of a god.’

‘Then I have taught you well.’

‘But neither can I see how this murder could have been committed by a human hand.’

Taita sensed that they were approaching the vault when he caught the scent of freshly cut stone. He folded his hands behind his back as he examined the heaps of discarded masonry. Leaning down, he traced a fingertip across the smooth surface of one of the blocks. ‘This is fine work,’ he murmured.

Taita turned his attention to the vault itself – vast, low, solid, with walls that could not be breached. Unlike the other grand structures of Memphis, there were no carvings, none of the artistic flourishes that revealed the skills of Egyptian masons. It served one purpose: to protect the treasures that were stored inside.

A small antechamber had been built in front of the great vault doors. It had a narrow entrance, so that it would be easily defendable by the guards who had been assigned that duty. Now, though, the four guards leaned on their spears outside this vestibule. Taita noted their downturned faces and nervous eyes. They were still frightened, and did not want to be anywhere near the site of the scribe’s bloody demise. But their eyes lit up with wonder when they saw the great mage approaching with the nomarch.

‘Show me where the body was found,’ Taita requested.

The guards, awestruck, did not move from their spot.

‘Open the door,’ Piay commanded the guards.

As the slabs swung open, Taita’s face remained stern but his eyes were alive with curiosity. It had been a long time since he had been presented with a problem as perplexing as this one promised to be.

He peered into the inky blackness. A smouldering brazier stood just inside the portico, and Piay took one of the brands standing beside it and lit it. He stepped to the threshold and raised the torch.

A blackened crust of blood spread across the flagstones just beyond the doors, where Djau-Aa’s body had lain.

‘See, here,’ Piay said, pointing.

Taita leaned in. He could imagine how the scribe had sprawled after he had fallen, and he saw where trembling fingers had attempted to trace a message. As it had dried, the mark had become harder to decipher, but the outline of the jackal-head was still clear enough.

‘That is indeed the sign for Anubis,’ Taita said.

‘Why would he have wasted his final moments on it?’

Taita peered into the darkness, thinking. But his mind was also on his

charge. Piay was a man who preferred action to thought, and now Taita sensed his frustration growing as he struggled to understand.

‘Is Djau-Aa telling us that Anubis killed him? Why would the Lord of the Sacred Land step forth from his domain to hunt down a mere scribe?’

‘We are walking into the dark and must proceed one step at a time,’ Taita cautioned. ‘Speaking of dark . . . Light the vault.’

Piay ordered the guards to take torches into the vault and light the oil lamps placed in alcoves around the walls. The men grumbled, but would not disobey an order from the nomarch. Finally, they edged inside, holding the blazing brands ahead of them as if some beast might bound out of the darkness and swallow them in an instant.

Soon the vault was flooded with the light of a hundred lamps, the light reflecting back from the piles of gold plate, chests and statues, necklaces and bracelets. Wealth that would have made even Pharaoh gasp.

‘We searched the vault when the body was discovered,’ Piay said. ‘No one could have hidden themselves in here. And the guards were outside the door, so whoever murdered the scribe could not have crept away unseen. The door could only be opened from without.’

‘You trust your guards?’ Taita asked.

‘They would not be here if I did not,’ Piay said firmly.

‘There are few men who could not be corrupted by the treasure in this vault. Particularly men who have endured the privations the people of Memphis were subjected to under your predecessor.’

Piay shook his head. ‘Not these men. I know them. They are loyal.’

‘I trust you,’ Taita said with an encouraging smile. ‘All four guards would have had to be in agreement to release the murderer from the vault and then seal the door behind him,’ he continued, ‘and that is most unlikely. One guard open to bribes, yes. Four such stalwarts prepared to turn their backs on their duty, no.’

Taita looked around the shimmering vault. In his mind’s eye, he saw Djau-Aa under attack: a man unaccustomed to physical exertion, his knees and hips aching from sitting for hours in the same position, his tired heart pounding. Despite his age, the scribe had almost managed to reach the door before his throat had been cut. He had collapsed, knowing he was dying, but still he had wanted to warn those who found his body. Or perhaps, Taita considered, the killer made the mark himself. But why?

He turned to his charge. ‘You have Djau-Aa’s records?’

‘Yes. His scrolls are stored in the palace archives.’

‘Good. Summon another scribe to bring them here. Use them to find out if anything is missing.’

‘From the vault?’ Piay looked across the heaps of gold dubiously. ‘How could the killer have escaped with anything? The vault was sealed.’

‘And yet he did escape,’ Taita said, looking straight into Piay’s eyes.

Piay nodded. ‘I will do so immediately.’

‘And while this work is conducted, I will bathe, anoint myself and break my fast. And then I will be ready for the tasks that will follow.’

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After the heat of the day, the chamber Taita had been given felt as cool as a river at twilight. Stretching, he allowed the slaves to strip him and prepare him for his bath. There were four of them, all female, and they attended to him with practised care, and in deferential silence, while the sweet scent of incense filled the air.

First, they worked an unguent of cedar, animal fat and juniper oil into his skin, then they began to shave him with circular bronze razors. So skilled and gentle were they that Taita felt no embarrassment over the ugly scar of his castration.

Only when they were certain that not a hair was left on his body, and had used a pumice stone to work the last of it from his scalp, did they lead him to the bathroom. Decorated with paintings of river birds – ducks and geese, ibis and purple herons, egrets, spoonbills and openbills – this room, with three high windows, was lit up by the sun, with views out across the city. The women, now dressed only in skirts made of crisp linen, massaged soap made of soda ash and olive oil into Taita’s skin, before sluicing water from tall pitchers over his naked body. After they had dried him, they finished their ritual by applying a mixture of moringa and almond oil, turning the great mage the colour of burnished gold.

Soothed by the attention of the slaves, Taita’s thoughts turned to the riddle Piay had presented him with. But as he went through the facts, he could not help but feel the inexorable tug of the greater mystery that had brought him to Memphis, the real source of his delight at Piay’s decision to

finally call him to the city – Imhotep's tomb, and the spells that it contained. Now that Piay had uncovered its location, Taita felt an almost unbearable need to commune with the Great Architect in his final resting place – a place of peace, free from all the worries of the mortal world. There he could study the wisdom that Imhotep had left behind.

Taita opened his eyes as the growl of his belly dragged him back to the present. He allowed the slaves to dress him in a clean robe of white silk and apply his green malachite eyeshadow, as their brothers from the kitchens carried in bowls of figs and pomegranates drizzled in honey, roasted partridge with chickpeas, and fried pastries accompanied by a pitcher of beer.

By the time he had eaten his fill, the shadows of evening were creeping across the city and a cooling breeze had rustled in from the north. Refreshed, Taita sauntered through the palace gates and made his way back through the narrow streets to the Temple of Ptah, the citizens of Memphis, young and old, scarcely able to believe what they were witnessing as he passed.

Outside the vault, Piay strode back and forth, huddling every now and then in conversation with two scribes and listening intently as the guards hurried out in turn to detail the items that had been accounted for.

'What news do you have for me?' Taita asked.

Piay strode over. 'Your suspicions were correct,' he admitted. 'There is a quantity of gold missing.'

'From a sealed chamber. What wondrous magic has been worked here?' Taita said with an ironic smile.

The guards and the scribes gathered round, eager to hear what their toils had produced.

'Though the how and the why of Djau-Aa's murder is not yet readily apparent, you can now let go of your fears,' Taita said. 'Gold has been stolen from the vault. From this fact, we can deduce with certainty that this crime was, in fact, committed by a man. For what supernatural entity – what god, what ghost or *djinn* – has use for material riches?'

'But what then did the scribe mean by making the mark of Anubis?' one of the guards asked, clearly still perturbed despite Taita's reassurances.

'You are making the assumption that he made it,' Taita replied.

'Who else?' Piay retorted.

‘The killer.’

Piay scoffed. ‘Why would the killer go to the trouble of drawing the sign of Anubis in his victim’s blood?’

‘To send a message, Piay,’ Taita replied evenly. ‘He wanted those who discovered his crime to believe it is indeed the work of Anubis, and for the rumour to be spread. He intended to sow fear . . .’

Piay narrowed his eyes, but found that he could not refute his master’s logic.

‘Nevertheless,’ Taita continued, ‘it is a sign, in more ways than one, and it will ultimately point us to the perpetrator. This murder, and the theft that Djau-Aa seems to have stumbled upon, could only have been committed by someone with remarkable abilities. On the morrow we must continue with fresh eyes. We will find out how it was done.’

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Like a bull shark drawn by the scent of blood, the crimson-sailed skiff cleaved through the deep waters of the Nile. Three sentinels braced themselves in the prow as the reddening sun began to sink towards the horizon, their arms hanging with the measured looseness of fighting men who never let their fingers stray too far from the hilts of their swords.

From where he limped along beyond the whispering reed beds, Hannu watched the vessel pass. Others would not have given it a second glance, but Hannu was always alert to that which seemed out of place. It had saved his life many times.

On his meandering journey north from Memphis, Hannu had glimpsed many similar men. They were almost always in twos or threes, on boats whisking through the fast water. What their business was, he could not tell, but their grim determination clearly set them apart from the other watermen who navigated the great river – those hauling bales or catching fish.

Something was afoot in the Lower Kingdom, Hannu was certain of it – like storm clouds gathering over the Great Green. Squatting on a granite waymarker, he lifted the waterskin from his side and swallowed a draught. The day was getting cooler, the wind growing stronger, bringing the sticky taint of rot from the swamps in the delta upriver.

Hannu frowned. Another night sleeping in a ditch when he could have been in his soft bed in the palace in Memphis; another day fishing in the muddy shallows to fill his belly, instead of enjoying dishes piled high with delicacies prepared by the nomarch's kitchens.

Since leaving the city, Hannu had trekked north along the banks of the Nile, wrapped in a worn woollen cloak and carrying a sack of meagre possessions, so that to anyone he passed he resembled nothing more than a poor merchant's assistant. He was short and stocky, and with his limp he appeared no threat to anyone.

From time to time Hannu had begged passage on skiffs sailing downriver towards the delta. He had struck up conversations with the sailors, maintaining a light tone, gossiping about the new Pharaoh until he casually turned the talk to the raids on the caravans. But most of them had heard nothing about the attacks, and those who had merely grunted and shrugged. Their lives were harsh and filled with toil. What did they care about thieves on the road, so long as they were left untouched themselves? When Hannu persisted with his questions, they suggested it might be a band of Hyksos warriors, looting what they could before they fled back to their homeland. Or perhaps the Shrikes, those fearsome thieves whom some said still operated in the Lower Kingdom.

A cry jolted Hannu from his thoughts and he leapt to his feet. His hand instinctively went to his waist, to where his sword would normally have hung, but he had left it in his chamber in the nomarch's palace in Memphis – a merchant's assistant would not carry a soldier's weapon. The only blade he had was a short knife tucked into his belt.

The cry came again, this time spiralling into a high-pitched keening. It was the sound of a woman in distress. Hannu lurched along the dusty track, following the sound, until he came to its source – a woman on her knees, hands pressed to her face, rocking back and forth as she cried. Her dress was shabby, her skin weather-beaten.

A man loomed over her, scowling. He had seen around forty floods by the look of him – his head unshaven, dirt clotted under his nails. His kilt was mottled with stains.

'What's happening here?' Hannu demanded.

The woman looked up, tears streaking her face. 'My daughter!' she cried.

‘One of the river crocodiles must have taken her,’ the man said. ‘There’s nothing to be done for her now.’

Scrambling to her feet, the woman grabbed at Hannu’s tunic. ‘No!’ she pleaded. ‘That can’t be! She’s an obedient girl. She knew to keep away from the reed beds and the shallows where the crocodiles hunt.’

The man snorted. ‘When did children ever listen to their parents?’

‘You must help me to find her,’ the woman begged.

Hannu looked from the mother’s tear-rimmed eyes to the man standing coldly behind her. ‘Who are you?’

‘A fisherman.’ The man shrugged. ‘I heard her cries, like you did.’

With his last word, the man’s eyes darted towards the reeds. Hannu’s senses prickled. Something was not right here, of that he was certain, and Hannu was not the type of man to ignore it when something was amiss. ‘Where did you last see your daughter?’ he asked the woman.

‘Follow in the girl’s footsteps and you’ll find the same fate,’ the man grunted.

Hannu ignored the warning. He would deal with the fisherman once he had found the girl.

Taking him by the hand, the woman tugged Hannu along the path to a line of date palms swaying in the breeze. ‘I left her here,’ she said, pointing to a slab of rock. ‘I’d lost my necklace on the path and went back to search for it.’

The woman opened her fingers to show Hannu her jewellery, a mean thing made of painted clay balls and the bones of waterfowl. One of the clay balls was larger than the others and painted in rough strokes with the Eye of Horus – a lucky charm to ward off misfortune.

Hannu dropped his eyes to the mica dust that lay around the rock. In his youth he had been a decent scout, and here he could see the ghosts of prints. One of the marks was long and deeper than the others. The girl *had* been dragged into the reed beds. But by what, he couldn’t be sure.

Perhaps it *had* been a crocodile. When they were hunting, they could move like the wind. Clamped in those jaws, the woman’s daughter would have been in no state to call for help. But the rock on which the girl had been sitting was far enough away from the water – she should have seen the creature coming for her and, Hannu thought, had time to scramble away.

Hannu followed the tracks to where the reeds began and peered out

across the chest-high wall of green papyrus. If a crocodile slumbered there after consuming its prey, he wouldn't see it until it was too late.

'Don't expect me to come to your rescue,' the fisherman called out behind him.

Hannu glanced back at the man and weighed what he saw in his face.

'Wait here for me,' he said sternly to the woman.

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Hannu's fingers closed around the handle of his knife as he staggered into the sucking mud at the river's edge. As he pushed through the reeds, he noted that some of the rushes had been broken, as if someone – or something – had already passed the same way.

His heart thumped in his chest. He had seen one of the great beasts bite a man clean in half, but he pushed the memory aside. He trusted his instincts, and something here felt unnatural.

The chilly river water crept up his legs until it reached his waist. Hannu gripped his dagger in his right hand as he pushed back the final curtain of reeds with his left. On the other side, a small skiff had been moored, so old that it barely looked river-worthy. The bunches of reeds that had been bound together to form the hull were fraying, and in places had been roughly and ineffectively patched.

A man crouched in the stern – his limbs lean and his eyes shrouded by overhanging brows.

Waiting, Hannu thought.

Catching sight of him, the man's mouth fell open in surprise, then twisted into a grimace. 'What do you want?' he growled.

'A lost child.' Hannu held the sailor's gaze.

'A child, you say? Aye . . . aye . . . A crocodile dragged a girl from the bank. She's long gone now.' The man feigned a sad expression. 'These things happen.'

Hannu had seen better performances from the drunkards who begged outside the taverns in Thebes. He glanced towards the prow. A bundle of what looked like old rags lay there, stained and threadbare. As Hannu watched, it twitched.

The man must have seen Hannu's expression shift, for he snarled and

his hand dipped to his kilt's waistband.

Before the boatman could grab his weapon, Hannu lunged. Though water surged around him, it didn't slow him. Lashing out like a cobra, his left hand caught the man's tunic, wrenching him over the side of the skiff. His cry bubbled away as he was plunged beneath the surface of the river and water flooded into his mouth.

The boatman writhed like an eel, desperately trying to break Hannu's grasp. As Hannu strengthened his hold on the man's tunic, pushing him down into the river's muddy bed, something snagged in his cloak and he felt the prick of bronze against his side. He realised that the boatman was stabbing up blindly with his knife even as he drowned in the frothing brown water. If he could ram his blade into Hannu's groin, the fight would be over.

Hannu thrust down with his own knife – once, twice, three times – until a dark cloud swirled to the surface and the churning water stilled.

With his foot, Hannu pushed the body out into the current. Here was a real feast for the river crocodiles. They'd scent the blood soon enough.

Hauling himself into the flimsy skiff, careful to avoid upending it, Hannu crawled to the bundle of rags and rested one hand upon it.

At his touch, the movement under the cloth intensified and he heard a whimper. Leaning close, he whispered: 'Do not fear. I am here to help you.'

The convulsions stopped. With his knife, Hannu sawed through the restraining layers of material until the bundle of rags fell apart to reveal a girl of about six, lean and tanned nut-brown, her eyes wide with terror. Her wrists and ankles had been bound with coarse rope and a strip of cloth had been used to gag her.

Hannu pressed his finger to his lips and the girl seemed to understand. He sliced through her bonds and she collapsed into him, trembling. Relieved that she was alive, Hannu folded his muscular arms around her, comforting her as best he could. Then he murmured: 'Let's get you back to your mother. But you must be as quiet as a mouse, do you understand?'

The girl nodded, her eyes overflowing with tears.

Hannu pulled up the anchor – a large stone attached to a greasy hide rope – then grasped the oar and guided the vessel along the edge of the reed beds.

So intense was his fury that he barely noticed his surroundings. There was a grim trade in young girls, to the brothels in the cities and even

beyond Egypt's borders. He had nothing but fierce loathing for men who engaged in it.

Leaning on the oar, Hannu steered the skiff around the rushes until it bumped against the muddy bank. He clambered out and reached out a hand to pull the girl onto firm ground. She was clearly in shock, but he hoped that she was young enough that in time the memories would fade.

Still holding her hand, Hannu limped along the track to where he had left the mother and the fisherman. By the time he glimpsed the two figures, his anger burned white-hot and he gripped his knife so tightly it shook in front of him.

With a jubilant cry that startled the fisherman, the girl freed her hand from Hannu's and ran towards her mother, who swept her arms around her daughter, sobbing and laughing at the same time.

The fisherman's eyes grew wide with terror as he saw the old soldier's fury. He spun on his heel and raced away along the path. Hannu drew his knife, grasping it by the blade, carefully measuring the growing distance between him and the fleeing kidnapper, before letting it fly. His wounded leg might no longer possess the strength that it once had, but his arm was as strong as ever. With a sickening *thwack*, the knife buried itself up to its hilt in the fisherman's back, and he collapsed headlong into the mud with a piercing cry.

Hannu approached the kidnapper, bringing his foot down on the wretched man's shoulder as he attempted to rise. The fisherman cried out again and slumped in the mud.

'I warn you not to move again,' Hannu growled, leaning down and savagely ripping the dagger from his captive's shoulder, prompting a shrill scream. 'Try it, and I will gladly send your wretched soul into the afterlife.'

With this, Hannu knelt heavily on the fisherman's back and began cutting strips of fabric from the man's clothing before using them to bind his wrists.

After he had checked the firmness of his work, Hannu sheathed his knife, stepped on the fisherman's back to press him into the mud once more for good measure, then lifted his sopping, wounded prize to his feet, dragging him along behind him.

Once she had wiped away her tears of joy, the mother stood and in a wavering voice said: 'I owe you everything.' She held out her broken

necklace. ‘Please, take this.’

Hannu shook his head. ‘I am happy your daughter is safe. I need no other reward.’

‘You risked your life for her. This is all I own of any value –’

‘I do not need anything.’ Hannu thought for a moment. ‘Except, perhaps, some information.’

The woman seemed pleased to be able to provide something. ‘Please, ask whatever you want. I do not know if I’ll be able to help, but on my daughter’s life, I will try.’

‘I’m an old soldier,’ Hannu began. ‘I fought the Hyksos for many years, but one of the barbarians buried his axe in my leg, and I haven’t had work since. I’ve been following men – men like me, who were once soldiers, perhaps – travelling north on the river.’

The woman paled, her eyes flashing anxiously to the fisherman. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘You haven’t seen these men?’

‘No.’

Hannu looked at her dubiously. ‘On your daughter’s life, you said.’

The woman hugged her daughter tightly in her arms. Finally, she looked up at Hannu. ‘Avaris,’ she whispered at last. ‘They are going to Avaris.’

Hannu’s brow furrowed at the mention of the old Hyksos capital, far to the north. He knew it well from past adventures. ‘Why? Have the Hyksos returned?’

The woman shook her head fearfully. ‘I know no more than that. Some of the men in my village have gone.’

‘What sort of men?’ Hannu asked.

‘Fighting men. Men who would be soldiers, if the Lower Kingdom had any army to fight for.’ She regarded the wounded fisherman bitterly. ‘Men like him, if he were more like you and had any sense of honour.’

Hannu eyed his captive, who avoided his gaze. ‘Men like him,’ he mused.

‘The woman is crazy,’ the fisherman stammered. ‘I don’t know anything about men bound for Avaris.’

Hannu withdrew the knife from its sheath and shrugged. ‘Then you are of no use to me.’

‘No, wait!’

‘You had best be ready to tell the truth. That is, if you value your wretched life at all.’

‘There is a tavern there, beside the wall that faces the rising sun. Go there after dark and wait for the man who wears the black robe with the white sash.’

‘How do you know this?’

The fisherman eyed him contemptuously. ‘Your accent. You are from the Upper Kingdom?’

Hannu nodded proudly. ‘Thebes.’

‘That is why you don’t know about the tavern. Every man of fighting age across Lower Egypt has heard of it. Many have answered the summons.’

‘But you have not.’ Hannu glared at the fisherman. ‘Who is this man in the robe? Is he an Egyptian?’

The fisherman shook his head, his eyes suddenly wide with fear. ‘I will tell you nothing more. The rest you must learn for yourself.’

With that, he sprang away from Hannu, then turned and raced into the rushes. Splashing into the water, his hands still tied behind his back, he waded waist-deep, making a desperate lunge for the skiff that still floated by the bank.

Hannu grunted in annoyance and began to shuffle after the man, but he stopped abruptly when he saw a dark shape gliding beneath the water’s surface. Seconds later, the crocodile’s jaws closed with bone-crushing force on the flailing fisherman’s midsection. He barely had time to cry out before he was dragged down into the depths.

Hannu watched as the ripples dissipated and the river calmed. At last, he glanced around and saw that he was now alone – the woman and her daughter had fled while he had been distracted by the fisherman’s cruel end.

‘Avaris . . .’ he muttered to himself as he looked down at the blood on his hands. ‘Avaris.’

• • •

Taita stirred from a restful sleep as the sun began to pink the sky in the east and the first light of day filtered into his chamber. The palace was already awake. He breathed in the aroma of baking bread

drifting up from the ovens in the kitchens, and listened to the chatter of the slaves floating into his room from the yard.

Having dressed and readied himself for the day, Taita strode out into the passage and descended to the Hall of Audiences, where the nomarch was already at work.

‘You’re late,’ Piay muttered, looking up from a thick stack of papyrus as Taita entered, meeting him with bloodshot eyes.

It was true. Taita’s well-worn custom had always been to rise before the dawn, but he had allowed himself a small concession ahead of the task which stood before them.

‘And what time does the nomarch commence his governance each day?’

‘I do not often indulge in the luxury of sleep anymore,’ Piay replied. ‘Dreams are no longer a source of comfort. Myssa is always there – waiting for me. And then I must wake to the fact that she is gone before me to the afterlife, and in her place I’ve been left with this . . .’ He gestured at the papyrus in front of him.

‘There is one cure, and one alone,’ Taita replied, ignoring the emotion in Piay’s voice. ‘Time. You must let your loss settle into you, become a part of you, and then you will be able to live with it.’

‘That is easy for you to say,’ Piay snapped.

Taita looked on Piay sternly. ‘Do you think I petitioned Pharaoh to make you nomarch for no reason? You are bound to the people of Memphis by his decree, and only the God-Pharaoh Rameses has it in his power to set this duty aside . . . I know what is in your heart. It was in my heart, too, after the death of my mistress. But I had two princesses and a king to care for. They needed me, just as your people need you.’

Despite his harsh tone, Taita felt deep sympathy for Piay. It was the curse of long life – to see those who found their way into your heart wither and die. He would not have wished his own fate on anyone as young as Piay.

‘Yesterday, I walked the streets from the palace to the vault,’ Taita continued. ‘Do you know what I saw?’

‘I do not.’ Piay’s tone was cold.

‘I saw men and women, finally free of Hyksos oppression, terrified that a new evil had come amongst them. But when they saw me, their mood lifted – they believe that I will save them, that *we* will save them.’

‘And how will we do this?’

‘We will need the palace garrison, every man.’

• • •

As the two men strode from the palace to the vault, Taita inhaled the cool morning air. He had always loved this time of the day, when the sky paled in the east and the first glow of sunrise shed its beauty on the Nile. The oppressive heat of the day would come, but for now it felt as if all the world was in harmony.

The palace garrison had been drawn up outside the vault, as Piay had commanded. When the men saw Taita approaching with the nomarch, they gathered in a crescent, waiting for their orders.

‘We can be certain of some aspects in the matter of the murder of Djau-Aa,’ Taita began, ‘so let us consider them. Firstly, that the missing gold was taken by men. Secondly, that because of the mysterious nature of the theft, this crime has been long in the planning. With a well-guarded vault, there was no opportunity for chance. Finally, we can say with some confidence that Djau-Aa, a man who devoted himself to learning and made no enemies in this world, was murdered because he was not expected to be in the vault at that hour . . .’ Taita swept an arm towards Piay. ‘Due to your great success, Nomarch, Djau-Aa stayed late to keep pace with the flow of returned gold. And his diligence was his undoing.’

Taita paused, looking up at the sky. It was a deliberately theatrical gesture. He had always enjoyed an audience – it was a weakness he allowed himself.

‘I suspect that whoever came for the gold, found the scribe there amongst the stacks,’ Taita continued. ‘They could not risk Djau-Aa raising the alarm, or identifying them, so they slit his throat. That paints a picture of the events. Now we must think about the “how” of the matter. How was this done? And to this question there can be only one answer. If the vault was sealed . . . the doors locked, the drawbars in place . . . If trusted guards stood at the entrance, ensuring no one beyond Djau-Aa came and went, then there must be another way into the vault.’

Piay frowned. ‘Another way?’

Taita held out one hand towards the heap of discarded masonry. ‘This

vault is newly constructed. Its purpose was always well known – to store the treasures looted from this city during the years of Hyksos rule, wealth beyond imagining. A crafty man might well have found a way to ensure a hidden passage could be added.'

'Surely this would have been noticed?' Piay said.

'Perhaps. Perhaps not. But a hidden way into the vault is the only explanation.'

'Now I understand why you asked for so many men to be present this morning,' Piay said. He turned to Ahmose. 'Captain, take your men into the vault, check every stone, every joint. Find this passage.'

'And once it has been discovered,' Taita added with conviction, 'it will lead us to the perpetrator of this terrible crime.'

As the soldiers trooped into the vault, Taita's thoughts turned to the one thing that still troubled him: the sign of Anubis.

• • •

By the time the column of soldiers and the lone chariot leading them reached the Great Pyramid of Khufu on the Plateau of Giza, the heat was beating down upon them like the mallets of the goldsmiths of Peru-nefer, the hot wind stirring whirls of mica dust around their feet.

Stepping down from the chariot, Taita felt a prickle of excitement as he stared up at the vast mountain of pale stone rising from the rolling sands. The sheer scale of the endeavour, the meticulous workmanship, even without the gold capstone that would have made the edifice glow like a beacon for as far as the eye could see – it was the dream of Egypt given form in stone.

'Does this sight not make your heart beat faster?' Taita asked Piay, as the captain of the Blue Crocodiles took the reins from the nomarch.

'You forget what happened here,' Piay replied. 'I feel no joy setting foot in the necropolis.'

'Power beyond imagining lies here,' Taita mused, as if he hadn't heard Piay's words, his gaze drifting across the two smaller pyramids to the Sphinx. 'One thousand years ago Imhotep foresaw a time when Egypt would face trials that could well destroy her. The spells he hid away could

bring salvation, but only in the hands of the wisest man of that coming age, so he believed.'

Piay nodded distractedly, then began to lead the way around the pyramid to a pile of rock and freshly dug sand a spear's throw from the base of the monument. There, Taita's breath caught in his chest at the sight of a figure moving towards him, with burning eyes, a tattoo of a living skull covering his face, the black ink around his eyes and nose stark against the man's pale skin.

Slowly, Taita began to perceive that there were more of them, all standing at a distance. It was as if they were materialising out of the desert air, the curved bronze of their swords glinting in the midday heat. The Sons of Apis were indeed terrifying to behold. Taita lost count at fifty men, if men they truly were.

The leader of the phantoms approached Piay, who nodded as he muttered something, gesturing to Taita. The skull-faced man turned and bowed deeply. 'Lord Taita, the Sons of Apis have long awaited your coming.'

Taita could sense something in the man's sonorous delivery, a way of speaking that indicated to him that the Sons of Apis were much older than ordinary men. Older, even, than he was. He glanced curiously at Piay.

'The Sons of Apis have guarded the spells of the Great Architect for a thousand years. Now the day they have waited for has come. This is their last task.'

The leader gazed at Taita. 'My lord Imhotep intended this chamber and its sacred contents for you alone, Lord Taita. Now you have come to take possession of it, I ask that my brothers and I, who have faithfully guarded this great secret through the ages, may finally approach the very power we have so long protected, and obtain admission to the afterlife. It is a reward we were promised many lifetimes ago.'

Taita was moved by the leader's request. 'Go,' he replied kindly. 'Be at peace.'

The leader of the Sons of Apis bowed his head once more, then turned to face the pile of rocks. Dropping to his knees, he dragged the last stones away until a dark hole appeared – the entrance to a hidden tunnel.

Without looking back, he swung himself down through the aperture, disappearing into the dark.

One by one, the other Sons of Apis approached the entry and descended, until at last, Taita and Piay were left alone.

‘Will you accompany me?’ Taita asked Piay. ‘I am sure the examination of the city vault will still take some time.’

Piay shook his head. He was staring into the dark tunnel as if looking into the seething heart of the Duat – the underworld itself. ‘Myssa gave her life in those depths. I went back once, but only to reclaim her body. I will not go down there again.’

Taita nodded. ‘Very well. Return to Memphis. Leave the chariot and one of the Blue Crocodiles. I will meet you back at the Temple of Ptah as soon as I have inspected the tomb.’ He shifted his gaze back to the tunnel. ‘What lies in there may provide the means to complete the reunification of the two lands of Egypt and defend it against our future enemies.’

‘I have seen the spells, and felt their power,’ Piay said when he at last found his voice. ‘Be careful – the tomb is treacherous.’

‘I have no reason to fear it. It holds knowledge that was meant for me.’

Piay nodded. ‘You will find a torch below. As a final duty, the Sons of Apis have prepared the tomb for your arrival.’ Then he bowed and turned to make his way back to the waiting soldiers.

Taita lowered himself into the gently sloping, granite-lined tunnel. The dank air instantly caught at the back of his throat. He shivered at the thought that barely a foot had trodden upon the stones since they had been laid a thousand years earlier.

Taita saw a torch, a flint and a fire-striker in the dim light filtering down from the entrance. Cracking the flint, he lit the torch, his nostrils wrinkling as he was enveloped in a swirl of smoke tainted with the bitter scent of pitch. Holding the flaming brand high, he chased the shadows down the tunnel.

Taita felt his skin begin to tingle as he finally stepped into the stone chamber that lay under the Great Pyramid of Khufu. Raising his torch, he saw a sarcophagus in the centre of the chamber, miraculously untouched by the grave-robbers who had plundered so many of the other ancient tombs. The flickering light washed across the smooth granite surface, unmarked by symbols that would have revealed the name of the one who lay within. But there could be no doubt – this was the final resting place of the Great Architect.

Gold glittered in the gloom: a chalice filled with a mixture of castor oil and natron, beneath which lay four small lamps. Taita knew the mixture well, having used it many times in his long life – a fuel which allowed an artisan to light up their work without staining it with soot. Lighting the wicks, Taita positioned a lamp in each corner of the tomb and then stepped back in wonder. Across the span of the walls, glowing with the same brilliance as the day they had been painted a millennium before, were the gods' words, the *medu neter*. The spells ran from ceiling to floor in brilliant cascades of red, white, green, black and blue, seeming to shimmer and quake and dance, their power radiating before his eyes.

Taita, his mouth agape in wonder, stepped forward. Tracing his fingers across the symbols, his lips began to move as he silently read the entreaties to the gods that Imhotep had left behind – entreaties that were at once, somehow, before him, there to be spoken, and yet hidden and unutterable at the very same time. Taita felt an inexhaustible energy coursing through him. The force that lay here! Power to summon the gods themselves to walk amongst men, so that they might aid them in their endeavours. Power to bring the two kingdoms of Egypt back together; power to protect the great land from future harm. Fire coursed from his fingertips to his heart.

Taita sighed. It would take him an age to decipher all the knowledge amassed on the walls of Imhotep's tomb, but time was what he had been given. Perhaps this is why I have been blessed with long life, he thought to himself. Perhaps in this work, he would finally discover the gods' purpose for him.

Taita edged around the walls, allowing the spells to lead him. Finally, he came to one that was longer and somehow more vibrant than the others. When he reached for it, it seemed to pulsate, inviting him into a chasm that it was somehow opening in the wall in front of him. Studying the spell, he began to understand that it was an incantation allowing a mortal to step into the everlasting realm of the gods.

Was this what had allowed Imhotep to leave the mortal world and begin an eternal quest for knowledge? Taita stared at the gods' words, feeling a wave of euphoria rise inside of him.

Fighting the urge to utter the spell aloud, he stepped back to the centre of the chamber and settled down with his back against the sarcophagus. Closing his eyes, Taita let his mind drift with the beat of his heart, listening

to the whispers that filled the tomb – whispers that seemed to come from the spells themselves.

• • •

The *medu neter* still gripped Taita's mind as he took the reins of the nomarch's chariot and slowly began to turn the horses back towards Memphis. The soldier Piay had left to guard the horses eyed him suspiciously from under his helmet – it was clear that Taita had returned a different person from the one who had entered Imhotep's tomb.

When Taita had finally torn himself away from the walls of the tomb, aware that Piay and the men of the palace garrison would be waiting for him back in the city, it was with one of the lesser spells on his lips. The dismissal of the Sons of Apis meant that Imhotep's tomb was now, after a thousand years, unguarded, so the responsibility of protecting what lay inside was now Taita's. As he uttered the sacred words, the stones around the entrance to the tunnel seemed to bend and meld together like molten glass, closing and hiding the tomb. The power had been intoxicating, and even as he turned away, Taita felt an urge to return and drink more deeply from the wisdom that Imhotep had left behind.

Stirring from his thoughts as the gate of the city loomed ahead of him, Taita took a sip from the waterskin that hung on the side rail of the chariot. The colours of the *medu neter* were slowly fading from his mind, the power of the spells withdrawing, leaving him feeling refreshed in body and spirit. It was as if he could see everything clearly for the first time – the world around him vibrating with light and detail.

The chariot rattled along the winding Memphis streets until Taita drew the horses to a halt outside the Temple of Ptah.

Piay stepped out of the entrance hall, shaking his head. 'The men have laboured all morning, but they have found no sign of any passage.'

'I thought as much,' Taita said.

Piay frowned. 'You did?'

'Do not mistake me. The passage is there. But it has been constructed with such skill that it is invisible to the eye.'

Piay shifted with discomfort. 'Then how will we find it?'

'Come.' Taita gestured to Piay to follow him as he strode through the

temple and into the vault. ‘Bring ten bowls and space them equally along the stone there,’ he said, wagging his finger at the rear wall. ‘Once they are in place, make a small fire in each of them.’

Piay shook his head, baffled by this command, but he summoned Ahmose and passed on the order.

Soon tongues of flame licked up from the dried dung cakes stacked in the bronze incense bowls that Ahmose had obtained from the priests. In the enclosed space, the air thickened quickly with the acrid stink of burning.

Taita watched the fires carefully. Smoke billowed up from all of the bowls, twisting across the ceiling of the vault, being drawn up and out through the great doors. From all the bowls except one. There the fire burned brightly, the flames consuming the fuel and getting stronger.

‘See,’ Taita said, pointing. ‘There is a draught from outside the vault.’

‘The passage,’ Piay said in amazement.

‘Search there, and I wager you’ll find stones that can be removed to reveal it.’

Suddenly animated, Piay whirled his arms, commanding the soldiers into activity. ‘Get tools, and quickly. I want those stones taken up!’

Three of the men were dispatched to the Masons’ Guild. When they returned a short time later, their arms were filled with chisels, adzes and mallets. They quickly set to work on the flagstones.

Taita watched the frenzied labour as the hammering and clattering rang off the walls. Soon a channel had been opened up along the edge of one of the stones, wide enough for chisels to be inserted. With a great deal of heaving, the soldiers lifted it, pushing it up until it stood on one end against the wall.

‘It’s here!’ one of the men exclaimed.

A space had been revealed that led beneath the flagstones – just big enough for a man. Without a second thought, Piay dropped into the narrow tunnel and scrambled out of view.

Long moments passed, and Taita began to fear that the nomarch had blundered into some kind of trap. But then a flushed Piay burst back into view, heaving himself up into the vault.

‘The tunnel has been cut into the bedrock itself and runs to the edge of a midden,’ he announced. ‘The entrance has been covered over with wood panelling and clay bricks. You were right. This was how the gold was taken

from the vault, how the murderer surprised Djau-Aa before slitting his throat.'

Taita smiled at the begrudging admiration on the nomarch's face. 'When I was a slave, long ago,' he said, 'my master tasked me with designing secret vaults and passages for his many illicit enterprises. This design was well conceived, but no chamber is impenetrable, given enough time and the right tools.'

'With all the work this entailed, the thief no doubt intended to return time and again to steal from the wealth stored here,' Piay surmised. 'And knowing this, he was not as careful as perhaps he should have been. He left this behind.'

Taita studied the object that Piay held out to him. It was a golden senet board, exquisitely inlaid with mother-of-pearl and lapis lazuli. 'If his objective were limited to the wealth stored in this chamber, why would our intruder not take as much as he could, in the interlude between Djau-Aa's murder and the discovery of his body?' Taita reached out for the box and took the cool metal into his hands. 'Surely, he would know that by killing the scribe, scrutiny would follow, and his ability to come and go unnoticed would cease. And yet, he has taken only a modest portion of the vast treasure of Memphis.' He watched the light play over the symbols scattered across the senet squares. 'There are gems in this vault worth twenty times the value of this child's toy.'

Piay frowned at his master. 'Do you mean to imply that Djau-Aa's murder was the intruder's objective, and not the gold?'

'We must consider all possibilities,' Taita replied. 'The thief must have known that his work would be discovered, but he did not want it discovered immediately. Why? Logic tells us that this is something more than the simple theft of a few pieces of gold.'

Piay grunted in dismay. 'Bigger plan or no, there is only one person who could have built such a hidden passage. And if he did not authorise it, then he must at least have known about it – as it could not be hidden from him. I know who we must speak to.'

'Yes. We have our first mortal suspect, at last,' Taita replied.

• • •

The master mason was a tall man with a hooked nose. He was dressed in a bright amber robe studded with gems across the breast. Haman was his name, and he was well respected in Memphis, coming from a long line of master masons who had passed down the secret skills of their trade from father to son. He would have endured three initiation rites to achieve his elevated status, one of which would have forced him to experience his own death and rebirth.

Haman's house was not far from the Temple of Ptah. His elegant residence was large and airy, constructed from polished white limestone and marble, the walls masterfully painted in vivid colours with murals depicting the construction of the Great Monuments. Taita had rarely seen such work outside the great tombs, and as the designer of the scenes that lined the walls of Pharaoh Mamose's tomb, which lay in the mountains to the south of Qebui, he could appreciate the craftmanship more than most.

Informed of Piay and Taita's arrival, Haman welcomed them in his study. 'Nomarch! Lord High Chancellor!' he said with a deep bow. 'To what do I owe this great honour?'

'I have come to commend you on your work,' Taita said. 'Memphis is much improved since last I saw it.'

Haman bowed again. 'The nomarch's determination to see this city rebuilt does him great credit.'

'I understand the city vault was also your work?' Taita said.

'Have you seen it?' Haman asked, brightening.

'I have.'

'And it met your expectations?' the master mason asked.

'A masterpiece.'

Haman smiled, pleased to receive such a compliment from Pharaoh's Lord High Chancellor. 'Let us refresh ourselves as we discuss it.' He clapped his hands, and after a short interval two slaves appeared with cups of cool sherbet and sticky honey cakes.

As the slaves set the drinks and sweet morsels down on a low table, Taita looked around the room, resting his attention first on a marble statue of the Great Architect, then on the exquisitely carved cedar-wood chests and chairs imported from the lands on the eastern edge of the Great Green. These were the trappings of a successful life. Why, then, had this wealthy man turned to crime? It seemed he had all that he could ever desire. But

there was also no doubt that only Haman could have ensured that the passageway had remained undetected during the construction of the vault.

‘My love?’ A lilting voice drifted across the cool courtyard beyond Haman’s study, and Taita turned to see a fashionably dressed woman of around forty years of age. Her wide eyes were emphasised by thick lines of black *mesdemet*, and she wore a wig that framed her sharp cheekbones. Her hands rested on the shoulders of two children: a boy with a mop of black hair and a mischievous expression, and a girl who had caught her mother’s beauty. She stared at Taita, but when he smiled at her, she looked away, embarrassed.

‘Yes, my love?’ Haman replied.

‘Have you forgotten? We are expected at the house of Ankhmet this afternoon, to celebrate the birth of the new child.’

‘I have not forgotten, my love,’ Haman said warmly, ‘but I must attend to my guests first. The great sage Taita is Lord High Chancellor to Pharaoh himself, and does not often have reason to visit from Thebes. I will meet you at the house.’

‘We will not keep your husband any longer than is necessary,’ Taita offered, knowing that in all likelihood, Haman would be heading to a cell rather than to the celebration.

The woman bowed and ushered the children away as Haman turned back to Taita and Piay. ‘My apologies. I try to be an attentive husband and father, but sometimes these tiresome domestic matters intrude into the hours of work . . .’ He paused. ‘You say you have seen the vault? Have you been inside it? I have the plans here, if you would like to see them.’

Taita smiled. ‘I understand that there is much in the mason’s art that must be kept secret from those who have not been initiated.’ He paused, then added, ‘I would like to ask you about the construction of a hidden passageway in the vault.’

Haman’s features twitched with shock. ‘There is no hidden passageway in the vault. I would know.’

‘That is why we are here. The passageway was discovered this afternoon, after the death of a scribe led us to uncover the theft of gold from the vault.’

Haman moistened his suddenly dry mouth. ‘This cannot be,’ he stuttered. ‘I know nothing of this –’

‘Then you did not do the work of the master mason for which you were engaged?’ Piay interjected.

‘If there is a passage –’

‘There is.’

‘. . . then it can only have been constructed under cover of darkness, dug from outside the temple.’

‘Are you expecting us to believe that you would not have seen the signs?’ Piay allowed a hardness to enter his voice. Haman winced when he heard it. ‘The stones that disguised the entrance to the passage were cut with the skill of a master mason,’ Piay continued, ‘so that even a needle could not pass between the joins. It was impossible to tell that they could be removed. Not even your most talented craftsmen could have done this without your guidance and supervision.’

Haman took a step back, his composure ebbing. He glanced from side to side, a hunted beast searching for a way to flee.

‘Wasting our time with more excuses will not serve you well,’ Piay cautioned. ‘I will oversee the *kenbet* court, where judgment will be passed. At the very least, you will be imprisoned and expected to repay what was stolen a hundred and eighty times over. And I warn you that a substantial amount is missing from the vault.’

Haman pressed his face into his hands. ‘The debt will destroy me,’ he groaned. ‘My wife . . . My children . . .’

‘Why did you do it, Haman?’ Taita asked. ‘A man of your standing? You want for nothing.’

‘I had no choice!’ the master mason cried. ‘The lives of my children were at stake.’

‘Who is behind the tunnel?’ Piay demanded. ‘Speak up now and the *kenbet* may find some mercy for you.’

‘I cannot.’ Haman began to sob like a child and Taita could almost smell the fear-sweat on him. ‘For the love of the gods! If I speak, I am doomed. My wife, my children, too.’

‘Tell me what part Anubis plays in this,’ Taita asked quietly.

Haman’s features twisted in terror as Taita’s words found their mark.

‘His sign was left on the floor of the vault, written in the blood of the murdered scribe.’

‘His killer undoubtedly entered and left through the secret passage

which you had built, Haman. You have his blood on your hands,' Piay added.

'I had hoped that no one would come to harm. That in the end, whatever they took would not be missed. You have to believe me.'

'Your hope has proven false,' Piay said flatly.

'Help us now,' Taita urged. 'How were you approached?'

Haman's countenance drained of colour. 'The scribe,' he whispered.

Taita and Piay glanced at each other curiously. 'What scribe?' Piay asked. 'Not Djau-Aa, surely.'

The master mason stared at his hands for a long moment before quietly delivering his confession. 'I do not know his name. He is a tall man, with eyes that could freeze the Nile. I know not how, but one night I returned to the house to find him waiting for me, here, in this very room . . .'

Taita leaned in, his curiosity piqued. 'What did he ask from you?'

'He ordered me to construct a secret passage into the vault, which could be accessed from outside the Temple of Ptah. It was to be undetectable, even if you were told exactly where to find it. When I refused to comply with his demand, the scribe told me that he was the emissary of Anubis himself. That if I refused, I would answer to the god personally – and that my journey to the afterlife would not be made alone. That my wife and children would accompany me to the gates of eternity.'

'Surely a man of your position would not be so easily compelled,' Piay said sceptically. 'You had to know that what this scribe was asking would destroy you, were it to be discovered.'

The master mason nodded sullenly. 'You are right, my lord. Initially, I dismissed the threat. I was disturbed that a man like the scribe had so easily found a way into my home – even if my wife and children hadn't seen him – so I set about replacing my household staff, and for a while I paid some guards from the guild to keep a watch, but when nothing more happened . . . I began to think little of it. That was, until we laid the foundation of the vault and made no concession for the passage. Somehow, Anubis and his scribe knew of it. For shortly thereafter, my brother-in-law, also a member of the guild, went missing. He had always been a reliable man, so I was perplexed by his disappearance. I went to his home, to see if he had fallen ill, and found him as you found your murdered scribe. On the floor with his throat slit, and with the sign of Anubis scrawled in his blood.'

‘Why did you not report this killing?’ Piay asked.

‘I dreaded what might befall me and my family if I revealed what had happened, so I hid the body, burying it at the construction site. The very next day, I began alterations to the structure.’

‘None of what you have told us proves that this scribe was, in fact, the emissary of Anubis,’ Piay declared.

Haman shook his head sadly. ‘You might think not. But the death of my brother-in-law made me fear for the lives of my wife and children all the same.’ He looked wide-eyed from one of his interrogators to the other. ‘I cannot tell you anything more. Already, I have said too much.’

Piay’s expression softened. ‘You have no reason to be afraid. I will station a guard at your door day and night. We will protect you, and your family.’

‘You know of the passageway,’ the master mason replied. ‘That shows I have failed.’ He turned his resigned eyes on Taita. ‘Not even the great Lord Taita can save me from the wrath of Anubis now.’

• • •

Piay escorted the master mason through the palace gate, as Taita trailed thoughtfully behind the two men. The nomarch had promised, for the sake of Haman’s family and his reputation, that he would not be bound if he submitted willingly to his imprisonment. Concern for the man’s life had led Piay to declare that he would incarcerate him on the palace grounds, in the cells beneath the garrison block, where only the most notorious of offenders were held. There, he could be properly protected against the man he called the scribe, or anyone who might do his bidding.

As Piay handed his prisoner over to the waiting guards, Taita came to his side, and together they watched as Haman was escorted underground. ‘The riddle grows. Perhaps the death of Djau-Aa was ordered by this other scribe.’

Piay shook his head, trying to make sense of this new development. ‘It is the first time I have heard of any such person.’

‘I have no doubt,’ Taita replied. ‘But we both are familiar with someone who, I am quite certain, will know him.’

Piay glanced unhappily at the steps leading to the cells beneath the guardhouse.

‘I can accompany you,’ Taita offered, sensing Piay’s unease. ‘If that will make your task easier.’

‘No. He is more likely to speak truthfully if he speaks to me alone. He will see your presence as a challenge.’

Leaving Taita where he stood in the verdant, sun-kissed garden, Piay descended the stairs into the torchlit darkness, where his father awaited him.

• • •

At the bottom of the steps, Piay breathed in the dank air, thick with the smell of human waste. Away from the one small lamp guttering in a corner, the darkness was abyssal. Piay kicked out at a rat that scurried in front of his toes, the tip of his sandal catching under its swollen belly and throwing it into the void.

Once his eyes had adjusted to the half-light, Piay approached a cell door and called Asil’s name. He knew his father would recognise his voice, but it was impossible to know if he would answer, and Piay could see nothing in the gloom beyond the small window in the door.

‘What do you want?’ Asil growled. His voice sounded parchment-thin, but Piay knew from long experience that his father made a play of his advanced age, feigning weakness so his opponents would underestimate him.

‘I have come to see how you are –’

‘Bad.’

‘And if you want for anything.’

Asil laughed hollowly. ‘My freedom. And a sharp knife to cut the throats of all those who have wronged me.’

Piay knew his father included his own son amongst them.

‘What, no gratitude?’ Piay said. ‘By rights, you should have been executed for your crimes.’

Finally, his father’s form emerged from the other shadows. He was standing deep inside the cell, glowering at his son. Even in the dark, his eyes glittered with cunning.

Asil was the leader of the Guild of Thieves in Memphis. As a free man,

he had left a trail of misery in his wake – stealing food from the starving and robbing the dying. He had been imprisoned for leading the uprising that had claimed the lives of Zahur, the previous governor of Memphis, and Lord Harrar, Pharaoh's envoy to the Lower Kingdom. Piay had felt little admiration for either man, but murder was murder.

'This is no kind of life, boy. With each day I spend in this pit, death grows more appealing.'

Under other circumstances, Asil would have been one of the first to be questioned about the death of Djau-Aa and the theft of the gold from the city vault, but Piay knew that for all the old man's guile, he was not ingenious enough to conceive of such an audacious heist. Brute force and threats were his currency.

'You would do well to address me with more respect,' Piay said in an authoritative tone. 'I may be your son, but I am also the nomarch of this city.'

'Credit to me,' Asil spat.

'The blood we share is all that prevents me from granting you the death you deserve. And I promise, if I change my mind, that death will not be delivered in the manner you hope.'

Asil sneered again and bowed deeply, mocking his son. 'I hear the great Taita has set foot in Memphis,' he said as he straightened. 'The man who took my place as your father and made the boy I loved into . . . you.' He narrowed his eyes at Piay.

'A man who holds himself to the highest standard,' Piay retorted. 'Who understands honour above all things.'

'Honour? Only those who are born into wealth can afford such a worthless thing.'

'Honour is what sets us apart from two dogs fighting over a bone.' Piay looked at his father with sympathy, but he knew that he would never understand. 'But I did not come here to give you a lesson in morality.'

'Thank the gods for that,' Asil sneered. 'Why did you come, then? Speak.'

'The Guild of Thieves knows of every crime committed in this city. Nothing is stolen here without your approval.'

'Yes, yes. Spit it out, boy. What do you want?'

'There has been a theft from the new city vault.'

Asil stiffened. He narrowed his eyes, his attention caught. It was clear from the way he held his head and the intensity of his stare that he admired the ambition of the thief.

‘Are you accusing me?’

Piay shook his head. ‘This theft was far beyond the abilities of you and your thugs,’ he said. ‘It was planned by a great mind. Besides, you are in here, rotting.’

‘You would be unwise to doubt the reach of my arm,’ Asil retorted. ‘But I will tell you now – this was not the work of the Guild of Thieves. I heard that the scribe had been murdered, but you have done well to prevent talk of this theft spreading. It does not reflect well on you, *Nomarch*.’ Asil ground out the word from between his teeth. ‘A new vault, built at considerable expense, and within a week it is already breached?’ He chuckled to himself.

‘Who is responsible?’

Asil snorted. ‘Why should I tell you anything?’

‘You say this crime does not reflect well on me. It does not reflect well on the Guild of Thieves, either. It was committed under your noses, and yet you know nothing of it.’

‘If the vault was robbed, as you say, it can only have been by an outsider.’

‘But not just any outsider,’ Piay said. ‘Someone who could not only conceive of such a plan, but also find a way to strike fear into the heart of the master mason.’

Asil looked away, but he said nothing.

‘There was a sign left in the vault,’ Piay continued. ‘On the floor next to the murdered scribe.’

Asil’s eyes flashed yellow in the stifling dark of the cell. ‘The mark of Anubis,’ he said.

‘You know who this is?’ Piay pressed.

‘Aye.’ Asil’s voice wavered. ‘And you should leave this matter well alone if you want to cling on to your miserable life. Your high office and grand reputation will not protect you.’

Piay had always thought nothing could scare his father. He was as unyielding as obsidian and as relentless as the *khamsin*, but here was someone who clearly frightened him.

‘Who is it?’

‘I am in here, and you are out there,’ Asil replied.

‘I will not grant you freedom in return for information.’

Asil turned his back on his son. ‘Then, blood or not, I have nothing more to share with you.’

• • •

Avaris loomed out of the thick haze hanging over the steaming marshes of the delta, the scarred and broken walls appearing like the blackened bones of some long-dead beast. From the bow of the skiff that Hannu had taken from the kidnappers, the sprawling city seemed deathly quiet – only the mournful screeching of gulls broke the silence.

Above the walls, the soaring columns of the temple of the Hyksos god Baal were visible. Hannu’s thoughts drifted back to the last time he had sailed up to this city. Avaris had been a thriving capital then, an imposing metropolis built on the bounty from the network of trade routes that stretched far into the east; its vast harbour was filled with a forest of masts sprouting from ships from every corner of the known earth. They had been dangerous times, certainly, but happier ones, too. Piay had been at his side, flushed with his own self-importance, overestimating his abilities as always. They had made a good team back then, Hannu thought. Two righteous adventurers against the world.

That was before Piay had met Myssa. And before he knew the grief of losing her.

Hannu’s mood darkened. He had vowed that he would not give in to such thoughts. The past was past, and there was nothing that Hannu, or Piay, or anyone else could do about it.

He looked again at the city that stood before him – a crumbling monument to a broken empire. The Hyksos had fled, the trade routes had been strangled by warfare, and only a few galleys unloaded their wares in between the rotting hulks that remained half-submerged against the quayside. Soon, Hannu thought, this once great city would be nothing more than a grand cemetery where jackals roamed, a fitting memorial to the arrogance of the barbarians who had aspired to make themselves masters of a land belonging to the gods.

Water sluiced around Hannu's feet and, with a muttered curse, he snatched up the leather flagon that the kidnappers had used to bail out their skiff. He had been battling to avoid sinking ever since he had set off down the river.

Once he had averted disaster, Hannu guided the skiff into the harbour and found a place where he could tie up. But as soon as he was on dry land, he thought better of it. With a shrug, he kicked the skiff back into the flow of the Nile. Wherever he went next, he would find another way of getting there.

Hannu limped onto the quayside, where slaves heaved goods into carts that would be hauled through the river gate and into the city. But unlike the Memphis docks, where merchants could be found haggling over bolts of pristine Syrian silk and sweet-smelling amphorae of olive oil from Crete, here Hannu could only see the most basic of goods – tattered baskets of emmer wheat, wilted onions and sun-darkened radishes. A pot-bellied tax collector wandered back and forth, waving his inky brush across a roll of parchment, but no one looked up to meet his eye. If the governor couldn't even collect taxes effectively, there was little hope for Avaris, Hannu thought grimly. Who would repair the damaged walls and feed the soldiers in the garrison?

Hannu watched a ship's captain walking along the quay, checking the moorings of his galley. Not for the first time, he wondered why he hadn't simply set aside his exasperation with Piay and remained in the comfort of the nomarch's palace. Grumbling under his breath, he edged around a row of empty urns and planted himself in front of the captain.

The man looked Egyptian, though his skin had been leathered by hard work and weather. He eyed Hannu with suspicion. 'I have enough men. I don't need any more.'

'I seek my work on dry land.'

The captain looked Hannu up and down dubiously. 'If you've come to Avaris to find employment, then may Horus spread his wings over you.'

'I don't need much. Some bread. A place to lay my head,' Hannu begged.

The man gazed up the road that led towards the river gate, then spat into the dust at his feet. 'Take my advice. Go to Memphis. The city is reborn under its new nomarch. There is work there, and money to be made.'

Hannu forced a tight smile. ‘That may well be. But for now, I’m here.’ He paused. ‘I’ve heard things have become lawless in this region. Raids on caravans, ships like yours threatened by pirates downriver. I’m an old soldier. Thought there might be some need for men with my experience.’

The captain nodded at Hannu, softening at the mention of his military service. ‘You may well be right. I’ve heard plenty of such talk between here and the coast.’

‘Who’s behind it? Shrikes?’

The captain shook his head.

‘The Hyksos? Some of them are still around, so they say.’

‘The Pharaoh’s men went back to Thebes once the Hyksos were defeated. They left a new nomarch in Memphis, and he sent boats to clear the waterways to the Great Green, but the people of the delta don’t like outsiders. There are men there, running things like it’s their own kingdom. And who’s here to stop them?’

Hannu knew the captain was right. Order had only been brought to the Lower Kingdom as far as Memphis. Beyond that, across the marshes of the delta, the land had not yet been brought under Pharaoh’s control.

‘Brigands and cut-throats . . .’ Hannu said with a note of contempt. ‘Nothing to be scared of. In my experience, men like that run at the first sign of trouble.’

‘Not these. But perhaps they would be interested in an old soldier looking for work?’

• • •

From the windswept desert sands, the Great Pyramid soared up stark against the night sky. The full moon of Piay’s chosen god, Khonsu, hung above its golden capstone and Oceanus, the endless milky river of stars that flowed from horizon to horizon, drifted behind it, mirroring the course of the life-giving Nile.

From where he stood near the pyramid’s base, Taita looked up at the towering mountain of stone, humbled as he faced the edifice, a student in front of an all-knowing master.

And yet as he tore his gaze away, he realised that the landscape around him was not as it should be. No smaller pyramids squatted in the shadows,

no necropolis spread out into the desert – the magnificent structure stood alone.

Even as the notion settled on him that something was not right, the stones of the monument seemed to crack open near the base and a golden light flooded out across the sands. Shielding his eyes against the glare, Taita glimpsed a shadow moving deep within the luminescence. A figure was emerging from the depths of the pyramid.

Taita watched as a man strode towards him. He was tall and slender, naked apart from a short kilt and a close-fitting golden skullcap which emitted a shimmering halo around his head. In his right hand he held a crook inscribed with the gods' words.

Taita knew instantly that this man was no mortal – his eyes burned like a furnace and he seemed wrapped in a liquid skin of light.

'Greetings, Taita.' The figure moved his lips, but the words seemed to come from all around. 'I am Imhotep.'

'I am humbled that you know my name, Great Architect,' Taita replied.

'We are brothers, Taita. We have both dedicated ourselves to the glory of Egypt. Our minds burn hotter than most. Our vision is unmatched, for we see across the vast ocean of the ages – into the future and the past. We understand that sacrifices are necessary to ensure the survival of this holy land, where the gods once walked.'

In a different moment, Taita's vanity would have been burnished by Imhotep's words, but instead he felt the stirrings of an obsession that had begun when he had first entered Imhotep's tomb.

'You were once a man who dwelt in these mortal lands, but now you walk with the gods,' Taita said in a voice that fluttered with anticipation.

Imhotep seemed to understand what lay behind Taita's words. 'This path will open to you, too, Taita, if that is what you desire.'

'But you have not come here to offer this to me now?'

'No.' A gathering wind started to circle around them, throwing dust at their ankles, making their kilts dance. 'The tomb has been opened for you, Taita. It is as I intended, but the spells which adorn the walls, the spells that I left for you, they will not remain forever. Now they have been looked upon by mortal eyes, they will begin to wither and recede.'

Taita felt a pit open in his stomach. 'They must be preserved,' he said.

'They must.' Imhotep nodded solemnly.

‘This is why you are appearing to me now,’ Taita realised, voicing his thoughts aloud. ‘What do I have to do to save them?’

‘Learn them, Taita. They were left for you.’ Imhotep’s eyes seemed to burn brighter as he issued his instructions. ‘Command them. Use them. Become the vessel that bears them. But know that as you learn them, they will fade and die.’

In that moment, the wind strengthened, and clouds of whirling sand began to fold around Imhotep.

Taita reached out an imploring hand towards the Great Architect as he receded into the depths of the dust storm. ‘Wait! Don’t leave!’

‘Eternal peace can never be achieved, Taita.’ Imhotep’s voice was fading. ‘There must always be one who keeps watch across the ages, who will ensure the survival of this land. Vigilance is constantly required. Egypt is never truly safe.’

As Taita paused to consider the meaning of the Great Architect’s words, the brilliant light flared again, filtering through the wall of sand.

• • •

Taita stirred from the dream that he knew in his bones was not a dream, and pushed himself up in his bed. The wick in the lamp next to his bed had almost burned away and the flame flickered unevenly, causing the paintings that covered the walls of his chamber to shudder, as if they were struggling to come alive.

Taita looked down at the golden senet board that lay on the bed next to him, where it had slipped from his hands. He had been examining it before his dream of the Great Architect. Running his fingers over the symbols that covered its surface – the house of water, the house of second life, the house of Horus – he allowed his thoughts to settle in his mind.

There were different kinds of dreams, as every scholar knew. But dreams like this one, where the gods revealed vital information . . . Those were dreams that should never be ignored.

Taita picked up one of the senet stones that lay next to the board. Five white stones, carved from marble, their hounds’ heads inlaid with gold. The black stones – the jackals – were missing. Outside, he heard voices as the soldiers on the palace walls changed shifts. It was just before dawn – the

longest hour of the night, when the soul was closest to the afterlife.

Calling for the slaves to bring him water, Taita clambered out of bed. Once he had washed and oiled his body and put on a fresh white robe, he would be able to marshal his thoughts more easily. But when a man appeared at Taita's door, it was not with a pitcher of water, and the man was not a slave.

'Lord High Chancellor, you must come at once!' Ahmose, commander of the palace garrison, said in a panicked voice. 'The nomarch demands your presence.'

• • •

Torches burned brightly in the darkness, held aloft by a small unit of the Memphis Guard. Piay stood in the flickering light, staring down at the master mason's prone body. Someone had slit the man's throat from ear to ear, and blood had pooled around his body, soaking into the filth encrusting the ancient flagstones.

As he stepped into the cell, Taita was immediately drawn to a symbol on the wall next to the door. He traced the thick lines of congealed blood – Haman's blood – with his finger. 'The mark of Anubis,' he confirmed.

Piay was vexed. 'This is an impregnable cell. How could the killer gain access?'

Taita crouched beside the mason's head and delicately plucked a piece of stone from the gore that lay before Haman's still-open eyes.

'Only one man could have carried out this crime.' Asil's voice echoed from down the dank hallway as Taita examined his find.

Taita glanced at Piay, who frowned at the sound of his father's voice. Taking a torch from one of the guards, Taita walked along the row of cells.

'You,' Asil said accusingly when he saw Taita.

'It has been a long time, Asil. You are much older now than the man I remember.' As Piay joined him, Taita continued: 'The man who begged me to take possession of his only son that morning at the hostel in Thebes.'

'Whereas you haven't aged a day.' Asil peered at Taita disbelievingly.

'Your sight has not been dulled,' Taita replied with the ghost of a smile. 'I am glad for it. Perhaps you can tell us who killed the master mason.'

'I saw no one.'

‘I find that hard to believe.’

Asil shrugged. ‘Believe what you will, Lord High Chancellor. There is not so much as a single lamp down here when the guards are not present.’

‘You said only one man could have committed the crime,’ Piay interjected. ‘Who is this man?’

Asil licked his lips before replying to his son. ‘Suppose I tell you. What’s in it for me?’

‘I won’t have you executed for withholding what you know,’ Piay retorted.

‘Sometimes I do still see myself in you, son.’ Asil cackled, then shook his head.

‘An alternate place of confinement is not beyond possibility,’ Taita offered. ‘But only if you share everything you know, and your information proves to be sound.’

The nomarch shot Taita a baleful glance, and the mage could tell that he was infuriated by his proposal. But now was not the time for stubbornness.

‘Who is this “one man”, Asil?’

‘I want a window,’ the leader of the Guild of Thieves replied. ‘I want to feel the sun, the breeze. I want to be able to see my city again, to look out over it and savour it.’

Taita looked at Piay. While he had made the initial offer, he would not risk further infringing on the office of the nomarch.

‘Very well,’ Piay consented with an exasperated sigh.

Asil paused and licked his lips again. ‘The Guild of Thieves has heard his name, spoken in whispers from the last days of the Hyksos. Many times, from many different mouths. Some say he is more than a man, for his mind is as sharp as a serpent’s fang –’

‘And his name?’ Taita prompted.

‘They call him “the Shuyet”. Though what he calls himself, I do not know.’

Piay narrowed his eyes. The *shuyet* was one of the nine parts of the human soul – a man’s shadow. ‘Have you seen him?’

‘No. Few have. He is represented by a scribe, a tall man who always wears a black robe with a white sash.’

‘The master mason spoke of this scribe,’ Taita said. ‘He was also frightened by him.’

Asil pursed his lips. ‘I am scared of no man, do you hear. No man. But others are afraid of the Shuyet.’

‘Those who work in the Guild of Thieves?’ Taita asked.

‘Some of them, aye. They say that the Shuyet is not mortal, that he is a demon who has crawled up from the Duat. Others claim that he is a powerful sorcerer who travelled to Egypt from distant lands beyond the Great Green.’

‘And what is the significance of the symbol of Anubis?’ Taita asked.

‘All agree that wherever he came from, and whether he is demon or sorcerer, Anubis is reborn within him. The Shuyet is the Lord of the Dead’s jackal-headed shadow, his servant here on earth.’

‘Reborn for what purpose?’ Piay asked.

‘Once the Shuyet takes his place as ruler of the Lower Kingdom, he will restore Anubis to his rightful place as Lord of the Underworld. Osiris will be cast aside. The Shuyet will be Pharaoh and Anubis the only god.’

• • •

Piay and Taita left Asil and ascended to the tranquillity of the palace garden. The moon still hung in the sky above the palace walls, even as the sun rose and started to turn the leaves of the trees into living flames of gold.

As they walked up the path to the palace, Taita was silent.

‘What part of this strange affair troubles you the most?’ Piay asked.

‘Whoever the Shuyet truly is, and whether he is the shadow of a god or a mere mortal, he is a threat to the order that Pharaoh requires in the Lower Kingdom. Someone like that could prevent the unification of Egypt,’ Taita replied. ‘I suspect that such a man, bold enough to murder the master mason in the palace of the Nomarch of Memphis, under the noses of the palace garrison, would see opportunity here, in the chaos that has reigned since the Hyksos were routed, and he is probably plundering the rest of Lower Egypt with impunity.’

‘The treasure caravans . . .’ Piay muttered, thinking aloud.

‘Treasure caravans?’

Piay nodded. ‘Returning with gold and gems looted from this city by the Hyksos. They have been attacked by bandits on more than one occasion.’

‘It is a reasonable assumption that the raids you describe are connected to the Shuyet,’ Taita agreed. ‘But there is something else.’

The nomarch’s expression became more serious as Taita held out his hand to him. In his palm sat a basalt senet stone, jackal-headed, its gilded eyes and teeth glinting in the morning sunlight.

‘I found it next to the master mason’s body.’

‘What does it mean?’

‘That the Shuyet wishes to prove himself against me. It’s a challenge. This is some kind of a game to him. Hounds and jackals. And he has already taken one of his pieces off the board.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Neither do I,’ Taita replied. ‘But nothing is as it seems.’

• • •

As the two men stepped into the palace, Piay clapped his hands to summon the slaves. ‘The Lord High Chancellor is hungry. Bring bread and figs.’

‘I was visited by Imhotep last night,’ Taita began as he sank to the floor in front of a low table.

Piay listened intently as the mage explained how Imhotep had spoken to him before the Great Pyramid.

‘The spells are fading?’

‘So it seems. Though I have been blessed by the gods with great wisdom and a long life, I find myself in a moment where I do not know which course of action to take.’

Piay frowned, not understanding.

‘If I am to preserve the spells, as Imhotep has instructed me, I will have to spend many moons confined within the tomb. I cannot risk leaving, only to return and find the walls bare, the *medu neter* reduced to dust. But we are threatened by a powerful enemy who, it would appear, would conquer the Lower Kingdom for himself. An enemy who has – with the death of Djau-Aa – summoned me here. An enemy who wishes to engage me in a battle of wits.’

The nomarch shifted his weight. ‘I have given further thought to the treasure caravans. Why not use them to lure the Shuyet from his lair?’

When Taita did not immediately respond, Piay elaborated: ‘When I was a boy, you told me stories of General Tanus. How, as Akh-Horus, he defeated the Shrikes by luring them into a trap with the false promise of Assyrian slaves.’

‘Tanus had one thousand Blue Crocodiles under his command.’

Piay nodded. ‘And I have three companies of that very same regiment at my disposal. What if we announce the arrival of a caravan with a hoard of such magnitude that it will be impossible for the Shuyet to ignore? The gold that was taken from the Temple of Ptah, stamped with the Master of Truth’s name, has yet to be discovered.’

‘What makes you certain your trap will not simply net members of the Guild of Thieves?’

Piay grunted. ‘The Guild knows these caravans travel under armed escort. They won’t risk fighting trained soldiers in broad daylight, but, for so great a prize, I suspect that the Shuyet will. And when his forces descend on the caravan, the Blue Crocodiles will burst forth, surprising and capturing them. Then we will be able to interrogate their leader and compel him to lead us to the Shuyet.’

• • •

‘Know, O children, of an age of wonders, when the majesty of Egypt stretched from the seven mouths of the delta to beyond the furthest cataract of Mother Nile. A time of plenty. A time of peace. When great monuments were raised up to the heavens. When the peoples of the world bowed their heads in awe.’

Nimlot the priest leaned forward, his eyes burning with passion. The two children before him looked up at their father, feeling the power of his words reach deep into their hearts.

‘But then arose in the Land of the Reeds a line of weak and evil kings, the sons of Mamose. They called themselves pharaohs, but they were not divine. They let the great monuments fall into disrepair, caring only for their own tombs and the things they could take with them into the next life.’

Sitting back on his stool in the small temple annexe, Nimlot closed his eyes, imagining what had once been. A deep sadness settled into his features, emphasising the lines that hardship had carved into his brow. Yet

still he has bearing, his son Qar thought.

'The Red Pharaoh saved us. He fought the sons of Mamose and expelled them from the delta. He began work to restore the monuments and secure the Upper Kingdom against the Sea Peoples. He awoke the great houses of Memphis and reminded them that their city is the heart of Egypt. And what is a body without a heart?'

Nimlot leaned forward once more, looking from his son's face to his daughter's. His head was freshly shaven and he wore the spotless white robes of his priestly class, a gleaming bronze amulet in the shape of a leopard's head hanging around his neck.

'But then the Hyksos came, cutting down all before them – the army of the Red Pharaoh and the sons of Mamose alike. A bloody harvest. But what was, can yet be again. Never forget this. Never lose hope. What is, can be changed. Perhaps, as you grow, you will be the ones to change it. Perhaps you will be the ones to finish the work that the Red Pharaoh began. To restore the heart of Egypt, to see the great monuments rebuilt, the sons of Mamose punished for their sins against us – the true descendants of the old people.'

Qar nodded and tried to look interested. Nimlot spoke on these subjects often. Sometimes, it seemed that his only interest was the past – an Egypt that few remembered. The notion that those days of glory could be reclaimed had come to consume him. And though Qar was only eight years old, and had little experience of the world, his mind was sharper than most, and he suspected that his father's obsession had blossomed as his reputation in Avaris had been diminished.

Nimlot smiled and ruffled Qar's dark hair, pleased that his son was reflecting on his words.

His sister never had to play these games to get their father's attention. To her, Nimlot gave freely and deeply. Now she was frowning with intense concentration, her lips pursed.

'You believe the Hyksos will be defeated?' she asked.

Zahra was one year younger than Qar, and though her features were still rounded, everyone said she would grow to be a great beauty. Qar could not see anything special in her himself. She had a slender neck and long legs like a stork, and strange blue eyes, like the sky on a clear day.

'You are clever beyond your years, my daughter,' Nimlot said warmly.

‘You understand full well the miseries the barbarian invaders have heaped upon us. They give us our freedoms –’

‘To worship our gods.’

Nimlot nodded. ‘And other trifling joys. But it is a trap. If our people think that they can continue with their daily lives as they always have, they will not become rebellious. But those freedoms are like a desert mirage. I have the temple, I light the incense, I lead the funerary rites, but I cannot speak as my father would have done. The barbarians have turned us all into slaves, though few recognise it.’

‘How can we defeat them?’ Qar asked. ‘They ride everywhere in their chariots, and they carry swords and bows. We . . . We have nothing.’

‘We will find a way, given time. Is that not right, Father?’ Zahra said, seeking affirmation.

Qar balked at his sister’s words. Was she now trying to curry favour by agreeing with their father, even in the face of all reason? He flashed a cold glance at her, though she seemed not to notice.

‘The gods will ensure that is so, my love. The Hyksos are wicked and cruel, but Ma’at must stand. Sooner or later, their reign must come to an end.’

‘As I grow, I will do all I can to set our land free again,’ Zahra said solemnly.

Qar smirked, but hid the expression quickly so that his father would not notice. What could Zahra ever do? She was ugly and bumptious. He was the one to whom his father was truly speaking, though out of fondness for Zahra, he knew that Nimlot pretended they were equal in his eyes.

‘I will not forget these lessons you have taught us, Father,’ Qar said even more solemnly. ‘I vow this day to return Egypt to the glories you have described.’

‘I can ask no more of you, my son.’

Nimlot bowed his head, and Qar thought he saw tears on his father’s cheeks. But before he could be sure, the slapping of running feet against stone made him jolt upright.

A tall man with a hooked nose bolted into their room. Qar brightened at the arrival of his father’s temple assistant, and perhaps closest friend. But his smile faded when he saw the fear etched into his face.

‘What is it, Heru?’ Nimlot asked.

‘They are coming.’

‘Assis?’

‘Yes, and his band of butchers.’

‘Father? What is wrong?’ Zahra’s voice trembled, sensing danger.

Nimlot gave Zahra a reassuring smile, but Qar understood that something terrible was happening. He had heard the two men mention Assis in the past, a Hyksos general who ‘kept the peace’ in Avaris. His father always used those words in a tone of mockery.

‘Take the children, Heru. Take them far from here,’ Nimlot said in a bright voice. He did not want to frighten them, Qar understood, and that knowledge scared him more than anything.

Heru grabbed Nimlot’s arm. ‘We must get you away from here first . . .’

‘Take the children!’ This time Nimlot’s voice cracked and his features darkened. ‘We knew this day would come. The Hyksos tolerated my complaints as long as no one listened, but now they see me as a threat. Any place I go, they will hunt me down. They will hunt you, too, and they will hurt the children for no reason other than that I am their father.’

Nimlot gripped his friend’s shoulder. They stared gravely into each other’s eyes for a long moment, and then they embraced. Nimlot whispered something in Heru’s ear that Qar could not hear, but when he stepped back, Heru’s eyes gleamed with tears.

‘I entrust my children to you, Heru,’ Nimlot said, his voice full of emotion. ‘I see in them the seeds of something great – a wisdom that will perhaps dwarf my own, given the guidance of a good shepherd. They are my legacy, and perhaps Egypt’s, too.’

Now Qar could hear the thump of feet hurrying in their direction.

Nimlot crouched down and pulled Qar and Zahra to him. He held them tightly and then whispered: ‘I love you with all my heart. Never forget that.’

‘No, Father!’ Zahra gasped.

Nimlot pressed his finger to his lips and ushered them towards Heru. ‘You must be wily,’ he said. ‘Assis will do his best to ensure that you do not leave Avaris.’

Zahra began to sob.

‘Be silent,’ Qar hissed. ‘You will only make things worse. Did you not hear? The barbarian wants to kill us.’

To her credit, Zahra stopped her crying instantly and smeared her tears

across her face with the back of her hand. Then Heru gripped their wrists and dragged them out of the annexe.

Qar craned his neck to see the approaching soldiers, but Heru pulled him on, hauling him past the entrance to the library and towards the doorway at the rear of the temple. Then Heru suddenly halted, throwing himself to the side of the entrance, before peering anxiously around the corner.

'What is it?' Qar whispered.

'There are more of them out there, blocking our escape.' Heru took a deep breath. 'We must run, as fast as the wind, and trust that the gods will help us elude them.'

'Wait,' Zahra said.

'Come!' Heru snapped.

'If we run, they will see us,' Zahra said. 'We should hide. They do not know we are here. And they are only angry at Father, not you. That is true, is it not?'

Heru hesitated, looking out across the sun-drenched courtyard. Then he nodded. 'Hide, then, but be quick about it. I will go and prepare the incense for the evening ritual as I always do. It is almost time. Pray they do not suspect me.'

'But where will we hide?' Qar asked.

Zahra jerked her thumb behind her. 'Follow me.'

While Heru hurried away, Zahra grabbed Qar's hand and led him back the way they had come and into one of the storage chambers. Now Qar could hear raised voices echoing: the barbarians berating his father angrily and Nimlot's calm explanations in reply.

If Zahra understood the magnitude of what was happening, she didn't show it. The storage chamber was filled with the sweet scent of the oil that was used for the temple's lamps, emanating from a row of large, lidded clay pots lined along one wall.

'This is why you never find me when we play our games,' Zahra whispered.

She went straight to where the empty pots stood, lifted the lid off one of them and clambered inside. Peeking over the lip, she stabbed a finger at the pot next to hers.

Qar hesitated, reluctant. He was scared that the barbarians would come

looking for them and find them, and he was angry that Zahra did not seem to be as afraid as he was.

As the voices grew louder and harsher, Qar climbed into the pot, pulling the lid over his head. In the dark, he gagged on the smell of the oil residue, his heart thumping so loudly that he thought the barbarians must surely hear it. For a moment there was silence, the throbbing of voices dying away, then came a withering scream.

Qar knew it was his father.

Trembling, he fought the urge to rush back to the annexe. It would do no good. He could not save Nimlot, and it would only result in his own death.

Hot tears burned down Qar's cheeks as he waited. Finally, he heard the barbarians leaving, their voices fading as they rejoined the street.

When Qar was certain the Hyksos had gone, he eased the lid off the pot and listened, just to be sure.

Zahra was less circumspect. The lid of her pot flew across the chamber and shattered on the flagstones. With a wail, she clambered out and ran.

Wriggling from his hiding place, Qar chased after his sister. He found her, sobbing, sprawled across Nimlot's body. Qar tried to avert his eyes from the blood, but it was everywhere. He knew then that this was a moment that he would never forget.

Heru dashed in and let out a cry of despair. Grabbing Zahra, he pulled her from her father's corpse. She fought and kicked, but he crouched down and held her in his arms until she stopped struggling, though her tears did not cease. Reaching for Qar, too, he pulled him close, his arm around his shoulders.

'There will be time to mourn your father,' he murmured. 'Your lives are still at risk. We must get away from here. I promised your father that I would take care of you, and I will stay at your side for as long as you need me. You will not be alone.'

'What do we do now?' Zahra cried.

Pulling himself out of Heru's embrace, Qar felt as if a fire was blazing inside him, a fierce heat of emotion that he had not experienced before. 'Our innocent lives are over,' he said, raising his chin and speaking as he thought a grown man would. 'We can be children no more. We must dedicate ourselves to one task – to avenge our father, however long it takes. I vowed to achieve his dream, and now I make another vow: to kill Assis,

who stole the light from our lives.'

• • •

Taita and Piay had agreed that the announcement of the arrival of the great treasure caravan – carrying the lost gold of the Temple of Ptah – would be made at the height of the Tekh Festival. Known as the Feast of Drunkenness, it was joyously celebrated across all Egypt, but no city had more temples to Hathor of the Sycamore – daughter of Ptah, mother and consort of Horus and Ra – than Memphis.

The preparations were made, the breweries tasked to increase their production, and the city hummed with anticipation – songs ringing out from homes across the quarters where the poor lived, a rising chorus of melodies, the words summoning the elation of victory in battle or love found after numerous tribulations.

When the day came, women hurried to fetch water from the wells, their feet almost dancing across the stones of the street. There would be no more labour that day. The mallets would lie still, the workshops silent, the furnaces cold, the fields disturbed only by the breeze rustling the barley, and the never-ending clack of the shadoofs pumping the water for irrigation.

In the palace, Taita and Piay washed and dressed in their finest robes. The Lord High Chancellor's was white, studded with rubies, emeralds and sapphires that picked out the wings of Horus. The nomarch's was less rich, but still proclaimed his status – a linen robe with Khonsu's orb of the night stitched in silver thread against the dark blue material.

As they stood at the window, listening to the birdsong and watching as the rooftops were gilded by the light of the rising sun, Taita eyed his former pupil. The palace slaves had shaved Piay's head and applied his makeup perfectly – the emerald *udju* drawing attention to his large, dark eyes.

'Hannu will be disappointed to have missed this day,' Piay said. 'He likes his beer.'

Taita studied Piay's face. 'And you? Will you be celebrating with your citizens today?'

Piay shook his head. 'There is too much to do.'

Taita nodded. He could not disagree with Piay – today was not a time for celebration. Revellers would fill the streets of Memphis, there would be

joy and gaiety, but the great city remained in danger so long as the man who called himself the Shuyet walked freely amongst them.

‘Your assistant will return from his scouting trip soon enough. There will be time enough for celebration then.’

Piay’s eyes narrowed. ‘Perhaps.’

Descending together to the square outside the palace, they watched the Blue Crocodiles march from their barracks, led by the burly figure of General Kamose. The three companies – seven hundred and fifty of Egypt’s finest fighting men – formed up in two lines, their white kilts pristine, their bronze shields and swords shining after being scrubbed for hours with sand the previous day.

Ankhu and the other greybeards who comprised the Council of Elders bowed their heads in deference as Piay and Taita took up their positions alongside the general, at the head of the group of dignitaries.

‘See what your efforts have wrought, Nomarch.’ Ankhu smiled. ‘The whole of this great city celebrates your achievements on this auspicious day.’

Piay nodded courteously, but Taita could see he took no pleasure in Ankhu’s words.

The musicians who would accompany the dignitaries through the Memphis streets hurried to join the party. As the drummer, the three trumpeters and the two sistrum-shakers proceeded to the front of the line, they glanced curiously at Taita – the great mage’s presence clearly filling them with awe.

After a few moments, the *shemayet* from the Temple of Hathor strode through the gate with her lyre, ready to lead the procession. Hathor was the great goddess, Mother of Ra and exemplar of femininity and beauty. Taita thought approvingly that this servant of hers was a worthy ambassador. The *shemayet* dazzled in an amber dress with an ochre sash, her eyes framed in the same honey shade and her delicate oval features emphasised by a black shoulder-length wig.

‘A beauty to make the gods jealous,’ Taita murmured to Piay.

But as Taita had expected, the nomarch only grunted in reply. ‘Begin the procession!’ he ordered.

The drummer began to pound the hide of his instrument. As the thumping beat rang out beyond the palace walls and across the city, the

shemayet plucked a winding tune from her lyre and, in time to the drum, the procession stepped out of the palace grounds and into the broad street that led to the Temple of Hathor.

The residents of the city rushed from their homes at the sound of the drum, chanting Hathor's name. Those who lined the avenue raised their cups high as the procession passed, slopping beer over one another and out into the street. Every eye was drawn to the *shemayet*'s beauty, or so it seemed to Taita.

'Nomarch! Nomarch! Nomarch!' they cried as they spotted Piay.

Many must have been drinking before the sun had risen, Taita decided, noting their glazed eyes and stumbling gait with an amused smile. And why not? It had been many years since the citizens of Memphis had been free to praise the great goddess properly. Today, they would celebrate life, and the Mother of Ra. And they would honour Piay.

'Nomarch! Nomarch! Nomarch!'

The cheers of the crowd echoed off the tall white buildings that lined the ancient streets, but when Taita glanced at Piay, he saw only resentment in his eyes. 'May the face of the nomarch be alight with joy, to reflect the exultant spirits of those he governs,' Taita advised. 'Ankhu was right to observe that it is because of you that these streets ring with the sound of celebration. Do not give them reason to question your sincerity. That was a mistake your predecessor made, as I understand it.'

Piay sniffed. 'Zahur made many mistakes here.'

'Nomarch! Nomarch! Nomarch!' The cheering intensified and the throng thickened as the procession neared the Temple of Hathor.

'Myssa did not die because you obeyed my instruction to come to Memphis, Piay.'

Piay pursed his lips. 'Perhaps not. But if I had not done so, she would not have, either.' He scanned the joyous faces of the drunken revellers as they passed. 'They have reason to celebrate today only because of her sacrifice.'

'Do not hold this city accountable for her death.'

'If not Memphis, then who?' Piay turned and glared at his master.

Taita was silent as they approached the Temple of Hathor, a massive flat-roofed building that stood at the centre of an enormous walled square. Six soaring stone columns held up the temple's portico, each carved with

the likeness of the sheaves of the barley from which the holy beer was brewed, and topped with the face of the goddess.

The square was already full by the time they arrived, and Taita could hardly hear his own voice over the thunderous reception they received as they marched down the aisle that parted the raucous, euphoric crowd. Even though he had walked in many processions, on more feast days than he could recall, Taita had never seen an outpouring of joy to match this one, and he felt his heart lift.

In their long white robes, the priests hovered in the deep shade under the portico. They were framed by an opening in the marble façade behind them: the door that led to the sanctum where the great goddess heard the whispered prayers of her supplicants.

As soon as he saw the procession turn into the square, the chief priest stepped forward and thumped his staff on the ground three times.

The priests of Hathor stepped aside in reverence as, from the depths of the temple, a magnificent golden bier studded with precious jewels appeared. In an instant the jubilant cacophony of the celebration abated, for no one would dare to risk offending the gods. As one, the multitude went quiet.

The priest swung one arm into the air and announced in a resounding voice that thundered out over the crowd: ‘She comes! Mistress of the Sky, Mistress of the Stars, Mother of Ra!’

The hush that had settled on the crowd became tense with anticipation, like the eerie calm before the onset of a storm. Across the square, not a single person moved. All eyes were fixed on the temple doorway.

As the bier moved out into the sunlight, Piay saw that a statue of Hathor reclined upon it, her lustrous black hair cascading around her features, a sun disc headdress set between curling cow horns. In her right hand she carried the staff of power, a reminder that she was equal to the greatest of the male gods. In her left hand she held the *ankh*, the symbol of eternal life.

At the sight of the mother goddess, every man, woman and child bowed their heads, and a thousand whispered prayers filled the air.

‘Hail the goddess,’ the chief priest boomed, ‘who crosses the boundary between the realm of the gods and the world of men to help the soul make its way to the afterlife.’

‘Hail Hathor, the Lady of Drunkenness!’ the crowd responded, the reply

rippling across the square, followed by a jubilant cheer. Cups were raised and the beer tossed high, so that an amber rain fell across the crowd.

‘On this occasion, let each of us remember the day when all men were saved by beer!’ the chief priest announced, then stepped aside and gestured to the door of the temple.

Taita smiled as the players who would perform the story of the birth of Hathor stepped out from inside the temple. At the head of the small group was a man dressed as Ra, wearing a silk robe dyed yellow, with a golden sun disc mounted behind his head. Four other players darted out to dance in front of him, tumbling and rolling and pinching one another under the watchful gaze of the goddess.

Ah, those weak and feckless men, Taita thought with amusement as he watched, channelling the sentiment that he suspected the gods must have felt every time they were compelled to save mankind from itself.

‘I have grown weary of the cruelty of men and the petty games they play,’ Ra rumbled, scowling. ‘They do not value this world that has been given to them as a wondrous gift. They must be punished!’

‘Let me, Lord Ra!’ a female voice behind him cried. She wore the head of a lioness and a crimson dress.

‘Destroy them, Sekhmet!’ Ra commanded.

The goddess stepped out and fell upon the group of men. With enthusiasm, she pretended to rip them apart – limbs made from parchment-bound reeds flew from the entrance to the temple and scattered around her victims. Sekhmet ducked down, the lion mask moving as if she was lapping at the blood she had spilled.

Ra nodded, pleased with the destruction that had been wrought, but as he did so, two men and two women stepped forward and gripped his arms.

Taita felt his spirits lift further when he saw that even Piay was smiling at the unfolding performance. He leaned in and whispered approvingly: ‘I would have thought the players here could never match the quality of those in Thebes.’

Piay nodded, similarly impressed.

‘My Lord, this punishment goes too far!’ one of the women pleaded. On her head was a crown topped with a cow’s uterus. ‘If you wish to teach mankind a lesson, you should stop the destruction before there is no one left to learn it.’

‘You are right, Tenenet. But Sekhmet cannot be stopped.’

‘Let me help, Lord Ra.’

The woman dressed as Tenenet turned and picked up a large bowl. Though Taita couldn’t see the contents, he knew, as all there knew, that it was beer.

Tenenet set the bowl down amongst the scattered papyrus limbs, sunlight reflecting off the amber liquid inside. The woman flourished her arms above her head as if casting a spell, then threw her hands down towards the bowl. Those audience members close enough to see gasped as the liquid clouded and turned bright red.

‘See here, Sekhmet,’ Tenenet cried. ‘More blood for you to drink!’

The lioness-headed goddess bounded over and pretended to lap up the contents of the bowl. After a few mouthfuls, she rolled her head drunkenly and then slipped to her side as she fell asleep.

The *shemayet* strode forward, plucking at her lyre, as the other players whirled around the prone woman. After a moment, the sleeping goddess jerked awake, stretched, and removed her lioness head as she stood. Someone handed her a new headdress – the sun disc and cow horns, like the one worn by the statue on the bier.

‘See,’ the chief priest intoned, ‘Hathor is born. Mankind is saved from destruction by beer.’

The crowd erupted in cheers.

‘Do it now,’ Taita urged Piay. ‘Make your announcement while the players and the priests still hold the crowd’s attention.’

Piay moved forward until he stood beside the chief priest and looked out on the crowd from the top of the steps.

‘Before you begin your celebrations in earnest,’ the priest boomed, ‘I give you your nomarch, to whom we owe so much this day!’

‘Nomarch! Nomarch! Nomarch!’ the crowd roared, chanting its approval for the leader before them.

‘This Feast of Drunkenness is an auspicious day for Memphis.’ Piay’s voice thundered out resolutely. ‘The dark times are passing into memory. We stand on the threshold of a new beginning, an age of glory and joy and freedom from want, as the two kingdoms of Egypt are finally reunited.’

A thousand rapt faces stared up at Piay. Taita watched, pleased with how he was conducting himself. For all his resentment and self-pity, Piay played

the part of Nomarch of Memphis well.

‘Pharaoh has sent word through his Lord High Chancellor that Memphis is to be restored to the glory of ages past, that our historic city shall rise once more to the honoured position it held before the Hyksos came.’ Piay paused to gaze out across the faces in front of him. ‘Look around and you will see that already Pharaoh’s decree is coming to pass. The trade routes are open, the warehouses are full, and the treasures and priceless artifacts of our forebears are being returned. Even as I stand here before you, a caravan containing the sacred gold taken from the Temple of Ptah, a fortune greater in size than any yet returned, is making its way here from the desert wastes where the Hyksos buried it when they fled. The gods are smiling upon Memphis once again. This is a blessing beyond imagining!’

As Piay finished his speech, the crowd responded to the nomarch’s words with a deafening roar of approval.

‘Well?’ Piay asked with raised eyebrows, returning to Taita’s side.

‘Your silver tongue has done just as I hoped.’

Piay felt a warm wave of satisfaction wash over him. Suddenly it was as if he were a young boy again, receiving praise for his endeavours in Taita’s classroom.

‘Now,’ Piay said confidently, ‘we have to close the jaws of our trap.’

• • •

As the day drew on, the beer flowed and the streets clogged with men and women, laughing and singing with joy. The stupefied slumped in doorways or lay in the shade beside their homes, grinning like fools as they watched the children chase the dogs, and the dogs chase the children.

In the palace gardens, Taita watched as Piay stood at the base of Myssa’s monument.

‘She barely knew me at the end . . .’ Piay’s voice was thick with emotion as he gazed at the limestone memorial. ‘Akkan fed her the dream petals while she was his captive, and his potion changed her, somehow. She couldn’t, or wouldn’t, remember our love.’

Taita’s brow wrinkled. ‘The petals of the blue lotus can be deceptive. They can afford great vision and communion with the gods, but

administered by the wrong hands, they can just as easily blind and condemn their user to a distorted reality, separated from the world they once knew.'

Piay's shoulders sank and his gaze grew misty and distant. 'I failed her. In coming to Memphis. In allowing myself to be deceived by Akkan. In permitting her capture by the Hyksos . . .' He held out his palms, tears streaking down his face. 'Her blood is on my hands.'

Taita felt the weight of Piay's anguish in his words and knew that any response must be delicate. Either his words would resonate and solidify into a staircase that Piay could climb in time, to escape the quagmire of his grief, or they would drive him further into it, and he would be lost.

Turning away from Piay, Taita looked at Myssa's monument. 'From where Myssa sits now, she sees you clearly once more. Of that, I have no doubt. The blue lotus no longer clouds her mind. All that remains is love, which now transcends the mortal realm. Hold fast to that, and you will never be without her again.'

Piay looked at Taita with surprise. 'I didn't think you could understand,' he confessed. 'But perhaps you do.'

Taita smiled ruefully. 'I was not always the man you have known. I was blessed to know the joys of a woman's body, before I was gelded. And there was a time still after that when I loved very deeply, as you have. I could not love her in the way I wanted to, but, nevertheless, I too suffered great loss when she was taken from me. She told me, as she died, that she'd had only two great loves, and that I was one of them.' His own eyes glistened with tears as he remembered how his mistress had closed her eyes, the sound of her last breath. 'I carry her with me, on every quest the gods send me on.'

'Lostris.'

Taita nodded.

• • •

As he limped through the quiet streets, Hannu kept his head down, but he had little cause for concern – the wretches who drifted past him seemed lost to their own worries. Many of them were from foreign lands – the olive-skinned people from the edge of the Great Green, and those who wore black hats like mushrooms, from the distant east. They were men and women who had drifted to Avaris when it had

been a city filled with opportunity, and who were now marooned in its ruin.

A stifling desperation hung in the air, and Hannu kept his fingers on the haft of his knife.

In the shade of the towering walls of the governor's palace, an angry mob had gathered, roaring at the administrators inside. Hannu watched them hurl chunks of masonry at the building, but he knew it would do little good – the palace was a fortress, the white walls thick and lofty. Once it had been a great source of Hyksos pride, the vast complex squatting on the edge of Avaris a prominent testament to the barbarians' power. Now it was little more than an ugly vestige of what had been.

Leaving the mob behind him, Hannu hurried away through the narrow lanes, past empty warehouses and deserted workshops.

The sun had settled on the western horizon by the time he reached a tavern by the wall, which he had to assume was the one mentioned by the fisherman. The rooftops were ruddy in the dying light, and shadows pooled in the alleys. The day was almost gone.

The tavern lay on the far side of a deserted courtyard, a long low building of clay bricks sweating the odour of stale beer into the twilight.

Hannu's nostrils flared as he stepped into the smoky interior. A dried sod of dung and straw smouldered in the hearth, and he counted twelve patrons sipping beer. Half of them sat together in pairs, while the remainder sat alone, gazing blankly ahead with the unfocused stares of those who wished for neither company nor conversation. One man leaned protectively over a bowl of wildfowl and onion stew, the juices dribbling down his chin as he sucked the bones hungrily.

Hannu bought a cup of beer and settled at a corner table in the shadows, just beyond the lick of the lamplight. From this vantage point he could watch the comings and goings unnoticed. He sipped his beer and opened his ears to the low rustle of conversation, watching as customers drifted in and out.

As the evening progressed, Hannu began to notice that the tavern was steadily growing more crowded, and in a curious way. Most of the new arrivals ordered neither food nor beer, but simply stood idly around the edges of the room, as if waiting for some event.

Finally, a tall figure ducked inside, and immediately Hannu knew that he had come to the right place. The new arrival was dressed in an elegant

black robe with a starkly contrasting white sash.

Hannu watched the tall man carefully. He carried himself with the bearing of someone who was accustomed to being obeyed, but while he might have intimidated others, Hannu had taken orders from many men, and he knew immediately that this was no general. His eyes were bright, though hooded, and his features refined. Hannu surmised that he was either a priest or a scribe, perhaps a carrier of the book of ritual – or at least, he had been. What he was now, Hannu had yet to find out.

It quickly became apparent that the man in the sash was not alone. Three other men, all broad-shouldered and bare-chested, followed him into the tavern, forming a screen between their master and the men who seemed to be awaiting him.

As Hannu watched, the man in the sash took a seat at the table next to the fire. The innkeeper avoided eye contact with his new guest, clearly familiar enough with what was to happen next to know to leave him alone.

Hannu narrowed his eyes as a lean, twitchy man – one of those who'd ordered nothing to eat or drink – scurried towards the man in the sash. The three guards quickly blocked his path, leaning in and interrogating the man, though Hannu couldn't make out what was being said.

Eventually, the muscled guards moved aside to allow the man to approach their master. As he stepped into the firelight, he bowed his head in deference. Then, without looking up, he began to speak quietly. After a few minutes, clearly satisfied with what he had heard, the man in the sash dipped his hand into a leather pouch that he had positioned on the table in front of him and pulled out what looked like some sort of talisman. The successful initiate's hand quickly closed around it.

Hannu watched as the lean man bowed again before he strode out into the night, clutching his prize.

As Hannu observed from his place in the shadows, this interaction was repeated again and again – each waiting man summoning the courage to shuffle forward for interrogation by the guards, before taking their turn with the man in the sash.

Hannu scowled in puzzlement. The man in the sash wasn't dispensing gold. Perhaps he was offering charms to ward off misfortune? The impoverished residents of Avaris certainly looked as if they had need of such things.

Hannu drained the last of his beer. The only way to find out more was to try his own luck. He stood and walked over to the guards.

‘What do you want?’ one of them growled.

Hannu bowed his head low, as he had seen the others do. ‘To serve again, as I once did,’ he tried in a hesitant voice.

‘What can you offer?’

‘Strong arms, a strong back –’

‘You limped over here,’ another of the guards said. ‘What good are strong arms and a strong back if they don’t have stout legs to carry them?’

‘I’m skilled with a sword,’ Hannu added.

The guards scrutinised him silently as they weighed his answers. Hannu was convinced he had failed the test, but then one of them stepped aside, allowing him to pass.

The man in the sash stood to receive Hannu at his table. He was a good two feet taller than the old soldier, and Hannu pretended to fidget nervously under the man’s gaze as he peered coldly down his hawk-like nose at him.

‘What is it that you know?’ the man in the sash asked with a faint sibilance.

Hannu was momentarily lost for words. What was the right answer? ‘Anubis walks,’ he guessed.

A slow nod of the head told him he was right, and Hannu breathed again. But the man in the sash’s unblinking eyes remained fixed on his face. ‘How did you learn where to find him?’

For a moment Hannu considered inventing a story, then decided it would be safer to stick closer to the truth. ‘A woman told me. It was information given in gratitude, after I rescued her daughter from a pair of kidnappers.’

The man in the sash wrinkled his nose in disgust. ‘You did well to help this woman. Men who seek to exploit the misery of the oppressed are a blight on the soul of Egypt, and must be punished. Where are they now?’

‘They are dead. I killed them.’

The corners of the man’s mouth twitched and he nodded again, clearly pleased with the answer.

‘Good. Now . . . tell me what you offer.’

‘I have no weapon, but I have skill with a sword –’

‘Are you a soldier?’

‘I was.’

‘In the Egyptian army?’

‘I fought against the Hyksos.’

‘As any good Egyptian would. Though many here in the Lower Kingdom did not. Too many of these cowards allowed themselves to be bribed with bread and with beer, to allow the barbarians into their homes.’ The man in the sash paused, then looked at Hannu askance. ‘Then you are from the Upper Kingdom.’

‘Born in Thebes. Once the barbarians were defeated, the army had no further need of me. I was cast aside. I worked my way along the river, hoping there might be something for me –’

‘Go!’ the man in the sash said abruptly.

Hannu felt his words catch in his throat. He hadn’t expected to be dismissed when every other man he had observed had received his reward. Whatever that was.

‘Go!’ the man in the sash repeated, more darkly this time. ‘I also have no use for you.’

Before Hannu could protest, one of the burly guards grabbed his arm and dragged him away from the table, forcefully ushering him out of the tavern and casting him into the courtyard.

‘Don’t think about coming back,’ the guard warned. ‘If we see you again, we’ll slit your throat and leave you on one of the middens, as a feast for the rats.’

Hannu swallowed his natural inclination to fight back. Instead, he climbed to his feet and trudged away as the guard turned back inside.

He did not go far. Once he was sure no one was watching, Hannu ducked into a doorway on the opposite side of the courtyard from the tavern, and settled down to wait for the next man who was lucky enough to be given the prize that he had been denied.

Hannu liked problems he could solve with a sword, but what he had just experienced in the tavern had set a fire alight in his mind.

After what felt like an age, one of the other men that he had seen waiting for an audience with the man in the sash strode out into the night. He wore a frayed grey cloak and was missing an ear – Hannu had taken note of this detail earlier – but he also had a lightness to his step, which indicated that he had been successful where Hannu had failed.

As the one-eared man hurried across the courtyard, Hannu slipped from his hiding place and followed. The silent streets were dark and Hannu had to trail the man closely, so he would not lose sight of him, but not so closely that the sound of his leather sandals on the flagstones would raise suspicion. It didn't take him long to realise, though, that the man was oblivious, too excited by the outcome of his evening's work to notice the old soldier who limped behind him.

Glancing once over his shoulder to ensure he was not being watched, Hannu decided that the time had come to pounce, and he broke into an awkward lope on his damaged leg. As he closed on his target, the man with the missing ear looked back, but it was too late. Hannu rammed into the man with all his strength, launching him into an alley, where he sprawled flat on his back.

Snatching his knife from beneath his belt, Hannu pinned the fallen man beneath his good knee, thrusting the blade under his chin.

'Call out and I'll cut your throat,' Hannu breathed.

The one-eared man chuckled. 'You're wasting your time. I have nothing,' he sneered.

'You have something in your hand. I saw it.'

Hannu saw the desperation in the man's eyes, but still he resisted revealing his prize. Pressing the edge of his blade harder into the man's flesh, Hannu grabbed his wrist with his free hand.

'Show me.'

His captive glared at him. Again, Hannu pressed down on the blade. This time, a bead of dark blood blossomed on the man's pale skin.

With a grunt, the man unfolded his fingers. In the moonlight, Hannu saw that the prize was some kind of token. He took it in his hand and examined it closely.

It was a clay disc, painted black with the jackal head of Anubis stamped into it.

'You see, it is nothing. Useless to you,' the man asserted. 'Now let me have it back and I'll be on my way.'

'Tell me what this is for.'

The man narrowed his eyes at Hannu. 'If you do not know already, it will not help you to learn.'

'I'll be the judge of that.'

The man glowered at him. Finally, he croaked: ‘It buys entrance to the Hall of Anubis, where we will pledge allegiance to the true ruler of this land.’

‘Pharaoh rules all Egypt.’

The man’s lips curled into an amused smile. ‘Look around you. This is not Pharaoh’s kingdom.’

‘Tell me whose is it, then.’

‘Anubis is the only ruler here. We have been abandoned. He is our only hope.’

Hannu narrowed his eyes, his thoughts racing. Then he withdrew his knife from the man’s neck and helped him into a sitting position. ‘Tell me where I can find this Hall of Anubis, and I will leave you be.’

Hannu watched his captive’s eyes glitter as he considered the offer. ‘There are catacombs beneath the ruins of the Hyksos temple to Baal,’ he said, finally. ‘When the purple banner flies, new recruits will be admitted, to take their vows after showing the token. Without one, you will never gain entry. Now, give me what is mine and let me go.’

When Hannu hesitated, the man suddenly barrelled into him, throwing him back. In an instant, the one-eared man was on top of him, straddling Hannu as he reached into his grey cloak and withdrew his own long knife.

As the blade slashed down, Hannu twisted his body aside so the weapon snagged in his cloak instead of burying itself in his flesh.

‘Give me what is mine!’ the one-eared man roared, consumed by a wild fury, hacking and stabbing as Hannu rolled this way and that. ‘Give me what the *cheriheb* gave me!’

In his desperation, the other man seemed possessed – the fight would not be over until one of them was dead.

Knowing he had no choice, Hannu thrust his own knife up, driving it hard into the man’s neck. Rolling aside to avoid the gush of hot blood, Hannu thrust the man off him. ‘You fool!’ he said bitterly, lurching to his feet as the man choked and kicked out the last of his life in the gutter.

Hannu wiped the back of a trembling hand across his mouth as he steadied himself. He had killed many men on the battlefield in his time, but never an innocent. The man he had followed from the tavern had surely only wanted to improve his lot in life. And desperation had made him foolhardy. He had simply chosen the wrong moment to take a stand.

Closing his eyes, Hannu muttered a prayer to Hathor to protect the man’s soul. Then he picked up the token from where it had fallen in the filth of the alley and lurched away into the night.

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The line of carts rolled across the red sands, the soldiers leaning into the wind that swept down from the simmering desert wastes. As the sun rose still higher, Piay knew that it would soon feel as if Ptah himself had thrown open a great furnace door, and men and animals would bake together in the Eye of Horus.

Marching at the head of the caravan, Piay gazed out across the flat land and into the hazy distance. They might as well have been alone in all the world – the plain in front of him was desolate – but for once his thoughts did not drift to Myssa. He was focused on the task at hand. This was the third day of their trek to Memphis, hauling the wagons that were supposed to contain the gold that the Hyksos barbarians had looted from the Temple of Ptah. In fact, only one of the carts contained any gold – and that had been taken from his own city’s vault. The rest were home to a platoon of the Blue Crocodile Guard, sweating into their leather armour and cursing every bump and jolt as the caravan rumbled towards the capital of the Lower Kingdom. This was his plan, Piay reminded himself. His opportunity to show how much he had learned in the years since his long days being tutored in Taita’s classroom. With dry, calloused fingers, he tightened the azure scarf across his nose and mouth to protect himself from the pricking dust and plodded on.

Piay had barely taken two more steps when a voice rang out behind him. Though the words were quickly borne away on the wind, there was no mistaking the identity of the figure striding purposefully along the caravan.

Dragging down his scarf, Piay shouted: ‘You should stay in the carts, away from the wind.’

‘We are coming to the moment of truth,’ Taita announced when he reached the head of the caravan. ‘I need to have my feet on the ground.’

Piay looked back along the line of laden carts and took a deep breath. Taita was right – if the Shuyet was to send men to take the gold they carried, then it would be today, and before sunset. Any later and they would

be too close to Memphis.

When Piay had addressed the crowd outside the Temple of Hathor, he had calculated that the Shuyet would have agents in the city, and the news would quickly work its way back to him. But as they had made the necessary preparations, Taita had persuaded Piay against wagering more of the city's treasure than necessary in his gamble. The ruse, his teacher had advised, would play just the same with or without gold in the covered carts. Piay had protested that at least some gold would be necessary, and Taita, upon hearing his logic, had agreed and suggested a single cart.

Not long after, Piay and Taita had slipped out of Memphis with fifty members of the Blue Crocodile Guard. Two days later, they were joined by a cadre of the Memphis Guard and the carts that they were now returning to the city.

From the moment they departed, Piay had been prepared for an ambush. But now he was beginning to worry that the Shuyet was as perceptive as Taita had warned, and that he had smelled the trap.

'It will be here or not at all,' Piay breathed to Taita. 'The Shuyet will not attack within sight of the city walls.'

Dust clogged the corners of Taita's eyes, so that it appeared that he shed pale golden tears. 'Then this would be a good time to break our journey and allow the men to slake their thirst,' he offered. 'Perhaps in doing so, we will lure the jackal from his hole.'

Agreeing, Piay strode along the caravan, bellowing the command. The carts ground to a halt and the weary soldiers slumped down against the wheels, tugging their dust-clogged scarves from their faces so they could pull at their sagging water-hides. Piay watched them as they counted out their ration, the three mouthfuls of water that they were allowed.

For a while the men of the Memphis Guard sat in silence in the shade thrown by the wagons, drawing strength back into their limbs. Then Taita stepped away from the carts and peered into the distance. 'There,' he said, pointing.

Piay looked in the direction his master was indicating and saw – or thought he saw – the faintest plume of dust rising out of the baked desert plain. He wished Hannu was by his side. His friend had better eyes for distance – he could spot danger at a thousand paces.

'Could be nothing,' Piay said. 'Another caravan coming this way.' But

as soon as the words had left his mouth, he felt a familiar prickle down his spine. His instincts were telling him otherwise.

‘They are coming from the south-west, not from the trade route,’ Taita said with a voice as calm as if he had noticed an interesting new bloom in the palace gardens.

Piay spun on his heel and marched along the caravan. ‘Ready yourselves, Memphis Guard,’ he commanded as he passed the carts. ‘Crocodiles, do not show your colours yet.’

Once he had alerted every man under his command, he strode back to Taita, who was gazing out at the rising dust cloud. Piay could now make out dark smudges within it, as it swept closer. ‘Now we will finally learn the true identity of the Shuyet,’ he muttered.

‘We will learn something. That much, at least, is certain.’

Piay watched as a war band – men running on foot towards the caravan, about thirty strong, enough to terrorise the guards who should have been the caravan’s only defence – slowly took shape through the heat haze. Squinting, he could make out their white breechclouts and the brown scarves they had pulled across their mouths and noses. He had expected battle-hardened mercenaries, men on horses, chariots . . . not a party of desert raiders on foot, their swords strapped across their backs. They would fight savagely, Piay was sure, but they would be no match for professional soldiers.

Piay raced back along the caravan. ‘Ready!’ he shouted, both to encourage the Memphis Guard, and to prepare the Blue Crocodiles.

With a shrieking battle cry, the raiding party swept nearer, unsheathing their swords and whirling them around their heads in a display intended to strike paralysing fear into the hearts of the Memphis Guard.

The next stage had been long planned. Feigning panic, Piay whipped the lead mules to drive them on. Braying, the beasts lurched forward as six men crouching the other side of the cart pressed their shoulders against it and tipped the wagon over, as if it had hit a boulder buried in the sand. The cart crashed on to its side, spilling a shimmering wave of gold across the dusty ground.

This was the only cart with gold inside, but it served its purpose perfectly. The sight of the riches drove the raiders into a frenzy, just as Piay had intended. Any caution they might have had would now be set aside, and

the nomarch felt vindicated that the reward had been worth the risk.

‘To arms!’ he yelled to the caravan behind him.

As one, the Blue Crocodile Guard piled out from where they had been hiding. Egypt’s finest wrenching out their bronze swords and forming a wall behind their long, rectangular shields.

Piay felt a surge of pride as he watched his plan unfold. The raiders’ advance faltered, then came to a halt, as the reality of their position became apparent.

Pulling his sword from the folds of his robes, Piay thrust it towards the war band. ‘Attack!’ he bellowed to the Blue Crocodiles, who charged, immediately scattering the panicked raiders.

But they were no fools, these men – Piay could see that much. They knew they were outnumbered, knew they could not stand against the elite Egyptian force that had emerged from the wagons. Their opportunity for easy plunder had gone and they were no men of honour – they would not risk their lives for a lost cause. Instead, they turned tail and raced back the way they had come.

‘Stay with the caravan!’ Piay ordered the Memphis Guard, his voice booming over the howl of the wind. To the Blue Crocodile Guard he shouted: ‘Follow them! Find their master!’

As he watched his soldiers break into a run, pursuing the fleeing raiders, Piay flashed a smile at Taita. ‘Now we will bring the Shuyet to justice.’

Taita didn’t return his smile. ‘Punishment can only be administered after victory, and victory can only be achieved if you have the upper hand. Are you certain that you still have the upper hand here?’

‘If we wait to find out, this opportunity will be lost. Of that, I am quite certain.’

‘What of the caravan?’ Taita asked.

Piay shot a cursory glance back at the soldiers of the Memphis Guard, who waited uncertainly with the carts, the loose robes that covered their armour whipping in the wind.

Taita nodded. ‘Prudence is rarely something a leader regrets, Piay.’

Piay absorbed his teacher’s comment, then he turned and shouted to Ahmose: ‘Captain, return to Memphis! I will meet you there, once we have apprehended this criminal.’

Then Piay took off after his men and their quarry.

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At first it was a bloody tint colouring the distant sky, but then a wave of sand rolled across the desert like a bolt of red silk being viciously unfurled. Piay, Taita and the Blue Crocodile Guard had chased the raiders through the heat of the day, and the sun had been their enemy, the desert the anvil upon which they had taken their punishment, but now, as the storm crashed over them, swallowing the sky, ripping the sand from under their feet, it was as if Seth was finally bringing the world to an end. Even with the scarf across his mouth, Piay choked on the gritty dust, and his ears rang with the howling of the wind, as though the sandstorm carried an army of lost souls.

Around him, the Blue Crocodile Guard pushed relentlessly forward. Where Taita had gone in the swirling chaos, Piay had no idea.

Piay staggered on, bent almost double, peering through grit-encrusted eyelashes, trying to catch a glimpse of the raiders ahead of them.

Just when he had resigned himself to the certainty that the Shuyet's men would escape them, the tail of the sandstorm blasted by and the air cleared. The Blue Crocodiles stumbled out into the late afternoon heat, and Piay ripped off his scarf to suck in a mouthful of clean air.

'Do not slow your step!' he bellowed, urging his soldiers to resume their pursuit. Ahead, he could make out the raiders through the shimmering heat. They had pulled away from the Blue Crocodiles in the storm, and Piay felt again the fear that all his planning had been for naught. The raiders were more fleet of foot than his own men, burdened as they were by their heavy shields.

Piay had not anticipated that the attackers would flee. His expectation had been that the guard would defeat the raiders in battle, and that either their mysterious leader would be discovered amongst them, or the survivors would be forced to lead Piay and his men to the Shuyet's lair.

Piay gritted his teeth – they could not afford to lose their only connection to the Shuyet.

Weighing his choices as he ran, Piay shouted a command to his soldiers to toss their shields aside. It would weaken the Blue Crocodiles in any confrontation, but he could not see another choice.

Despite the many years he had spent under the great mage's tutelage,

Piay was startled when Taita suddenly reappeared amongst his men and then raced ahead on legs that seemed to belong to a much younger man.

Piay grinned. He knew that he should not be surprised. He had been at Taita's side when he had led the Egyptian army into the battle under the walls of Thebes, and had watched as he had thundered into the fray on his foaming horse, at the head of Pharaoh's bloodied and half-beaten force. Taita had been a storm of bronze, hacking his way into the Hyksos lines. Only the gods could have gifted him with such superhuman prowess.

Piay pressed on with fresh vigour, and for the first time in as long as he could remember, he felt the weight of Myssa's death being lifted from his shoulders, the shroud of grief being pulled back from his mind. Not since he had lost his beloved had he felt so invigorated, so purposeful. Piay felt he could run like this forever, with the hot desert air lashing his face, and leaned in to the task of catching the fleet-footed Taita. 'They will not escape us now,' he said confidently as he reached his master's side. 'They will flag long before we do.'

Taita glanced at Piay as they ran, a twinkle of amusement in his eye. Piay could tell his teacher approved of his effort, and the change in his spirit.

Both men fell silent, sharing a welcome unity of purpose as they tore on after the fleeing raiders, past the deep gullies of long-dried watercourses and columns of jagged rock punching up out of the stony ground, the Blue Crocodile Guard hurling themselves along behind.

Then, through the wavering air ahead, Piay began to glimpse shapes that seemed at odds with the desert landscape. At first he was puzzled, but as they ran on, he realised that they had stumbled across the remains of a ruined city – crumbling walls enclosing the shattered remains of temples and palaces and grain stores.

'What is this place?'

'One of the many settlements in the Lower Kingdom that were abandoned after the invasion of the Hyksos,' Taita replied.

'What was it called?'

'I will not utter it,' Taita exclaimed. 'A dead city is lifeless for a reason, and it is best not to provoke the gods by naming aloud a place that they have caused to be abandoned.'

'The perfect hideaway for a man pretending to be the god of dead,' Piay

mused. ‘Close to the trade routes out of the Sinai, and between the Nile and the Great Green. A bolthole from which to launch attacks on unsuspecting caravans as they pass by.’

As the raiders disappeared through a shattered gate in the ragged walls, Piay raised a hand to slow his party.

‘We must assume that we have reached the jackal’s den,’ he announced to the Blue Crocodiles. ‘Be on your guard. Our enemies will have the advantage. We must proceed with caution.’

Taita surveyed the clay-brick walls of the cracked and collapsing buildings. His face was grim. Piay’s master knew the whole land of Egypt intimately from a lifetime of travels and adventures, and had no doubt seen the ruined city when it was filled with the throb of life. Piay thought he knew what Taita was thinking: that the towering monuments of men were, in truth, as flimsy as a solitary bloom in the face of the spring floods. All things died; all things were washed away. Was Taita afraid that this might be the ultimate fate of the land he loved so much?

‘Would you prefer to remain here, while we flush out the raiders?’

‘No.’ Taita’s reply was firm. ‘I will go with you.’

Piay nodded, then indicated for the Blue Crocodile Guard to follow him, swords at the ready. As they approached the gate, the wind suddenly dropped and he became aware of a deep and ominous silence that seemed to emanate from the sun-bleached stones. It was clear that something terrible had happened here.

At the gate, a scribe had carved a message on a fallen slab of masonry, the writing worn away by years of sand and wind. Taita stopped to examine it.

‘What does it say?’ Piay asked.

‘It’s a warning,’ Taita replied. ‘It tells the reader that the gods have cursed this place. That all future generations should pass by . . .’

‘And you think the Shuyet did not order some scribe to carve this warning into the stone?’ Piay said quickly, trying to forestall the uncertainty that he saw creeping across the faces of the Blue Crocodile Guard. ‘The longer we linger here, the more likely we are to lose the raiders, and our best chance of capturing the Shuyet.’

But the Blue Crocodiles hesitated, some glancing at Taita, until Piay took the lead and stepped through the gate himself. ‘This is where we will

find the man who claims that Anubis is reborn within him. I feel it,' he said confidently. 'Come – we are wasting time.'

Holding his head high, Piay marched into the ruins of the city, and after a nod from Taita, the Blue Crocodiles followed dutifully behind.

The shuffle of sandalled feet filled the empty streets, as the resurgent wind wound through the hollow doorways and around the crumbling walls. Black fat-tailed scorpions scurried out from under fallen masonry, but the party disturbing them was silent – no one spoke.

Piay's gaze moved from shadow to shadow as they penetrated deeper into the ruined city. He suspected that tracking the raiders successfully would depend on the smallest of details. The Shuyet's men would know that they would have the upper hand – if Piay and the Blue Crocodile Guard summoned the courage to pass the warning stone and enter the city – but that didn't mean that they couldn't be surprised.

The soldiers clustered together as Piay led the way through the narrow streets, their swords levelled as they passed each doorway.

The route they followed brought them to a central square paved with limestone, which to Piay seemed to only magnify the oppressive heat of the day. In the middle, a fallen obelisk lay on its side, its triangular peak long gone. Cracks and crevices spiderwebbed across the square, lifting the paving in uneven waves of stone.

'An earthquake struck this place,' Taita said in a low voice.

'The curse of the gods.' Piay exhaled with relief. 'That must be what the scribe meant.'

Taita said nothing.

As they crossed the square, Piay found himself looking at the ruin of a once grand palace, with a barracks beside it and a temple, its portico collapsed around the broken spines of the columns that had held it aloft.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Piay caught the flash of a white breechclout, and his breath quickened as he made out one of the raiders, darting from the cover of the fallen obelisk and scrambling away through the palace doorway.

Piay gripped the hilt of his sword and pointed after the fleeing raider. 'They're in the palace.'

'Or hiding in the vaults below,' the captain of the Crocodiles replied.

Piay's eyes hardened with resolve. 'I want to look into the face of the

Shuyet and see what manner of man he is.'

Taita nodded his agreement, but as a warm gust of wind blew across the square, he frowned. Piay had seen that troubled look many times before. 'What is it?'

'Something is amiss,' Taita replied, his eyes scanning the shattered windows and doorways.

Piay didn't know what his master had sensed or seen, but before he could open his mouth to issue a command, an arrow plunged out of the sky and punched through the bronze cuirass of one of the Blue Crocodile Guards. The soldier staggered back, his eyes wide with shock as he clutched at the shaft buried deep in his chest. As he collapsed and the light drained from his eyes, shouts of alarm rang out on every side.

'Take cover!' Piay yelled, pulling Taita down behind the fallen obelisk.

As the arrows ripped through armour and into eye sockets and throats and chests, Piay counted six fallen Blue Crocodiles, sprawled in dark pools of their own blood. If only they'd had their shields with them, his men would have been able to protect themselves, he thought. He swallowed back the bile rising in his throat – his recklessness had cost his men their lives.

As the first volley passed, Piay turned his gaze upward. He could make out the archers who assailed them now, perched around the square, nocking new shafts for a fresh volley.

Turning to his remaining soldiers, Piay bellowed: 'Run! Take cover while you can!'

The Blue Crocodile Guards scattered as they dashed for shelter, but as Piay ushered Taita into an old stable block, he saw two more of his men cut down as they ran.

Piay ground his teeth. Eight of his fifty men had fallen under the barrage, and he was compelled to admit that he had never seen the Blue Crocodiles so exposed. He had led his men to a slaughter.

'The best thing you can do for those men who have fallen is to escape with your own life,' Taita said. 'To fight another day, so their sacrifice may have meaning.'

Inside the ruined stables it was as hot as a smithy, and the floor was coated with thick dust. Piay pressed his back against the wall beside the door and sucked in a deep lungful of air. 'I will not make the mistake of underestimating the Shuyet again,' he swore in a low voice. 'He took the

trap I set for him and used it to create a better one for me.'

'Whether god or man, our adversary is a worthy one.' Taita gazed out into the corpse-strewn square. His face was as graven as the obelisk, his eyes narrowed, his jaw set. 'He knew the treasure caravan was a ploy. Now he has drawn us here, to end our pursuit of him.'

'I should have seen the signs when the raiders fled. The Shuyet knew that the Blue Crocodiles would have to throw aside their shields if they hoped to keep pace with his men.'

Taita's brow furrowed. 'Do not judge yourself too harshly. As nomarch, once your plan was put in motion, you had little choice but to see it through. Your soldiers would have questioned you otherwise.'

'The Shuyet had his archers in place, ready to cut us down. I should have foreseen it.'

'At least now we know what the Shuyet is after.'

Piay looked across at Taita in bafflement. 'And what is that?'

'It is quite apparent, Piay. He is after us.'

'Us?' Piay shook his head incredulously.

'Why else would he go to the trouble of luring us here, then order his man to target only the Blue Crocodiles? They failed to loose even a single arrow in our direction. Why? It is us that he wants, and he wants us alive.'

'If we are his target, then we must keep moving,' Piay said, grimly. 'His archers have managed to separate us from the Blues. If you are right, then the foot soldiers the Shuyet has no doubt hidden in every nook and cranny of this dead city are on their way here to find us.'

Piay peered out through the door, watching as the archers climbed down from their eyries to take up new positions on the ground around the square. The raiders had emerged, too, brandishing their swords as they stepped over the bodies of the fallen Blue Crocodiles.

If there were any surviving members of the elite soldier corps, there was no sign of them. Piay offered a silent prayer to Khonsu that the courageous souls who remained alive had escaped to safety.

Taita crossed the breadth of the stable to a doorway at the rear, which led to a small annexe lined with stone troughs choked with debris. Another doorway opened out onto the narrow street beyond.

'Time to make our escape,' Taita murmured.

Piay nodded his agreement.

As they edged along the rutted lane, a call and response which they couldn't quite make out echoed from the square.

As he listened, Piay's eyes widened. 'You are right, Taita. They are looking for us. For *you*.'

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Smaller mud-brick structures, some reduced to little more than crumbling foundations, lined the streets. Piay guessed that they must once have been houses. They were interrupted occasionally by heaps of broken masonry – the remains of the city's grander buildings.

Taita led them into one of the houses still solid enough to afford them cover. With Piay as his rearguard, he eased from room to room, and then out past the ancient baked remnants of a midden.

As they moved into the next building, Piay realised that Taita was guiding them back towards the city's walls, but on a route that was deliberately circuitous. He grinned – their trail would be almost impossible for anyone to follow.

Taita ducked across an alleyway and into another dwelling. When Piay stepped over the threshold after him, he saw that it was just a single room, but large enough to hold a raised brick platform containing three large, stone-lined vats.

Suddenly Taita turned back towards him and grabbed his tunic. 'Shhhh . . .' he whispered, cupping his ear.

Piay held his breath and listened.

Sure enough, footsteps soon echoed from the street on the other side of their hiding place. Crossing the space cautiously, Piay raised his head and peered out through an aperture in the wall. Four raiders were going from house to house.

When Piay looked back he saw that Taita was moving back the way they had come, towards the alley behind the house.

But as the mage moved to duck through the opening, Piay grabbed his shoulder to stop him. He had heard more footsteps coming their way, but this time from the alleyway. In seconds, the house would be surrounded by the Shuyet's raiders.

'Pray to the gods that they pass us by,' Piay hissed.

‘Or prepare to be captured.’ Taita’s face was firm.

‘I will never let them take you. Not while I still have breath.’

‘We may have no alternative.’

His master was not afraid of battle, Piay knew. Across the many years of his long life, he had fought enemies far more fearsome than the men who hunted them now. But he had to concede that Taita was right. There was little chance of fighting their way out. And as soon as they were discovered, the raiders would alert the rest of the Shuyet’s men. Piay’s stomach knotted at the thought of his master being led away in chains.

‘They’re unlikely to take me alive,’ Piay reasoned as he unsheathed his blade. ‘Let me at least take a few of them with me to the afterlife.’

‘What makes you think the Nomarch of Memphis has no value for them?’ Taita asked.

Piay pressed himself to the wall beside the doorway they had used to enter; Taita crossed to the far side of the room and settled into a crouch in a shadowy corner.

His muscles tensed, Piay waited, listening to the footsteps slowly close in from both sides of what he saw now had once been a dye house. His heart pounded fiercely in his chest, and he felt his senses sharpen with the anticipation of hand-to-hand combat. It had been too long since Piay had held a sword in his hand, too long since he had used the skill that had won him renown across Egypt as a young man, before he had known Myssa.

The thought of his beloved left his mind as quickly as it had entered as a raider’s frame darkened the doorway. The man stepped inside, idling unawares beside Piay as he scanned the room.

As he spotted Taita, the raider’s eyes grew wide and his lips opened, but no sound came out. Instead, Piay’s sword blade filled the cavern of his mouth as it sliced up through his jaw and jammed into his skull. Piay had thrust his weapon with all his strength into the man’s throat, killing him instantly.

Piay caught the raider’s body as it slumped to the ground, and Taita hurried over to help him drag the corpse onto the brick platform and bundle it into one of the vats. Then they waited in silence as the other three raiders continued to move down the alleyway, focused on their search and not yet concerned by the absence of their companion.

‘We have to get out of here before they discover that he is not coming to

join them,' Piay said, tilting his head towards the dead raider's resting place.

Taita followed Piay as he climbed through the hole in the wall and crossed the street behind the search party.

It was with great relief that, a few minutes later, they turned a corner and found the city wall towering before them. It had been badly damaged by earthquake and the years that had passed since its foundations had been shaken had only served to break it down further – Piay and Taita could see the arid wilderness of the desert wastes beyond, through the fissures that had been rent in the once imposing ramparts. Piay stood guard while Taita clambered through a gap just wide enough for a man's body, then slipped through himself. Together, they hurried out into the desert.

Their spirits soared as they ran, laughing at how close they had come to capture, breathing in the desert air that seemed so alive after the hot, choking dust of the dead city.

But their elation did not last long. Piay's heart leapt into his throat as they sighted armed men in the distance, silhouetted against the setting sun. His fingers closed around the hilt of his sword as he and Taita slowed their pace to a jog and approached with caution.

'Blues!' Taita announced triumphantly, a broad smile breaking across his face as he made out the uniforms of the Blue Crocodile Guard.

'I have been more glad of your keen eyes today than at any other time I can remember,' Piay replied with a laugh.

Reunited with the Blue Crocodile Guard, Piay immediately called the captain to him. Twenty-eight of the original fifty guardsmen had escaped the city. Three of them were badly injured, but the rest, while filthy, bloody and exhausted, were unharmed.

'God of the dead or not, the Shuyet owes us a debt of blood,' Piay said as Taita began to move amongst the wounded. 'On the memory of the brave men who fell, I swear that I will make him pay it.'

• • •

Once Nut, the goddess of the sky, had swallowed the sun and darkness had fallen over the desert, Taita urged Piay to stop and to allow his weary men to rest. 'If the Shuyet had intended to pursue

us, his raiders would have caught us by now. We saw just how quickly they can cover the ground.'

Piay agreed, and called the Blue Crocodiles to a halt. They slumped down in a dry gully and swilled back the water that remained in their hides.

As he reclined against a large rock and gazed up at the soaring vault of the heavens, Taita seemed as troubled as Piay had ever seen him.

'What are you thinking?'

Taita didn't break his gaze from the spray of stars. 'I am beginning to think our adversary is as formidable as any I have encountered. I cannot yet divine his nature, but he is more perceptive, more calculating, than any of the Hyksos barbarians. He knew everything we had planned for him today. He was ahead of us at every turn. It was only your talent with a blade that allowed us to escape.'

'I should have listened to you,' Piay conceded. 'You asked me if I really thought we had the upper hand. We should not have charged in.'

'I did not become who I am today by never making mistakes,' Taita replied, turning his gaze on Piay. 'Every great leader has his moments of blindness. And watching you lead your men today, I am certain that is what you have become.'

'A great leader would have been more careful, as you advised.'

'Perhaps. But, had we turned away, we would not have learned valuable information about our adversary.'

'Twenty Blue Crocodiles died, and the Shuyet is still free,' Piay remarked grimly. 'That is a poor exchange.'

'All men die, Piay. It matters little how or when, so long as Egypt endures. Our task is to see that it does.'

'What do we do now?' Piay asked in frustration.

Taita considered the question, shifting his gaze back up to the stars above them. 'Now, it is time to consider our own strategy,' he replied. 'The stakes in the game have been raised. If we are to win, we must learn who the Shuyet is and what he plans.'

• • •

he bats erupted from the crumbling towers of Avaris like floodwaters finally breaching a dam, blotting out the bands of crimson streaking the western

The sky and throwing a chill across the city's narrow streets.

With a shudder, Hannu looked away from the swooping creatures, each with wings longer than his forearm. The doorway in which he sheltered allowed him to overlook the soaring walls of the Temple of Baal – once a glorious monument to the god of the Hyksos, with an immense and forbidding compound and a lofty portico supported by ten gargantuan stone pillars. Hannu had waited every night for the last five days, for the purple banner that the one-eared man had told him of. And now it fluttered in the early evening breeze – beckoning all of those who understood its meaning.

Hannu unfurled his fingers to examine the prize he held in his palm: the painted clay disc stamped with the jackal head of the god of the dead.

The disc bought entrance to the Hall of Anubis when the purple banner flew: that's what the one-eared man had said. Hannu had little idea of what awaited him beyond the gates of the Temple of Baal. Someone was recruiting men – and a large number of them – but for what reason, he couldn't yet discern.

The streets of the former Hyksos capital had become quiet. The beggars and whores had no doubt trailed away to the harbour, where they might still extract something from the remaining sailors stoking their fires along the wharf.

As he watched the dust being whisked along the empty lanes by the breeze, Hannu sensed movement. Figures started drifting towards the temple from all directions – five men, then ten, then suddenly more than he could count.

Hannu studied the arrivals. Their steps were light, eager. They must have been promised something compelling. He could only assume that it was a cut of the treasure left behind by the Hyksos. In a desperate city like Avaris, that would attract any number of men.

For a moment, Hannu considered why someone would select the Temple of Baal as their recruitment centre. It seemed to him an odd choice. Anubis was not a Hyksos deity. No, Hannu thought as he wrapped his cloak around him, the man behind all of this was almost certainly an Egyptian. Perhaps the location of the Hall of Anubis was a mark of victory – proof to those that followed him that the Egyptian gods had triumphed over the god of the barbarians.

Bowing his head, Hannu joined the men trudging towards the compound's gate. As he drifted between the pillars that led to the temple, he saw that the stone had been desecrated with curses, carved by those residents of Avaris bitter at being abandoned by the Hyksos.

From under his brows, Hannu watched the men around him. Not a single man spoke, and not one of them acknowledged the others.

The moon was rising as the men in front of Hannu approached the shadows beneath the portico, where a formation of guards, perhaps fifteen of them – armed with swords and spears, broad-shouldered and upright – waited. Hannu felt a twist of unease. Once he reached the guards, there would be no going back. Some might say he was a fool for venturing so far – his life would be over the moment he was discovered for the imposter that he was – but when Piay had found him on the street, this is what he had vowed to do: to serve Egypt and Pharaoh in any way he could.

Hannu's skin puckered as he stepped beneath the portico. His fellow recruits had come to a halt in front of him, as the guards questioned them and demanded the token that they had been given by the tall man with the white sash, the *cheriheb*.

But what if the guard who had thrown him out of the tavern was there, and recognised him?

Hannu had a distinctive appearance – short and squat, a cripple. He lowered his head as he moved forward, so that his face was masked in shadow.

As he closed on the guards, listening to the men in front of him offer their answers to the questions that were put to them, he realised his mistake. The *cheriheb* had rejected him at the tavern because he had revealed that he had been a soldier from the Upper Kingdom. The man behind this is not only an Egyptian, Hannu concluded, but from the Lower Kingdom – proud of his history, a disciple of the Red Pretender.

When he reached the front of the line, Hannu kept his eyes on the ground, fixing his gaze on the three pairs of sandalled feet in front of him.

'Token,' one of the guards growled.

Hannu held out his open hand. The guard snatched the Anubis disc that lay upon it. 'Name?'

'Tanus.' Hannu felt a pang of regret at choosing the name of the great general of Thebes. It was foolishness. What if the guard recognised it and

questioned him further?

Hannu's heart thumped in his chest as he continued to stare at the dusty flagstones. Just when he thought he might be exposed, the guard hawked up a mouthful of phlegm and spat it on the ground.

'From?' the guard grunted.

In a low, rumbling voice, Hannu mimicked the accent of the Lower Kingdom. 'Bubastis.' He would not mention Thebes again.

'Inside.'

• • •

Within the temple, the almost full moon shone down through the collapsed roof, creating a jumble of angular shadows behind the fallen beams and broken masonry. Ahead of him, Hannu noticed a man wearing a faded and cracked leather cuirass. It bore the marks of the Red Pretender. As he followed the man, Hannu mulled the markings on his armour. Did this confirm his theory? Or was it simply a coincidence?

Beyond him was another guard, standing in the shadows. He jerked a thumb and the man in front of Hannu disappeared past him into an abyss.

Hannu saw a doorway, with steps leading down beneath the temple. There was no light from below, which made him feel as if he was about to step directly into the Duat.

He waited while the guard scrutinised him, then, when the man jerked his thumb again, Hannu took the narrow, sloping stairwell into the depths.

The steps curved around as he descended, corkscrewing into the rock beneath the temple. Eventually, Hannu stepped out into a small chamber. It shimmered with the light of a single torch, and he choked on the sharp reek of burning pitch in the constricted space.

On the far side of the chamber, he saw another doorway, which opened into a much larger space. There, the flames of numerous brands forced the shadows from the wide room. The men who had already been admitted were massed there, in the ruddy glow that lit up the ceiling.

Hannu pushed himself into the crowd and away from the eyes of the guards who stood against the walls. The air was hot and the stink of sweat quickly became nauseating, but as soon as he was enveloped in the mass of bodies, Hannu felt himself breathe a little easier.

Though he was shorter than most and his view was obscured by the crowd, Hannu managed to get a sense of the space he was in. The ceiling was perhaps the height of a man above his head, the ragged chisel marks clear in the flickering light. But around the edges, the rock was untouched, suggesting that this was a natural cave adapted for the bloody rituals that the Hyksos had no doubt conducted in the space. There looked to be around eighty men packed into the hall, and here and there along the walls there were openings – tunnels, most likely. Hannu imagined a labyrinth of catacombs extending beneath the vast temple and out into the city.

Pressing the man in front of him aside to get a better look, Hannu glimpsed a dais set at the far end of the chamber. The man whirled and glared, but finding himself faced with Hannu's own glowering countenance, he nodded deferentially, and stepped aside to give him an unimpeded view of the stage.

For what seemed like an age, Hannu waited, until the pain in his damaged leg was almost unbearable. Beneath his thick cloak, sweat trickled down his back as more and more men pushed their way into the crowded hall, until they were jammed from wall to wall.

Finally, when a period of time had passed with no new arrivals, the guard standing at the entrance to the chamber stepped across it, blocking further admission. Though he was sure that he did not stand out, Hannu ducked down lower, as the guard looked out across the heads of those packed inside – towards the dais – and gave a quick hand signal.

The heat from the torches, and so many bodies crushed together, seemed to fuel the sense of anticipation as two men emerged from the shadows. The first was tall and broad-shouldered, with the posture of a seasoned warrior. His chest was bound in a leather cuirass, similar to the armour that the Hyksos wore, and hide thongs were lashed around his muscular forearms. He gazed out fiercely over the crowd of men before him, gripping the haft of his spear.

The second, taller man Hannu recognised instantly. It was the one he had encountered in the tavern – the *cheriheb* – still dressed in the elegant black robe with the white sash, though now seeming even more commanding.

As the warrior hammered the haft of the spear on the ground three times, Hannu tried to imagine what purpose could be served by this

theatrical display. It resembled the beginning of rituals that he had seen priests enact on feast days, but the men in the hall were not a rowdy throng that needed silencing before a ceremony began.

When the echoes of the final spear-strike had faded, the *cheriheb* began to address the men before him in a clear, resonant voice. ‘The course of your life has been altered this night. Your days of struggle are over. By entering the Hall of Anubis, you have chosen to make a new life for yourselves, one of plenty and of purpose. For your bravery, the gods will smile on you, in this life and the next.’

Hannu glanced at the rapt faces closest to him, seeing the torchlight dancing in their eager eyes – the tall man’s words had touched their deepest hopes.

Pushing himself up on his toes, Hannu took a better look at the dais. Standing prominently in one corner, he could see what appeared to be a throne, shaped from some dark wood – ebony, perhaps – so that it looked almost as if it was one with the shadows in the wavering torchlight.

Hannu expected the *cheriheb* to climb onto the dais, and to take his seat upon the throne, but he made no such move. Instead, the warrior beside him cracked the spear haft on the ground three more times and announced: ‘He is coming!’

The *cheriheb* raised his hands into the air. ‘Anubis is coming!’

A murmur of anticipation ran around the hall and Hannu felt a palpable shift in the air around him, as expectation mingled with dread.

‘Anubis is coming! Bow your heads! Anubis is coming!’ the warrior boomed, the pounding of his spear against the ground reminding Hannu of the solemn beating of a war drum.

Hannu glimpsed a flash of movement – someone throwing a handful of powder onto a brazier behind the dais – and a cloud of white smoke billowed out towards the crowd. This was not sorcery, but it was an impressive display nonetheless – as carefully choreographed as anything Hannu had seen priests perform at any temple. The men standing rigidly around him were entranced.

‘Anubis is coming!’ the *cheriheb* repeated.

As Hannu watched, a shadow began to appear through the folds of smoke. He felt a shiver run down his spine. The figure exuded a presence of such power that those gathered in that hall could only gape in mute awe.

Taller than most men, with black robes that swirled like a pool of ink around him, the jackal-headed god, the Weigher of Hearts, the Lord of the Sacred Land, stepped forward. Amid the collective gasp that followed, Hannu blinked in amazement.

It was Anubis.

It had to be a man in a mask, Hannu told himself, as the jackal head gleamed in the torchlight, its long snout flanked by piercing eyes outlined in white and ears that rose sharply upright, like daggers. But even if it was a mask, that did not mean that the god was not present. The priests who wore the masks of the gods in their rites became vessels that the deities could inhabit. And so this *was* Anubis. For who would risk the wrath of the god of the dead by pretending to be him? Especially in the hidden chamber at the heart of the Temple of Baal.

‘Hail, Anubis!’ proclaimed the *cheriheb*.

‘Hail, Anubis!’ the men in front of the dais responded, awestruck.

In his left hand, the god of the dead carried the *ankh*, the symbol of eternal life. In his right, he held the flail. As the figure settled onto the throne and looked out across the torchlit faces, Hannu felt himself swept up by the thought that here before them was the god who would determine the worthiness of each of the men in the hall, who would decide the fate of every living soul.

Hannu shook himself, trying to shrug off the cold fingers of dread that gripped him. No. This is just a man, he told himself. A man in a mask.

‘You have all been found worthy.’ The *cheriheb*’s voice boomed across the hall as he took up a new position beside the throne. For the first time, Hannu noticed the faint guttural tones of the Lower Kingdom as he spoke. ‘Here, in this Hall of Anubis, our lord, the Shuyet, to whom this realm known as the Lower Kingdom rightfully belongs, welcomes you into his service. His army, of which you will soon be a part, grows by the day. It will soon be as vast and unstoppable as the waters of the Nile.’

Hannu’s eyes narrowed as he struggled to make sense of what he was hearing. The word *shuyet* meant shadow. Was it the name of the man behind the jackal mask? The man whose body Anubis now inhabited?

‘With the Shuyet, you will never know want, or doubt, or lack of purpose,’ the *cheriheb* continued. ‘Your hearts will sing with the rising of Ra’s great orb each morning, and you will drift into contented sleep under

the watchful lamp of Khonsu each night. Here, you will make your vow to follow the Shuyet until the end of your days, when, as reward for your devotion, he will usher you into the afterlife as his good and faithful servant.'

The *cheriheb* paused, allowing a long silence to settle on the hall before he began speaking again.

'Once you have sworn your oath, you will be bound to the Shuyet forever.'

Hannu now had no doubt that the man before him, dressed as Anubis, was the Shuyet. He marvelled at how easily this masked man and his spokesman were able to mesmerise the men who had come to them, but a wave of dread quickly replaced his wonder. Whatever the Shuyet was, he was not a man who would be content with stealing gold from caravans or pilfering from vaults – no matter how impenetrable. This man would have far greater ambitions.

'Under the rule of the Red Pharaoh, the people of the Lower Kingdom lived as the gods intended,' the *cheriheb* continued. 'But our birthright was taken from us fifty years ago, when the Hyksos first invaded from the east. The barbarians stole our riches and forced our people to become their slaves. Never again will we endure such suffering.'

The *cheriheb*'s voice rang with a passion that seemed to send the spirits of the men in the hall soaring. Even Hannu felt his own soul stirring.

'Yet now another comes to steal our land from us.' The scribe looked out into the crowd, as if speaking to each man personally. 'Pharaoh Rameses, a son of Mamose, has decided that he will seize control of our kingdom, now the Hyksos have been driven back to their homeland. His forces might have delivered the blow that finally broke the barbarians' hold on us, but it was our resistance, our determination to make them pay in blood every day for their occupation, that weakened them. Now, this pretender has decided that we should be slaves once more.'

Hannu grimaced at this proclamation. Rameses had no desire to subdue anyone. Instead, he believed that by reuniting the two kingdoms, all Egypt would be raised up into a new golden age. Every man and woman in Memphis had already benefited from Pharaoh's vision. But what did the men around him know of the world beyond the ruined walls of Avaris?

'This will not happen again,' the *cheriheb* boomed, looking to the figure

of Anubis on the throne. '*We* will not let this happen again. With you, his army, at his back, the Shuyet will lead us to victory against the oppressor from Thebes. We will crush the forces arrayed against us, and we will take back what was once ours. The Lower Kingdom will know lasting peace once again, under the rule of the true god-king, the Shuyet.'

Hannu stiffened at this declaration.

So, this was the Shuyet's plan.

He was building an army in secret, to seize control of the Lower Kingdom. Unlike Pharaoh Rameses, he aspired to preserve the separation between the two kingdoms, and to rule a sovereign, independent and restored Lower Egypt. And, Hannu realised with dismay, Memphis would have to fall for him to attain his dream.

'Brave fighting men from every corner of the Lower Kingdom have joined the Shuyet's army,' the *cheriheb* continued. 'You, who are joining now, do so just in time, for soon the moment for action will be upon us. The army of Anubis will march boldly against our enemies until they are crushed.'

As the scribe's final words echoed out across the hall, Hannu felt his blood run cold. He wondered how long the Shuyet had been building his army. And where his men were garrisoned? Not even a whisper of such a force had reached the ears of Pharaoh's advisors. His thoughts flew to Memphis – the nomarch and the Lord High Chancellor were completely unaware of the army that was preparing to destroy them.

His attention was drawn back to the dais as Anubis stood and held out the *ankh* and flail. 'Make your vow,' the Shuyet intoned deeply, speaking for the first time. 'You will raise your right hand in the air,' he commanded.

Across the hall, the men responded without hesitation, every one of them firmly in the Shuyet's thrall. Slowly, with no other choice, Hannu raised his own hand.

'Make your oath, as Anubis is your witness,' the *cheriheb* shouted over the crowd. 'I vow to commit my life to the Shuyet,' he began, clearly enunciating each word of the vow so the men gathered before him could repeat it. 'Only when he collects me for my journey through the afterlife will I be freed from this vow, and my debt paid.'

Then the scribe raised his arms, and the throng of men gathered in the underground hall chanted the oath in thundering unison.

Hannu only mouthed the words. Even a man as pragmatic as he was would not swear false allegiance before a god. Still, his mind was elsewhere as the men around him recited the forbidding vow. Somehow, he had to escape before the new recruits were transported to the Shuyet's camp. He had to warn Taita and Piay.

• • •

The Shuyet's soldiers herded the newly conscripted men out of the chamber. In the narrow annexe, they were compelled to proceed in single file. Dropping his head to his chest, Hannu muttered a silent prayer as he shuffled towards the staircase.

The men trudged back up the rough stone steps by which they had entered the inner sanctum of the Temple of Baal. After the suffocating heat of the underground hall, the night air was chill, and Hannu pulled his cloak closer around him as he stepped out into the temple compound. More soldiers stood on either side to guide the new recruits.

'Move on . . . towards the river,' barked one of the soldiers, who appeared to be a captain. 'Follow the light.'

Hannu looked ahead. A single lamp burned by the temple gate, hoisted on a long pole by another of the Shuyet's soldiers. Illuminated by the flame that hovered above him, the man seemed suspended like a spectre floating through the night. As the first of the new recruits reached him, the soldier turned into the cramped street beyond the compound, leading the men towards the harbour.

None of the men spoke. The only sound was the shuffle of their sandals across the broken flagstones. But when the line of conscripts reached the broad street that led to the harbour gate, moonlight shone down upon them, silvering their path, as if to welcome them to their destiny.

As they neared the harbour, Hannu's eyes darted from side to side, assessing each of the side streets as they appeared out of the darkness. If there was to be an opportunity to slip away, he would seize it. But the Shuyet's soldiers still hugged close to the column, their spears ready to strike anyone foolish enough to break their newly made vow.

Hannu was trapped. But if he followed the new recruits to their destination, he might be able to learn the true strength of the Shuyet's army

and its battle readiness, he told himself, and he could bring that vital intelligence back to Taita and Piay. But what were the chances of escaping from the Shuyet's stronghold? What were the chances of making it back to Memphis at all?

On the wharf, braziers glowed, throwing up bright sparks, and the air was thick with smoke from the smouldering dung and straw bricks. Most of the sailors had retreated below decks to sleep, and those who were still awake looked half-drunk. They glanced at the line of conscripts without interest, clearly accustomed to regularly seeing these lines of men being marched by torchlight from the city.

The shriek of a hunting owl echoed through the stillness, and Hannu watched as a winged shadow flashed across the flagstones. Raising his eyes, he saw that beyond the scattered merchantmen was the mast of a large ship that hadn't been present when he had pulled into the harbour in his waterlogged skiff. As the column approached, he could see that the ship had once been a Hyksos trading vessel, with its high aft tower and prow carved into the head of a rearing horse. It must had been salvaged by the Shuyet and his men when the barbarians had fled. The Hyksos had used ships like this one to transport blocks of limestone to the lands in the east, returning with holds full of cedar wood. It would be perfect for moving the new conscripts to wherever they were to be housed and trained.

At the base of the gangplank, a scribe waited for them, with his brush and ink and roll of papyrus parchment. Hannu watched as the men ahead of him gave the scribe their names, and details of the towns and villages that they had called home. Then, one by one, they climbed the gangplank to the deck, where they disappeared from view.

Hannu took a deep breath to steady himself and followed.

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The vultures circled, riding the warm air billowing off the desert sand, spiralling upwards into the windswept sky, where they scanned the land below for carrion. Piay eyed the birds as their white plumage caught the morning sun, but he knew that he and his men were of no interest to the scavengers. Taita had spent all night tending to the three injured men whom the Blue Crocodiles now carried on makeshift

stretchers, and although their wounds were serious, he had reassured Piay that they would all return alive to Memphis. The vultures' far-seeing eyes were fixed on something else, something still ahead – where the lush green of the Nile valley began – but as Piay watched their measured circuits, he could not help but wonder if their presence was an omen.

Piay's plan had cost them dearly. Twenty-two of the fifty Blue Crocodiles who had left the palace barracks remained where they had fallen, in the dead city. And no matter what Taita said, Piay's guilt could not be assuaged.

Piay was distracted from his thoughts by the approach of a small caravan – a few carts that stopped when he hailed the lead driver. To his surprise, when the hood of the driver's crimson robe was peeled back, a wealth of dark hair tumbled out in gleaming coils. The driver was a woman, and a beautiful one, too – her dark blue eyes holding his own captive. She wore a richly patterned silk scarf bound tightly around her forehead – from a land far to the east, Piay guessed, well beyond the borders of Egypt.

'I'm coming from Memphis,' she told them proudly, in the throaty accent of the Lower Kingdom, when Piay questioned her. 'I had goods to trade at the Feast of Hathor.'

'Why Memphis?' Piay asked her.

'People are flocking to the old capital from every corner of this land.' She shrugged. 'There is hope again in Memphis, and money to be made.'

Satisfied with her answer, Piay nodded. 'Be on your way,' he said, dismissing her.

As the merchant's carts trundled away, Taita watched them go with a curious expression on his face. 'She was quite memorable, for a merchant,' he mused.

'She was,' Piay agreed.

'There was a time when a woman like that would have captured your interest.' Taita raised an eyebrow. 'What once was, can be again.'

An hour later, as the sun began to approach its zenith, they spotted a second caravan. The increasing traffic indicated that they were closing on their destination, and the Blue Crocodiles picked up their step – it would not be long before they were back in Memphis, safely in the barracks alongside the rest of their company.

But as they approached the caravan, instead of the creaking of wheels

and the flick of switches over the rumps of the mules, there was silence. Corpses lay strewn between the overturned carts, mutilated bodies already decomposing under the relentless desert sun. The Blue Crocodiles immediately recognised the dead – the Memphis Guard – and the remnants of the caravan that they had driven into the desert. It had not made it back to the city.

Piay surveyed the scene first with bewilderment, then with horror. The Memphis Guard, the fifty men who had comprised the caravan's escort, had been slaughtered.

'Our adversary must have swallowed at least a part of your ruse,' Taita remarked grimly. 'He has seized the treasure you tempted him with.'

'There may be survivors,' Piay said, waving the Blue Crocodile Guard forward. But as he watched the soldiers begin to work, moving diligently from body to body, his anger overwhelmed him. 'Fifty men!' he growled. 'Fifty men!'

'There is nothing you could have done, Piay,' Taita replied. 'Had we not gone after the raiders, we would have been overwhelmed by the Shuyet's forces, just as these soldiers were. You and I would now be captives.'

'The Blue Crocodiles would have fought!' Piay retorted.

'Yes, and the twenty-eight we still have would be dead, alongside the rest,' Taita said as he surveyed the carnage. 'At least you had the good sense to take my advice, and leave most of the treasure in the vault. Had you not, then that would have been lost as well.'

'A senseless slaughter . . .'

'But perhaps not without recompense. Look!' Taita pointed to where the Blue Crocodiles were gathered around a lone Memphis Guard, whom they had propped up against the wheel of one of the emptied carts.

As he followed Taita over to the group, Piay could see that the young man's torso was stained crimson – he was amazed that he had lasted as long as he had. 'The gods have preserved him for a reason,' Taita muttered as he crouched beside the injured soldier and began to examine his wounds.

Piay nodded, squatting beside him. 'Who did this?'

'Anubis,' the guard croaked, his head lolling and his eyes struggling to focus. 'It was Anubis himself.'

Piay sensed the Blue Crocodiles around him stiffen as a sudden breeze whispered across the caravan and a thin cloud moved in front of the sun. It

was as if the god's shadow had fallen upon them.

The wounded man's eyelids fluttered shut as he slipped to one side, unconscious.

Piay stood. 'Bind his wounds,' he commanded. 'Then put him in one of the carts with the other wounded.'

While the Blue Crocodiles carried out Piay's order, the man who had been the first to reach the mortally wounded soldier lingered. 'A word, my lord?' he entreated.

Piay glanced quizzically at Taita, then nodded.

'He had more words in him before you arrived,' the guard revealed. 'The force that attacked them was no rabble. A hundred at least, he said, and they fought like soldiers, not raiders. The Memphis Guard stood no chance.'

'They were attacked by soldiers?' Piay said, astonished.

The guard nodded. 'The Shuyet has some kind of an army. The band of raiders we chased were a diversion. The real threat lurked somewhere out of sight, and once we had abandoned the caravan, they fell upon it like locusts.'

'And consumed all they found,' Taita said, finishing the soldier's thought for him.

'They also left this behind,' the guard said, holding out a piece of basalt flecked with gold. 'They made a special example of Captain Ahmose. Disembowelled him and cut off his head. We found this in his mouth.'

As the guardsman bowed and left to join his comrades, Taita held up the object that had been found in Ahmose's mouth – it was a jackal-headed senet stone. 'So, at last, we discover the endgame,' he said, thoughtfully. 'The Shuyet's design, once he deduced your plot, *was* to turn it on its head. He was attracted to the gold you teased him with, but he was too perceptive to step into the ambush.'

Piay glared at his master. 'You said that we were his target.'

Taita met his gaze evenly. 'I still believe we are, more now even than before. Do you not see that in what he did here – he was hedging his bets?'

Piay looked at Taita in bewilderment.

'If we chased after the raiders, he intended to drive off the Blue Crocodiles and capture us in the dead city,' Taita explained. 'If we remained with the caravan, he planned to take us here, along with the treasure we carried. Either way, his strategy was designed to catch us in his net. That we

stand here is testament to our victory, and his defeat.’

Piay spat in the dust. ‘He is mocking us,’ he growled.

Taita shook his head. ‘He failed.’

Piay looked at his master with wide eyes. ‘Look around you. He slaughtered our men and took the gold.’

‘But he didn’t take us,’ Taita persisted.

Piay grunted an acknowledgement. ‘You may be right. But if this is victory, it is a bitter one.’

• • •

The Blue Crocodile Guard picked up their step when they finally glimpsed the white walls of Memphis, pushing back their shoulders. They might have been defeated in the dead city, and lost their comrades in the attack on the caravan, but by the time they reached the gates they were marching with pride ahead of the wagon that bore their wounded – they were still Egypt’s finest.

As they strode up to the city, the heralds blasted out a fanfare to signal the return of the nomarch and the Lord High Chancellor. Taita knew that the sound would create frantic activity at the palace – fires would be lit in the kitchen, rose petals scattered across the cool marble floor of the entrance hall, and hot coals carried to the incense braziers.

With the wearying journey coming to an end, Taita was looking forward to his bath and being dressed in a fresh robe, but he suspected that however much soothing oil was rubbed into his skin, he would not be able to find peace until the Shuyet had been brought to justice.

To the thunder of the Memphis Guard stamping their spears in welcome, Taita, Piay and the Blue Crocodiles marched through the gate and into the city.

• • •

Taita and Piay let the slaves bathe them, and then ate and drank until they’d had their fill. But while their bodies were soothed, their minds remained restless.

When night approached, they walked out together into the palace

gardens. The air was filled with the fruity aroma of the night-blooming white lotus.

‘I feel much refreshed,’ Taita said.

‘I’m glad.’

An owl hooted, an eerie sound rolling out from the high branches of the sycamore trees like a soul that had become lost on its way to the afterlife. The ancient name for the bird was ‘the one who laments’, and the superstitious associated its call with imminent death.

But as they passed Myssa’s monument, Taita was pleased to see that Piay did not pause. Perhaps he was beginning to transcend his grief, his mind now fully focused on the dangers facing them.

‘So, he failed to capture us. What, then, do you believe our adversary’s next move will be?’ Piay asked.

‘I don’t know. But I think the time has come to stop playing his games and to start to play our own.’ Taita rubbed his temple thoughtfully. ‘We know now that we are the prize. So, rather than trying to trap him in the desert, or keep his forces at bay, let us rather bring him a little closer, so we can see him in the light.’

‘What do you propose?’ Piay asked.

‘A contest.’

Piay cocked his head incredulously. ‘A *contest*?’

‘A contest, demanded by Pharaoh, to discover the greatest talents, the sharpest intellects, the wisest citizens from across Lower Egypt. These notables will compete for the honour of being named vizier – a new appointment, someone who can help Pharaoh integrate the nomes of the Lower Kingdom into the new, unified Egypt. The only thing more irresistible than gold is recognition for one’s superior intellect. I know this from personal experience.’

‘It will attract a great deal of riff-raff seeking to advance their station, from across a land long ravaged by the Hyksos.’ Piay snorted. ‘But let’s set that aside for a moment. How will this contest bring the Shuyet closer?’

Taita held out his hand to Piay. In his palm lay three jackal-headed senet stones, their gold inlay winking in the moonlight. ‘One was found next to the master mason and the second with Ahmose, the captain of the Memphis Guard.’

‘And the third?’

‘The embalmers found it on the body of Djau-Aa. I went to see them after we returned this afternoon.’

‘So, we are still two stones short of a full complement?’

‘Yes. But you are missing the point. What do the stones tell us?’ Taita asked.

When Piay remained silent, Taita continued: ‘They tell us that the Shuyet likes to have someone to spy for him. Djau-Aa was his man. Haman was his man. Ahmose was his man.’ He paused. ‘He will not be able to resist sending someone to compete in such a contest. They would be his eyes and ears in Pharaoh’s closest circles. They would deliver us to him on a golden platter.’

‘But how does that help us?’ Piay asked. ‘Is this not exactly what we are trying to avoid?’

‘The Shuyet has made his moves,’ Taita said, flourishing the senet stones. ‘He brought me here. He gave me this puzzle to solve. But having evaded him in the dead city, we are now forewarned. He knows he has missed his chance. But if he can get someone close to me, someone he thinks I trust, he may yet get another chance.’

Piay looked puzzled. ‘Why should we give him such a chance?’

‘Because this time, we will turn his own blade against him. Now, tomorrow, we must send out messengers to all corners of the Lower Kingdom.’

‘And how will your plan succeed where mine failed?’ quizzed Piay. ‘Our foe has outwitted us once. What’s to say he won’t do it again, this time with graver consequences?’

Taita looked at Piay knowingly. ‘I cannot guarantee success. But it’s the best move we have left, and we are running out of time.’

Piay shook his head incredulously. ‘I don’t understand.’

Taita smiled. ‘The spells in Imhotep’s tomb are calling me. With the spells, the future of Egypt is secure. I have seen their power. With them, I will meet any enemy on the battlefield alone, and though he may have an army of many thousands, I will be triumphant.’ He paused. ‘But I cannot leave to undertake that task if the Shuyet still threatens the Lower Kingdom. What if I do not emerge from Imhotep’s tomb?’

Piay’s mood changed as he understood his master’s meaning. ‘You believe the task will consume you.’

‘Not consume, so much as transform. The spells will open the way to the dominion of the gods, and to the afterlife. I do not know how I will return. Or when.’

‘And so, before you undertake this great work, we have one simple task.’

‘Yes,’ Taita said, turning to face his former pupil.

‘We must capture a god,’ Piay said grimly.

• • •

The rat scurried across Hannu’s foot and he cursed it loudly. Around him, in the stifling hold, the Shuyet’s new conscripts slumbered – one or two had stirred at the sound of Hannu’s voice, muttering in their sleep, but their souls had yet to return to their bodies. Hannu lay there in the blackness, breathing in the sharp stink of rodent urine and the vinegar sweat of the hot bodies jammed around him. He had already been half awake, but he knew now that sleep would not come again.

Dragging himself upright, Hannu looked up at the great open square of the cargo hatch. He could see the sky beginning to pale as dawn approached.

After the galley had been loaded in Avaris, they had sailed north for an hour or so, drifting with the current. Clearly the steersman knew the river well, but it was still a dangerous time to set sail and Hannu suspected the main reason for travelling at night was the cargo they carried – the further they travelled from Avaris, the more difficult escape became. Bread had been thrown into the hold as soon as the anchor stone had settled on the riverbed, and it wasn’t long before the galley had grown silent – both above and below decks – but now Hannu could hear the dim sound of voices, rising above the groans of the hull flexing against the current. Something was happening.

Picking his way between the sleeping bodies, Hannu moved to the ladder that led up to the deck. The voices were louder here, but it was clear that those speaking did not want to be overheard. All the more reason to eavesdrop, Hannu thought.

Since they’d left Avaris, Hannu had not dared to try and leave the hold. He feared that one of the guards from the night at the tavern might be on

board, and would recognise him. But he needed to learn more about their destination and the Shuyet's plans.

It made sense that the Shuyet would march on Memphis first, Hannu thought to himself. If he could take the capital of the Lower Kingdom and hold it, then Rameses would have to send a force of many thousands to reclaim it. On the other hand, if the Shuyet marched on the cities along the Great Green first, before moving south, he would gain men and resources as he went, swelling his forces. Unless, of course, the Shuyet already had an army large enough to do both.

As he craned his neck upwards, Hannu realised that the only way he would be able to glean any information from the muffled conversation above him was to emerge from his hiding place.

With a grunt, Hannu began to pull himself up the ladder and into the chill of the dawn. As he emerged from the warm fug of the hold, he breathed in the stench of rot that hung over the marshes of the delta. The thin light allowed him to make out the reed beds lining the river's banks, but beyond that, the land appeared grey and featureless.

The voices were coming from the stern. Dropping to his belly, Hannu clawed his way along the deck, under the benches where the oarsmen snored loudly. A movement near the tiller, where the steersman would usually stand, caught his eye, but it was just a shadow. Then he made out four men standing by the rail, talking in hushed voices.

As Hannu strained to see from his low vantage point, another man clambered up over the side, no doubt from a skiff. As the new arrival dropped to the deck, the voices became more animated.

'What news?' someone hissed.

The response the new arrival gave was lost and, gritting his teeth, Hannu realised he had no choice but to get closer.

'The Shuyet is ready to attack!' someone exclaimed as Hannu dragged himself forward.

'Aye, soon, so I heard. That's what everyone is saying.'

'Ah, people are always talking,' another voice interjected dismissively.

The light was getting stronger as the sun rose over the starboard bow, and Hannu could now see that three of the men wore the leather cuirasses and tight-fitting helms of warriors.

'You're letting those dreams of pillaged gold and women go to your

head,' one of the galley guards said scornfully. Hannu recognised him as the man who had carried the lantern, leading the new recruits from the Temple of Baal to the docks.

'I like those dreams,' the taller of the two soldiers replied. 'But I have seen the galleys being loaded with my own eyes.'

The guard spoke again, in low, excited tones: 'It is said that when we retake Memphis, the Shuyet intends to send the nomarch's head to Rameses as a gift.'

Memphis! Hannu exhaled sharply. So he had been right with his first guess. And it would be a massacre. Piay did not have an army at the ready. The Blue Crocodile Guard would fight valiantly, but they did not have the numbers to repel the thousands the Shuyet had at his command, if the *cheriheb*'s words were to be believed.

The group fell silent, but Hannu's thoughts were racing. If an attack on Memphis was imminent, he could not afford to complete the journey to the Shuyet's camp. He had to find a way to escape from the ship, and bring the news to Piay and Taita at once.

Before Hannu could push himself back the way he had come, a voice thundered across the deck: 'You!'

Hannu knew that in the growing light, he had been seen. The group of men – guards and warriors alike – turned to face him as he wriggled out from under the benches and lurched to his feet.

'You! I know you. The short one with the limp. The old soldier.'

Hannu recognised the man who had ejected him from the tavern. 'How did you get aboard this ship?' the man asked, drawing his sword.

Fleetingly, Hannu wondered if he could talk his way out of the situation. But he did not have Piay's way with words, and he recalled the soldier's parting threat – that if he ever saw Hannu again, he would slit his throat and leave him on a midden as a feast for the rats.

'Answer me,' the soldier demanded.

As the soldier approached, the blade of his sword glinting in the rising sun, Hannu held up his hands to show he had no weapon. Then, as the soldier lowered his sword in anticipation of an easy kill, Hannu lashed out with his fist, crushing the soldier's throat and sending him sprawling to the deck. As his opponent lay momentarily stunned and gasping for breath, Hannu turned and limped hurriedly away.

‘Stop him!’ the soldier croaked.

Stumbling past the waking oarsmen, Hannu heaved himself up onto the side of the ship, glanced down once at the grey-green water of the river, and threw himself off. As he fell, he heard furious shouts behind him, but they were cut off as soon as he plunged into the bone-chilling waters of the Nile.

Hannu felt the currents grabbing his body, spinning him over and dragging him down and along. His throat burned as he held tight to what remained of the air in his lungs, but he could not risk surfacing. The guards were sure to be scanning the river with arrows nocked on bowstrings, ready to send him to the bottom for good.

Kicking out, Hannu propelled himself further into the depths.

• • •

Piay smiled as he watched a boy scurry along the dusty street, weaving through the throng as he hurried towards the forum. The vast space had been cleared of traders and a holiday declared, for today was the first day of Taita’s great contest and the competitors were to be announced to the citizens of Memphis.

Criers had been sent to every corner of the Lower Kingdom, to let it be known that the Lord High Chancellor was in search of the keenest minds in the land between the Great Green and the borders of the Upper Kingdom. Taita had further declared that there were to be no barriers to entrance. The contestants could be male or female, high-born or low caste, priests or peasants – the only restriction was that their birth must have been recorded in the Lower Kingdom.

Piay smiled again as he observed the boy’s passage through the masses. He had been just the same at the boy’s age – at the front of every crowd, eager to see any and every spectacle. What had happened to that boy? Piay wondered. Was he still inside of him somewhere?

As their bodyguard – drawn from the ranks of the Blue Crocodile Guard – pushed through the crowd, moving Piay and Taita towards the stage that had been set up in the centre of the square, the heralds blew a fanfare to announce the arrival of the nomarch and the Lord High Chancellor. Even so early in the day the air was festive and the mood feverishly excited. Some had even climbed high above the square and were perched on walls and

balconies. Others shouted their wagers at the bookies and their scribes.

‘It seems as if every citizen in Memphis is here,’ Piay said.

‘As they should be – when their nomarch commands it,’ Taita replied.

Ten candidates waited on the stage in the centre of the square, under the watchful gaze of the Council of Elders, who stood to one side, in deep conversation with Ankhu. Piay was surprised by the diversity of the contestants. Despite Taita’s decree, he had expected a group solely of men – scribes and merchants and priests. Men who had built a life for themselves but still felt overlooked, born into the wrong family or unable to advance themselves due to some misfortune. Men who would see Taita’s contest as a way of proving the gods wrong. Instead, here stood a boy, not even eleven years of age, a greybeard nobleman, tall and fragile in a black silk gown, and a blind Kushite with a shaven head, so fat that he could not stand without the aid of two slaves.

‘And there’s a woman!’ he exclaimed to Taita, catching sight of the final contestant. ‘Surely she cannot be the Shuyet’s spy.’

‘Welcome, Nomarch,’ Ankhu said as Piay and Taita made their way up the steps and onto the stage. ‘Lord High Chancellor, we feel the ten chosen candidates represent the very best of those who made their way to Memphis, to enter your contest. We are excited to see you put their skills and talents to the test.’

‘Thank you, Ankhu.’ Taita nodded. ‘And thanks, too, to the Council of Elders.’

‘How did you arrive at the number ten?’ Piay asked.

Before Ankhu could reply, Taita answered: ‘I specified the number.’

Piay nodded. Taita’s mind was far beyond those of other men – he always had a reason for his actions.

‘I did not expect that there would be so many worthy applicants.’

‘We shall learn their worth when we test them,’ Taita replied. ‘But I already know that some will not last long.’

Piay nodded. ‘And you are certain the one we are looking for is here?’ he asked.

‘I am,’ Taita said. ‘More than certain.’

Piay watched as Taita stepped to the edge of the platform to address the gathering. An eager hush fell upon the crowd as the Lord High Chancellor gazed out across the square. ‘This is an auspicious day,’ he began. ‘Ten

citizens have been selected for this great contest of wits, strength and character, ten who aspire to earn the privilege of serving Lower Egypt at the right hand of the God-Pharaoh Rameses as he leads Egypt into a new golden age.'

Taita glanced back at the ten candidates who would compete for the prize on offer – a reward that would elevate the victor above every other man and woman in the Lower Kingdom.

'Over the coming days, these ten will be tested with riddles and puzzles, tasks I have devised to measure the mental and physical strengths of each competitor. Three will be selected for the final contest, and from these, a worthy winner will emerge.'

The crowd roared as Piay joined Taita at the front of the podium. 'Now,' Piay boomed, 'step forward, so that all who are gathered here may know the names of those who would stand at Pharaoh's right hand.'

One by one, the candidates announced their names and from where they had travelled. Though Taita seemed unperturbed, Piay felt his doubts grow. None of the ten chosen by the Council of Elders – some of them on Taita's recommendation – seemed to him to possess the special qualities that the position of vizier required. Why would the Shuyet send a candidate to Memphis who would be unable to win the contest? He glanced at Taita quizzically. His master's plan relied upon them being able to identify the Shuyet's spy, but no one on the stage seemed capable of offering the torn land of the Lower Kingdom the leadership it needed, let alone counselling Pharaoh.

Taita caught his look. 'I can see you are worried, Piay, but there are three who have what we are looking for.'

Taita gestured surreptitiously to the candidates who had caught his eye.

Piay pursed his lips as he regarded each of Taita's selections.

With his hooked nose and eyes that blazed out from under bushy brows, Asim seemed the most promising. He wore an azure robe, cinched snugly at the waist by a purple sash, and a scarf of similar colour wrapped tightly around his head. His skin was the dusty colour of desert rocks, his cheeks gaunt. Piay was sure that Asim was of the same blood as the raiders who had confronted them in the desert. Instantly, the mutilated corpses of the Memphis Guard appeared before his eyes, strewn around what remained of the treasure caravan, their blood staining the desert sand black.

Turning away from Asim, Piay allowed his eyes to rest on the woman – Gyasi. She was much younger than Asim, and had perhaps seen just twenty floods. Her features were finely shaped but there was an arrogance in her that troubled Piay. She smiled faintly as she held his gaze, clearly enjoying his scrutiny. Her shining black hair was as dark as obsidian and cut just above her shoulders. With her malachite eye makeup and pristine white dress, she gave off an air of sophistication. It was no surprise to Piay that when she spoke it was with the accent of the cosmopolitan cities that lined the Great Green beyond the delta.

The final candidate that Taita had identified was Sadiki. A man of about thirty years of age, who had been born in Memphis, he had curly blond hair and a pale skin – a good-looking Egyptian, but from a lower-caste family. His kilt was filthy from his daily labours and bruises mottled his arms and legs. Piay was certain there would be dirt under his fingernails, but Taita was right: there was something about him; his blue eyes shone with intelligence, and he held himself with confidence.

‘What are your thoughts?’ Taita asked.

‘I was hoping there would be someone who would stand out immediately from the rest,’ Piay replied.

Taita smiled, a twinkle of amusement in his eye. ‘If you did not know better, I could just be another eunuch, standing here before you.’

Piay grinned ruefully. ‘You could never be just another eunuch.’

As the last candidate finished introducing himself to the crowd, Piay stepped forward and threw his arms into the air. ‘Let the contest begin!’

• • •

The men of the Blue Crocodile Guard escorted the nomarch, the Lord High Chancellor, the Council of Elders and the ten contestants back to the palace. Opulent rooms had been set aside for those who were to compete in Taita’s contest, rooms that they would occupy until they were either removed from the competition or declared victorious.

Taita continued to walk beside Piay as the palace slaves led the contestants away and the Blue Crocodiles returned to their barracks. As they made their way towards the entrance to the palace, Taita suddenly had

the feeling that he was being watched.

Then he heard that unmistakable soprano that he knew so well, singing the peasant melody that he had taught her:

My heart flutters up like a wounded quail
when I see my beloved's face
and my cheeks bloom like the dawn sky
to the sunshine of his smile.

Taita looked deep into the garden, in the direction that the singing seemed to be coming from. He could clearly sense a presence, powerful, familiar, and his heartbeat quickened at the thought of who it was – he would never forget that voice.

'What is it?' Piay asked, staring at Taita.

A guard from the palace garrison was patrolling the walls as a slave hurried by along the path to the kitchens, but no one else was visible.

'Do you not hear that?' Taita asked.

Piay shook his head in confusion.

'I will meet you in the palace,' Taita replied, leaving Piay abruptly, stalking away across the well-watered grass, past the tamarisk trees with their fluffy clouds of pink flowers.

• • •

The garden had been masterfully designed, so that it hid and then revealed the majesty of nature, tantalising all those who walked through it. Taita knew that whoever was singing could escape quickly and without being exposed, but he also knew that there was only one person who would still remember the words to a peasant song from a half century ago – and she was no longer alive.

Finally, he caught sight of a figure standing before one of the sycamores, beside a blood-red bed of poppies. Taita cried out and fell to his knees. He had known all along who was singing, but he had not expected to see her in the flesh.

'It is you,' Taita gasped. 'How can this be?'

I am imagining it, he thought. If his beloved was here, it had to be

because of his encounter with the *medu neter* in Imhotep's tomb – some manifestation caused by the spells which had wrapped themselves around his mind.

But Taita could clearly see Lostris smiling at him as she approached. She whom he had loved above all others. Lostris as she had appeared in the first flush of womanhood – her skin the colour of oiled cedar wood, the slant of her eyes enhanced by the silver-green of powdered malachite touched to the upper lids. She smiled. 'My Taita,' she said in greeting, her mellifluous voice ending his name with the faintest laugh of joy.

'Mistress,' he breathed, trembling from the wave of emotion that threatened to overwhelm him. 'You have returned as you promised you would.'

His beloved was wearing a white silk sheath dress with a lapis lazuli figurine of Hapi, the goddess of the Nile, hanging from a gold chain around her neck. Gold bands encased her upper arms and wrists.

'Why have you come to me now, after all this time?' Taita whispered. 'Is it because I set foot in Imhotep's tomb? Because I have looked upon the spells of power? Because I have wielded one?' His face brightened, hopefully. 'Have you come to ask me to follow you into the afterlife?'

'No one was ever more loyal to me than you, Taita,' Lostris murmured, ignoring his eager questions. 'And your loyalty to me has grown into a devotion to this land that will never be matched.'

Blinking away his tears, Taita reached out a hand as his mistress spoke, but no matter how far he extended his fingers, they felt neither fabric nor flesh.

'You are a spectre, born of memories. You exist only in my head,' he muttered sadly, his hand returning to his side.

Lostris smiled. 'Dark days have returned to this land, Taita. A new threat is growing. It is because of this that the spells have been revealed to you, and why you see me now.'

After his mistress's death, Taita had steeled his heart, had buried his grief, and slowly the pain of losing her had faded. But seeing Lostris again now was almost as much as he could bear.

'You are not truly here,' Taita said despondently.

'But I am here,' Lostris replied, pointing to his heart. 'And here.' She raised her finger to indicate his head. 'And I will stay with you, for as long

as you have need of me, my faithful and beloved servant.'

Taita sat back on his heels, shaking his head. 'I will always need you.'

He had yearned to be reunited with Lostris from the very instant the light in her eyes had flickered out, longed to hear the sound of her voice once again, and to smell her skin, sweetly perfumed by the balm that her slave girls massaged into it every morning after her bath. Taita had always known that these things would only ever happen in the afterlife, but now he knew what it would feel like to join his beloved where she waited for him.

Taita closed his eyes to hold back his emotions.

'Remember me in your time of need,' he heard his mistress whisper. 'And you will see me standing before you.'

When he opened his eyes again, Lostris was gone.

• • •

The woman slipped like a ghost through the shadowed, stinking alleys of Avaris, tracking the band of Hyksos warriors. The children who played in the narrow lanes paid her no attention. Her face was smeared with dirt and her drab dress was tattered and stained, making her look for all the world like just another desperate soul trying to survive in the cruel quarter where the poor and dispossessed clung to their miserable lives by their fingernails.

But her desperation was a disguise. Zahra, daughter of Nimlot, sister of Qar, had found that she was quite good at hiding her true identity.

As she passed the children, she focused again on the five barbarians she pursued, like a lion hunting a pack of hyenas. They swaggered through the quarter with the arrogance of men who knew they would never be challenged, braying with laughter and shoving aside anyone who stood in their path.

The leader of the band was Assis, the murderer who had occupied Zahra's thoughts every day of the twelve long years since her father's death. During that time, she had grown into a radiant beauty, with long hair falling in coils around her shoulders, high cheekbones and full lips. But it was her eyes that were the most memorable, as dark and deep as a temple pool at midnight, so that few could stand their unrelenting scrutiny for long.

Assis, for his part, had changed little since the day he had cut Nimlot's

throat. There were a few more streaks of silver in his long black hair, and more creases in the skin around his mouth and eyes, but his sword arm was still strong, and he cut an imposing figure on the streets of Avaris.

The barbarians surrounded a young woman, carrying water back from the river. Like jackals circling a lone gazelle, the Hyksos took turns tugging at her frayed dress. Then Assis grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled her face close to his, whispering something that Zahra couldn't hear, but which caused the woman's eyes to widen in terror.

Stay calm, Zahra thought. Do not intervene. Not yet.

Zahra sighed with relief when the barbarians finally tired of their game and allowed the woman to go on her way. If their molestation had continued, she feared she would not have been able to restrain herself. She was fast and deadly with the short blade she kept hidden in her dress. If pressed, she knew her own ability, and four of the five barbarians offered no challenge – she would kill them before they could draw their swords. But it was Assis she wanted. Her prey was strong and dangerous, and killing him would not be so easy.

When Heru had spirited Nimlot's children out of Avaris, the night their father had been murdered, Zahra could not have imagined how they would ever revenge themselves on Assis. Heru had carried them upriver in a stolen skiff, from town to town, until they had found a place to call home in Bubastis, the city of cats. There was always work for a ka*-priest, so Heru provided for them by making daily offerings at the tombs in the necropolis.*

But as Qar and Zahra grew older, things became more difficult in Bubastis. The new Hyksos nomarch was determined to squeeze every last drop of gold from the city. Heru's work began to dry up – families no longer had money to honour the dead – and their bellies were often empty. Even the great temple of Bast fell into disrepair.

At Qar's suggestion, the siblings became thieves, stealing what they could from the wagons carrying food to the Hyksos barracks. To her shame, Zahra quickly became very good at the light-fingered work. To ease her guilt, she would give half of whatever she took to the hungry children in the city.

Despite their privations, Heru never stinted with their education. He had become a surrogate father to his mentor's children, and he was determined to give them the tools they needed to help realise Nimlot's

dream of an Egypt reborn. Whether he thought it was destiny or folly, Heru never said. He dutifully delivered on his promise to Nimlot, and Zahra loved him for that.

Qar became restive as they left their childhood behind. Twelve years had passed since the day that had changed their lives forever. After so many years, the barbarian would not recognise them, he argued. Now was the time. They could return to Avaris, and plan their revenge.

When Assis led his men out into a sun-baked street, Zahra held back in the shadows. She had watched his movements for weeks, and had learned that he was as predictable as the inundation of the Nile. Every day that the Egyptian calendar deemed auspicious, the barbarian would make his way to the tavern, drink heavily and then wind his way home alone. That was the perfect moment.

Once she was certain Assis was strolling towards the tavern, Zahra raced back through the labyrinth of narrow lanes to the cramped house Heru had found for them. The clay-brick walls were crumbling, the roof sagged, and it was so close to a midden that the house was filled with the foul stink of human waste. But at least no one would come looking for them there.

Just as Zahra was about to enter, Heru stooped under the lintel and stepped out into the street, a frustrated sigh escaping his lips.

'What is wrong?' Zahra asked her guardian.

Heru looked back into the shadows of the house and then said in a quiet voice: 'I am concerned about your brother.'

'What has he done now?'

'He has grown irrational and violent.'

Zahra nodded. Over the years, the joy she remembered in Qar as a boy had ebbed away. These days, he scowled more than he smiled. Was it his obsession with vengeance that had deadened his heart, she wondered, or was it his growing ambition to realise their father's vision? More and more, Qar talked only of the ways that they might bring about the resurrection of Egypt.

'Power is what we need,' he had said once. When Zahra had asked him what he meant, Qar had dismissed her question with a furious wave of his hand. 'Our father was taken from us because we had no power. The only way to protect ourselves is to seize it.'

‘How?’

‘The Hyksos have shown us the way.’

Zahra had stared at him incredulously, unsure what lessons the barbarians who had slaughtered their people and murdered their father could teach them, but Qar had refused to speak with her on the subject any more after that.

Heru leaned in and spoke quietly: ‘I fear where this road will lead him. I have seen it in other men – ideas that become a poison that consumes them.’ He put his hand on her shoulder. ‘Please do what you can to steer him on to a more righteous path.’

With a worried nod of agreement, Zahra slipped past Heru and into the cramped house. She found Qar squatting in a corner, drawing items out of a sack. Zahra gasped when she saw the gleam of precious metal in his hands.

‘I thought we only stole food,’ she admonished him.

‘And now we steal gold.’ Qar looked up at her from under hooded brows. ‘I told you . . . I have a plan.’

Zahra shook her head in dismay.

‘Do you mock me?’ Qar snapped.

‘Of course not. I love you. You are all I have in the world. But this talk of plans, and power –’

‘Do you know how the Hyksos conquered Egypt?’ Qar twirled a gold amulet so that it caught the light.

‘They had horses . . . and chariots,’ Zahra replied.

Qar grinned and shook his head. ‘No. We Egyptians have our gods, but they do not bid us to conquer other nations, to tear down their temples and enslave their peoples. The Hyksos believe that this is what Baal wants them to do. He is a jealous god, but if they serve him, they will be granted prosperity in this life and the next. There is no limit to their devotion, to what they will give in Baal’s service, because they know they will be rewarded. If they live – Baal will smile upon them. And if they die – they will be welcomed into paradise.’

Zahra tapped the bulging sack with her toe. ‘Where did you get this?’

Qar ignored her. His eyes were gleaming with a strange light. ‘I will do as they did. Build an army –’

Zahra snorted.

Glaring at her, Qar continued: ‘Build an army from the poor, the

hungry. Promise them a reward beyond their greatest imagining if they serve the will of a god . . .'

'A reward they will gain by turning themselves into cut-throats, raiders like the Shrikes?'

'Yes, like the Shrikes. They built an army in all but name. Why not us?'

Zahra stared at her brother with dismay. 'No,' she said gently. 'This is madness. We are not warriors.'

'Egypt needs us, Zahra. Have you forgotten our father's vision?'

Zahra flinched at his words.

'He put his faith in us –'

'Are you doing this for our father?' Zahra asked angrily. 'Or for the power you crave? Our father served a god. He did not desire to become one.'

'One can do both.' Qar looked away sullenly.

'I, too, want to honour Father's memory,' Zahra continued, 'but there must be another way. We are Egyptian, Qar. I will not stand by and watch you become like the Hyksos. A monster.'

'And I will not let you stand in my way!' he shouted at her furiously.

Zahra looked at her brother. She knew that there was no point arguing with him when he was in this mood. 'Assis is at the tavern now,' she said calmly. 'Most likely getting drunk.'

'Good. Get ready. When Assis is dead, we can finally put the past behind us and look ahead to Egypt's glorious future.'

Zahra watched her brother as he bundled the gold back into the sack, but he ignored her gaze. Concerned, she grabbed two flatbreads that she had stolen earlier, and walked out into the hot afternoon.

The children were waiting in their customary place, in the lee of the city wall. Zahra was saddened to see the feverish gleam in their eyes as she handed them the bread. Qar was right about one thing – the barbarians had turned the people of Egypt into beggars.

• • •

Hannu crawled from the river, spitting and cursing. He knew that the Shuyet's men would pursue him, but he was now a good way downstream. He would be gone through the morning mist before the

skiffs were readied and the search parties organised.

The sun was a giant ball of orange on the horizon now, pulsing through the river haar that had risen with it. As he wrung out his dripping tunic, all Hannu could think of was Piay and Taita, and the white walls of Memphis engulfed by the army of Anubis. He had to warn them. But how? He must be six days' march from Memphis, and he was a man on his own, an old soldier with a bad leg.

Ahead of him a movement caught his eye – a shadow in the fog between the reed beds.

Pulling his dagger from his waistband, Hannu moved closer. The sounds around him were dull and muffled – tearing grass, the distant call of a heron. Then he saw it – a horse. Raising its head haughtily from where it had been grazing; its white legs splashed with mud.

Hannu cursed and looked balefully at Ra's orb as it rose ever higher. 'You know I hate them,' he muttered, returning his dagger to his waistband. 'I hate horses!'

• • •

It was late in the evening by the time Zahra returned to the house. Qar was waiting for her. He gave her a cheery grin to convey that their earlier confrontation had been forgotten, then slipped a knife out from the waistband of his kilt and showed it to her.

'We have been waiting for so long, Zahra,' Qar breathed. 'Now, finally, we will take our revenge.'

Zahra eyed the glinting blade uncertainly.

'Remember your role. All you need to do is lure Assis into the alley, away from any prying eyes. Leave the rest to me.' Qar's face was flushed with excitement, and his eyes gleamed with anticipation.

They slipped silently along the narrow streets, through the drifting woodsmoke from evening cooking fires, until they saw the lamplight shimmering through the open door of the tavern and heard the raucous, drunken laughter from within.

Qar kissed Zahra on the cheek, and then, with a light step, he disappeared into the darkness of the alley opposite the tavern's entrance. Zahra stepped back into a doorway to wait, watching as man after man

stumbled out of the tavern and meandered into the night.

Finally, Assis lurched out. He was alone, as usual, and as drunk as always. He paused to urinate against the wall of the tavern. When he had finished and turned back around, Zahra stepped out from her doorway and smiled alluringly at him.

Dumbfounded, Assis stared at her until his countenance suddenly brightened with comprehension, and a hungry grin bloomed across his face. In that moment, she knew that she had him. One thing she had learned as she had grown into a woman – men were easily captivated by a certain type of smile.

Without taking her eyes from Assis's face, Zahra walked to the entrance to the alley where her brother waited, then turned and beckoned to her prey. Assis needed no further invitation. He stumbled after her.

Zahra's eyes adjusted quickly to the gloom of the alley, and she saw Qar lurking behind a heap of refuse. She walked past him, then stopped, positioning herself in a pool of moonlight, knowing that, intoxicated as he was, the barbarian would be incapable of registering anything except the woman he now lusted after.

Assis's silhouette appeared at the entrance to the alley and Zahra felt her heart begin to pound as the Hyksos stumbled towards her, reaching out to steady himself against the wall.

When Assis passed Qar's hiding place, her brother leapt to his feet. Zahra glimpsed the glint of the knife as it flashed through the air, and she heard the thump of a blade driven to the hilt in the warm flesh of its target.

Assis screamed in pain, but he was a big man and Zahra knew that one strike would not be enough. She looked to Qar, but he had frozen at the sound of his adversary's cry. Fear had gripped him, and his hesitation was all that Assis needed to seize back the initiative. Turning, the barbarian lunged, grabbing her brother's neck in one huge hand even as he plucked the knife from his side.

Qar whimpered as Assis picked him up by his throat and slammed him back against the clay bricks of the alleyway wall. Terror flooded Zahra. A man as large as Assis could choke the life from her brother in an instant.

Without a second thought, she raced forward, snatching her own blade from the folds of her dress as she moved. Leaping on to Assis' back, she thrust her knife into his neck, then stabbed again and again in a frenzy of

fury and desperation. The barbarian's warm blood showered over her as he stumbled and fell, his huge frame crashing to the filthy flagstones.

But still he would not die.

Assis knew that the Duat awaited him, but that did not mean he had to make the journey alone. Even as he fell, he had his hand in the neck of Zahra's dress, ripping the cloth, pulling her half over his shoulder, so that on impact her forehead cracked resoundingly against the stone of the street. Her eyelids fluttered beneath a deluge of searing pain.

'Who are you?' Assis hissed, the blood spurting from the wounds she had stabbed into his neck, bubbling from his torn nose. His hands were in Zahra's hair now, jerking her head up, ready to smash her face into the flagstones.

Her awareness returning, Zahra brought her knife up and rammed it into Assis's eye socket in one swift movement. She heard his eyeball pop and felt the bone of his skull break behind the needle-sharp point, heard the breath leave his body as the blade did its work.

Only when she was sure that the barbarian was dead did Zahra allow herself to take her hands from the haft of her knife. Then she stood slowly, her breath ragged from exertion and shock. She was covered in Assis's blood, her dress ripped to the waist.

She looked for Qar, expecting him to thank her for saving his life. Instead, his face was twisted with fury. 'My brother?' she asked as she reached for him.

'I am not a coward,' he raged, twisting away from her bloodied hand. 'I was supposed to kill him. I am the one who will fulfil Father's vision.'

Turning, he raced out of the alleyway, leaving Zahra alone with the remains of their father's murderer.

• • •

A scream from the crowd shattered the silence as the raised dagger gleamed bright in the sunlight.

In the centre of the sun-drenched forum, an elegantly dressed man with a tuft of black hair on his chin sucked on a pomegranate. The man looked around with the lazy air of someone ambling purposelessly through the streets. Although he must have heard the gasps of the onlookers, he

remained oblivious to the figure that loomed behind him with the raised knife. Dressed in a flapping shroud, with a thick scarf pulled over his face to hide his identity, the knifeman slashed his blade through the air above his intended victim's head, drawing more screams from the crowd.

Taking the pomegranate away from his moist lips, the man studied it, frowning. He rubbed his throat and bent over to spit a mouthful of juice into the dust.

As he straightened up, the knifeman's dagger swept down into his ribs, and this time the screams reverberated off the whitewashed buildings surrounding the square.

The victim crashed to the ground, dead, the pomegranate rolling from his fingers and coming to a halt at the lip of the stage. Once again, silence fell over the onlookers.

As he scanned the faces of the crowd, Taita smiled. They were mesmerised.

'What is the point of this charade?' Piay asked, bemused.

'A simple test to begin the competition. To weed out those who should go no further, for their sakes more than ours.'

Taita glanced at the ten contestants who stood in a crescent, studying the scene before them. They had been at the palace for five days now, and there was no doubt in Taita's mind that at least one of them had been sent by the Shuyet. It was time to narrow the field.

'Simple, this certainly is,' Piay muttered. 'I do not understand how this will reveal much of anything.'

Taita smiled and stepped out in front of the Council of Elders.

'The first challenge has been laid at your feet,' Taita exclaimed, pointing at the fallen man. 'This wealthy merchant has been murdered. But who was it who killed him? The truth must be uncovered. The principle of Ma'at must always hold. Today we have our own Council of Investigators . . .' Taita swept his hand towards the contestants. 'They will question witnesses and sift the evidence.'

As Taita returned to his place beside Piay, the square reverberated, as the onlookers turned to one another to discuss what they had witnessed.

Taita was pleased that the crowd was enjoying the entertainment he had provided for them. While it was not his primary purpose to enlighten the citizens of Memphis, the common people, Taita knew, had only a vague

sense of how justice was administered across the land, and they would never have had the opportunity to witness it first hand. The deliberations of the scribes and priests were never made public. Only the sentences were announced, often in this very square. In this competition, however, they could see with their own eyes how Pharaoh's justice was administered.

Taita clapped his hands, and a witness stepped forward to undergo interrogation by the contestants. This man was supposed to be the physician who had examined the remains of the victim. He carried a rolled papyrus parchment, tucked under his left arm, and a jar of salve in his left hand, while in his right he swung a charm to ward off evil spirits.

One by one the contestants asked the physician their questions. Anticipating that some would mumble, Taita had arranged for a scribe to be on hand to repeat their words in a booming voice, so everyone gathered there could hear.

Piay seemed just as engaged as the other onlookers, listening intently and weighing every word spoken by the succession of witnesses: the dead man's wife, his father, a ruffian from the Guild of Thieves and a rival merchant.

When the interrogations were complete, Taita leaned over to Piay with a smile. 'Do you know who did it?'

Piay looked at him scornfully. 'It is not a mystery. The other merchant wielded the knife. He admitted the weapon was his, and there was blood found on his discarded tunic. His rival must have wanted to take over the trade route to the east and the steady supply of Syrian silk that was the foundation of his wealth.'

Just as Taita opened his mouth to reply, Piay held up a finger and continued confidently: 'But, knowing you as I do, the most obvious perpetrator is unlikely to be the real killer.'

'A valid supposition,' Taita said, his eyes twinkling. 'Let us see what the contestants will say.' He clapped his hands, and the crowd hushed. 'Now let us see who amongst our candidates can accurately discern who killed the merchant, so Pharaoh's justice can be carried out!'

Each contestant announced the name of the suspect they considered most likely to be the guilty party. Three named the rival merchant, but the remaining seven claimed the man's wife was the one who killed him.

Taita gestured to Hori, the youngest of the competitors, indicating for

him to step forward and explain his reasoning.

The youth spoke with a nervous quiver in his voice. ‘I believe the rival merchant to be the killer. He had cause, and admitted to possessing both the murder weapon and the cloak with blood on it.’

‘Thank you.’ Taita smiled at Hori, before inviting the next contestant to speak.

‘How did you reach your answer?’ Taita asked Asim, the desert wanderer.

‘Lord High Chancellor,’ Asim began, ‘there is no doubt at all that his rival wielded the dagger, hoping to slay this man so he could lay claim to great riches, as Hori has suggested.’

‘Go on,’ Taita encouraged.

‘But the rival did not kill the victim, for he had already been killed.’

Taita smiled and nodded. ‘Please, explain your reasoning.’

Asim bowed again. ‘The physician noted that the dead man’s lips had turned blue, and his mouth and throat were swollen. This tells me that he was poisoned, perhaps using the very fruit we saw him eating. And the pomegranate was given to him by his wife, so she said. With her testimony, she demonstrated to us that she had no love left for her husband. He was a cruel man who beat her. And so it is my belief that it was the wife who killed the merchant, to free herself from a life of misery.’

‘You have discerned quite correctly,’ Taita replied with a smile.

As the crowd applauded, Asim beamed. Behind him, the other contestants who had been correct in their deductions congratulated one another, and Taita was pleased to see the Memphian Sadiki and the woman Gyasi included in their number.

The three contestants who had answered incorrectly slumped their shoulders and looked at their feet.

Stepping forward, Piay raised one hand in the air and announced: ‘Rei of Lahun, Akir of Djanet and Hori of Gurob, your time in this contest has come to an end.’

‘But know that we who are gathered here celebrate you nonetheless,’ Taita added, ‘as being amongst the foremost citizens of Lower Egypt, and that Pharaoh, too, will hear your names. From amongst the multitudes who toil beneath the eyes of the gods in this great land of ours, only ten were selected to participate in this contest. Hold your heads high as you depart.’

• • •

The howling of jackals echoed from the hills to the west like a hymn of praise to the Lord of the Red Land, the dark god Seth. As Taita listened to the chilling sound, he felt the touch of cold fingers across his heart.

In his long life, Taita had experienced an array of emotions as deep and wide as the Great Green. There was the bottomless pool of grief that had consumed him after the death of his beloved Lostris, and the uninhibited joy that had lifted him on high when Rameses had finally taken the throne as Pharaoh. But Taita had never felt fear – at least, not as other men did. Fear had always been a mystery to him.

Even during the great battles against the Hyksos, when all hope seemed lost, he had felt despair over the destruction that had been visited on the land he loved so much, and over the suffering of its people. But he had never feared for his own life. Not once.

But since Taita had arrived in Memphis, he had felt as if a shadow had been cast over him, chilling him to the bone. Was this what it felt like to be afraid? Or was it Anubis beckoning to him, urging him to abandon the mortal realm once and for all?

He felt it again strongly now, after the trek across the Giza Plateau. The sun rested behind the tip of the Pyramid of Khufu, but even the scorching midday heat could not drive the cold from Taita's bones. Was it because he was approaching Imhotep's tomb? Was he meant to abandon those who relied on him, to turn over his responsibilities to Pharaoh and Egypt to another, and to give himself up to the task of preserving the great spells? But what, then, of the Shuyet?

Taita glanced back over his shoulder, to where Piay squatted amongst a cadre of the Blue Crocodile Guard at the base of the great monument.

'Why did you want to come back here?' Piay called to him.

Taita weighed his choices. It was time to tell Piay of the spectre that haunted him.

'Come,' Taita called back. 'I'll tell you.'

The howling of the jackals had become louder, and when the wind swirled it made it seem as though the animals were circling the two men, just out of sight.

Taita straightened up to his full height and walked to the spot where he had sealed the entrance to Imhotep's tomb with the *medu neter*.

When Piay arrived at his side, he said: 'You wish to go back into the tomb to continue your study of the spells? Is that why we have come here?'

'That is what I want most,' Taita replied. 'I am haunted, Piay. Every day, from the moment I awaken, until I close my eyes at night. Beneath this stone is the key to a power that men can barely begin to comprehend. You have felt it yourself, so you know something of what I mean. Down there is the power to unite and protect this great land, to summon the gods to walk amongst men. And it calls to me. Those ancient words call to me. To unravel and absorb their mysteries.'

As he gazed on the tomb's entrance, Piay could see his master trembling as if with the anticipation of a lost soul returning home after a lifetime away.

'I was recently visited in a way that I never considered possible before. I encountered my beloved Lostris in the palace garden.'

Piay glanced at him with dismay. 'The petals of the blue lotus have already cost me one person, who I will never succeed in replacing. I won't see them deprive me of you, as well.'

'The ways of the Hyksos do not appeal to me,' Taita reassured him. 'And, in truth, I now have no need of the blue lotus. The veil is falling away. The gates to the realm of the gods are opening to me. I can feel the immense power of those spells, the measureless weight of my responsibility to preserve them so they may, in time, preserve Egypt, and the peace that will come with the end of my labours.'

Taita looked up the soaring side of the pyramid, to where Ra's orb moved imperceptibly across the sky. 'There is less time than I thought, Piay,' he continued as the howling of the jackals started up again from beyond the hills. 'Even as I stand here, I am almost unable to resist the temptation to use the *medu neter* to unseal the tomb.'

'You must fight it,' Piay implored. 'I need you here, with me.'

'You must help me, Piay. You must find a way to keep me from Imhotep's tomb, to make sure that I do not slip and succumb to my desire.'

'Pharaoh needs you. Great Egypt needs you.'

'I am afraid, Piay. For the first time in my life, I am afraid. I thought I could set this task aside and return to it when Egypt had been reunited, but I

was wrong. It is happening. I am already changing . . . Becoming something else. Soon, I will not be able to resist. We are running out of time.’

• • •

From his post on the walkway atop the high walls of Memphis, the guard looked out at the plume of dust on the horizon. Its sudden appearance had stirred him from the torpor that had set in as he watched over the comings and goings at the city gate. Since the new nomarch had taken up his post, there had been little trouble. Brigands and thieves had learned to keep well away. The long, dull days were filled with the steady tramp of merchants and the braying of donkeys and mules.

The guard – a fresh recruit of just sixteen years of age – leaned on his spear and watched the plume, trying to decide if it was moving closer, and if it was something that needed his attention. He glanced uncertainly along the walkway, to where his comrades leaned up against the mud bricks, idly flapping palm fronds at the fat flies that buzzed up incessantly from the stinking piles of waste far beneath them.

Squinting into the bright light, the guard decided that the cloud was indeed drawing closer – and more, that it was swirling up from something moving at great speed.

‘Ho!’ he called, waving a hand.

The other guards turned to look at him as he pointed out across the scrub, towards the desert waste.

When they saw the dust cloud, they became instantly animated, leaning over the wall as they shouted news of its coming to the gate guards below.

As it swept closer, a figure emerged from the dust, a man on horseback, leaning forward over his white steed’s neck and riding as if all the terrors of the Duat were close upon his heels.

‘Sound the alarm!’ the captain of the gate guard called.

One of his men snatched up a battered ram’s horn and blared the rousing call.

‘The rider is alone. Is he really any threat?’ the young guard asked, wiping sweat from his eyelids.

‘It is not the rider that concerns me,’ the captain cautioned, ‘but whoever or whatever follows behind him.’

The guards clattered down the steps and forced their way through the stream of travellers making their way into the city. Levelling their spears, they stood in a crescent across the gate, waiting to welcome the new arrival.

The horse thundered closer, and as it emerged from the cloud of dust thrown into the air by its pounding hooves, the young guard saw that the rider was no expert horseman, but rather seemed to be holding on for dear life, his arms wrapped tightly around the animal's neck.

Once the beast slowed to a halt, facing the line of spear-carriers, the rider slipped off its back on to shaky legs. The guards recognised him beneath the layer of dust that caked his clothing as Hannu, advisor to the nomarch. He hawked up a mouthful of gritty phlegm and spat it onto the ground before wiping the sand from his eyes with the back of his hand.

'These monstrous beasts, I hate them! Hate them!' he growled, glancing over his shoulder at the foaming white horse.

Turning back to the guards, Hannu commanded: 'Now, let me pass. I have urgent business with the nomarch.'

• • •

The sweet scent of jasmine drifted on the breeze blowing into the palace from the gardens. In the great feasting hall, Piay was hunched over a slice of melon, juice dribbling down his chin. After a long morning of meetings, he'd seized the opportunity to fill his belly before the next delegation arrived.

From somewhere out in the gardens, a commotion rang out.

'Piay! Piay!'

It took Piay a moment to recognise that the sound was actually the voice of a man angrily shouting his name.

Gulping down the last of the melon, Piay tossed the rind aside, jumped to his feet and hurried out of the palace. He knew that voice as well as he knew his own.

At the entrance to the palace, Piay looked out along the avenue of sycamore trees and smiled at the filthy cloud of fury sweeping towards him.

'Piay! Get out here!' Hannu yelled. 'Piay!'

When he finally noticed his friend waiting for him, Hannu stopped and scrutinised Piay for a moment, as if recalling the pettiness of their parting.

‘You’re back, then,’ Piay said brusquely, fighting the urge to grin.

Hannu snorted good-naturedly. ‘Aye, well, I couldn’t leave you to fend for yourself for too long, could I?’

Piay was pleased that Hannu was back. He had always valued him, but he had not quite realised how much he depended upon him until his assistant had gone.

‘You have news, I imagine.’

‘Yes, and none of it good.’ Hannu paused. ‘Where is Taita?’

‘He’s in his chamber.’

‘Send for him and I will tell you the whole story over bread, olives and beer. Not a morsel has passed my lips for two days.’

• • •

Hannu ate like a starved hyena, relating everything that had happened to him since he departed Memphis – from his sightings of the strange groups of armed men along the river, to his arrival in Avaris – between mouthfuls of bread and intermittent bursts of belching.

When he described his experience in the suffocating chamber beneath the Temple of Baal, Piay leaned back thoughtfully. ‘So, Anubis is a man after all. A man who wears the god’s mask, like a priest. Perhaps the Shuyet is just that – a priest.’

Taita stared at Hannu inscrutably. ‘The Shuyet did not show his face?’

Hannu shook his head. ‘To everyone there, he *was* Anubis.’

‘But what use would a robber baron have for an army?’ Piay mused.

‘The Shuyet is no robber baron.’ Hannu popped an olive between his lips and rolled it around his mouth. ‘He has far greater ambition than that.’

Taita leaned back. ‘He is coming for Memphis,’ he said, thoughtfully.

Hannu nodded. ‘He plans to seize power in the Lower Kingdom, and to take the throne in Memphis, following in the footsteps of the Red Pretender.’ Hannu spat out the olive stone. ‘The Shuyet’s force is already well organised. The soldiers at the Temple of Baal and on the ship out of Avaris were well armed, well fed and well trained. They have at least one Hyksos galley, and I heard mention of more. And there seems to be no shortage of new conscripts in the Lower Kingdom, all ready to take up arms

to serve the man they regard as a god.'

'You have no idea where the Shuyet's camp is?' Piay asked.

'No. It's not in Avaris, that much I can say. Somewhere downriver, further into the delta.'

Taita rose to his feet. 'I must return to Thebes immediately. We will need an army as quickly as Pharaoh can give us one.'

'No,' Piay said.

Hannu popped another olive into his mouth, watching as Piay stood to challenge the wisdom of his master.

'The Shuyet, whoever he is, wants you. It is one of the few things we know for sure. A courier can take your message to Pharaoh.'

'Very well,' Taita replied after a pause.

'Be sure your messenger travels swiftly,' Hannu interjected, 'or we may not be here to welcome any army Pharaoh sends.'

Taita smiled down at him. 'Rest easy, Hannu. I will send the *Breath of Horus*, so there can be no doubt. The ship itself, in returning to Thebes without me, will *be* the message.'

• • •

The river flowed like a stream of quicksilver between the dark fields, while beyond it the desert wavered like beaten copper in the heat haze as the vultures soared on the air currents high above.

The land was a priceless treasure forged in the workshop of the gods, but it was the life-giving river that was truly Egypt. That was how it had always been and how it would always be, Taita thought, as he looked out from the prow of the nomarch's galley, listening to the reed beds rustle their peaceful song in the warm breeze.

As the steersman guided the craft into the deep central channel, slowing it against the current, Taita glanced back along the galley to the sailors preparing to drop the anchor stone into the river. The rest of the crew hunched over their oars on the benches, grateful for the respite from their labours.

Taita looked out towards the bank. In the shallows beside the swaying reeds, seven skiffs waited. At a glance, this seemed a strange test of the abilities of the remaining contestants: a simple race from one bank to the

other and back again. When he had heard about it, Piay had rubbed his brow with exasperation. Anyone could guide an oarsman in a boat, he had grumbled.

Taita smiled to himself. He had designed this part of the contest to be rather more challenging than Piay imagined, with the aim of teasing out the Shuyet's candidate. Hannu had suggested that the Shuyet's lair was likely far in the north, in the delta, where every family owned a skiff, and children learned to sail almost as soon as they could walk. 'Let us then see who shows such native-born skill.'

After receiving Hannu's report, it would have been easy for them to abandon the contest and turn the minds of every man, woman and child in Memphis to the coming war. Taita and Piay had debated the matter long into the night, but in the end Taita had insisted that they should continue with the competition as if nothing had changed. If they altered their plans, then not only would the Shuyet know that he had been discovered, but their chance to identify and interrogate his spy would be lost.

Taita had chosen this part of the river carefully, for here the currents were deceptively dangerous. Only the most capable of the contestants would be able to navigate the zigzag course Taita had set without losing control of their vessels.

Piay came and stood beside Taita. He was frowning. 'It irks me not to be planning our defence, while our adversary prepares his attack.'

'Our plans are unfolding apace,' Taita replied evenly, 'and they will not progress any faster if we abandon the contest. Besides, if you were not present, questions would be asked.' He smiled as he looked across at the seven skiffs. 'I think we are ready to begin.'

The contestants had taken their places in the bows, ahead of their assigned oarsmen, their brows furrowed in readiness.

Turning back to his galley, Taita raised a hand and the two trumpeters who stood atop the stern tower blasted out a fanfare.

'Let the second stage of the contest begin!' Taita announced.

As the last word was whisked away by the breeze, the seven skiffs were heaved away as one, with each of the contestants barking orders at their oarsmen.

Taita watched as the distance from the bank increased, the contestants fighting the currents to stay on course. Already four were beginning to pull

away, including the three candidates Taita had kept his eye upon since the first day – Asim, Gyasi and Sadiki. The fourth was a Kushite called Shubba. He stared at the water with the intensity of a fisherman with his spear raised high for the kill, occasionally calling back to advise slight adjustments to his oarsman's strokes, so that they could use the current to their advantage.

The skiffs were swept slowly across the river until, nearing the far bank, they turned in a broad arc to begin the return journey. Taita shielded his eyes from the sun's glare to study their progress. They would soon be passing through the area of greatest turbulence.

'The ones bringing up the rear are growing increasingly desperate,' Piay said.

'You cannot force the river to do your bidding,' Taita replied.

In the churning water, one of the skiffs lost its line and swirled around, before being swept downstream. The contestant, a man named Kyro, spat curses at his oarsman for failing to heed his instructions. As Piay watched, his eyes narrowed. 'Those who blame others for failure will never make good leaders.'

Taita nodded, and together they watched as Kyro switched positions with the oarsman, then threw himself into action, battling against the pull of the current to get the skiff back on course. He was a strong man, and his rage seemed only to increase his strength. Slowly, he began to catch the skiffs ahead of him.

'That Gyasi is quite impressive,' Piay said, pointing at the woman, whose skiff was in the lead.

'She has no shortage of confidence in her abilities, that much has been evident,' Taita said pointedly, 'but she is showing her true worth here.'

Behind Gyasi came Asim, his pale face etched in concentration. Taita was impressed. 'Asim could still pull ahead . . .' he mused as he leaned over the side, watching intently.

'Wait . . . Look!' Piay said, and Taita followed his gaze. Kyro was thrashing the water furiously in his increasingly desperate attempt to catch up. He had done valiantly, the prow of his skiff nosing the sterns of the two rearmost contestants – but he wanted more.

'Kyro is being reckless,' Piay warned.

The words had barely escaped Piay's lips before Kyro's skiff crunched into one of the two vessels, and then veered back to smash the other. Both

skiffs were upended and the four men aboard were thrown into the swirling river.

Taita narrowed his eyes. Though it was hard to be sure at that distance, Kyro seemed to be grinning.

‘He struck those vessels on purpose,’ Piay said with mounting anger.

‘A man without honour is a liability to his friends and a boon to his enemies,’ Taita replied.

The four men clawed at the hulls of their overturned skiffs, gasping and flailing as they desperately tried to save themselves, but before they could right their boats, a tremendous commotion erupted amid the swaying papyrus as honking geese and squawking herons thrashed up into the sky.

Taita watched as the river boiled and frothed, and his lips pursed as an enormous hippopotamus surged from the murky water with a furious roar, opening wide its huge jaws.

The hippopotamus was a bull in its prime, a full two skiffs in length, its leathery hide laced with pink scars. The musky reek of the great creature washed across the galley, redolent of rotting food and fresh dung.

The beast must have been cooling itself deep underwater, lulled by the soothing currents. Now, it was outraged. It was the familiar of Hapi, goddess of the river, and any who disturbed it ran the risk of her wrath. When Taita had chosen this part of the river, he had hoped that such a creature might appear, and that through it, Hapi herself might provide her own, even sterner test for the contestants.

The hippopotamus blasted a cloud of steamy vapour from its nostrils and roared again. In the great maw of its jaws, Taita saw the huge ivory teeth that would crush bones as if snapping twigs.

Cries of dread and panic twisted the faces of the men in the water. The two oarsmen turned desperately and tried to swim away. But the river bull lunged after them, the grey water pluming as the beast churned through it.

Piay bellowed an oath. Spinning on his heel, he roared to the gaping sailors: ‘Raise the anchor! Take us in close and ready your spears!’

As one of the oarsmen disappeared from view, pulled under by the hippo, Taita saw that the other competitors had turned their skiffs around and were also moving in to help. It was a brave gesture that warmed his heart. They had no weapons, and their lightweight vessels could easily be overturned, and yet, undeterred, they came to the aid of their fellows. These

were the sort of Egyptians that the unified kingdom would need.

Pulling her dress over her head in one swift motion, revealing for a moment a lean, well-muscled form, Gyasi dived from the prow of her skiff and swam powerfully through the seething water. Taita could not help but marvel at her courage, and when he glanced over at Piay, he saw something else on the nomarch's face – he was captivated.

Gyasi grabbed the tunic of the remaining oarsman and, kicking strongly, hauled him away to safety. That left the greybeard Meryamen and Minmose, a citizen of Memphis, a baker by trade. Both men were still clinging to the hulls of their skiffs, but as the hippopotamus surged back towards them, Minmose threw up his arms in capitulation, and slipped into the river. It was clear that he didn't know how to swim, but he had made his choice, trusting that the gods would see fit to save him. Meryamen, meanwhile, was either too terrified to move or he had simply decided that his end was upon him. The beast's mighty jaws snapped shut, and Meryamen and his skiff vanished into the thick red cloud of churning water.

'We are close enough,' Taita said. 'Have your men put their spears to use.'

Piay offered his own prayer of forgiveness to Hapi, then roared to the men who had lined the railing of the galley: 'Now! Take it down!'

The sailors hurled their spears at the hippopotamus, but the beast was still just out of range. It thundered with fury, and Taita thought for a moment that it might attempt to charge the ship, but as the nomarch's galley drew ever closer, it submerged instead, disappearing back into the depths.

'Keep your eyes on the water,' Piay ordered. 'He will surface again.'

Looking upriver, Taita caught sight of Minmose, being dragged out into deeper water by the current. The man cried out – once, and then a second time – but then his head disappeared beneath the water.

Suddenly, the bull burst from the river not thirty paces from the bow of the nomarch's galley. He came out gleaming in the sunshine, monstrous and awful.

'Now!' shouted Piay.

This time the spears found their target, one after the other. The bull bellowed as they buried themselves in his broad back. He tried in vain to dive again, but the foaming blood that streaked across his glistening back told Taita that his lungs had been pierced – death was imminent.

The bull reared, swinging his head from side to side, then stiffened, crashing back into the river with all four legs extended rigidly.

A cheer went up aboard the nomarch's galley as the sailors saw that the beast was dead.

'I cannot help but grieve for the men who met their deaths in the jaws of the beast,' Piay muttered as the corpse of the great bull began to slip beneath the surface of the water. 'Meryamen was amongst the most respected participants in the competition.'

'A challenge of this magnitude should not be without mortal risk,' Taita replied, watching the remaining competitors leap from their skiffs on to the muddy bank. 'Death is a part of life. They have simply gone on the journey that each of us must one day take, and passed through the gate to the afterlife ahead of us.'

• • •

Descending the gangplank to the muddy shore, Taita stood in front of the exhausted competitors and allowed his eyes to fall on them one by one. When he came to Kyro, the man looked at his feet, in the hope he would escape judgment for what he had done. Taita sensed neither shame nor remorse.

Stepping in front of the man, Taita remained there until Kyro raised his eyes. 'Your race is run, Kyro,' he said in a low voice. 'You are dismissed.'

'It was not my fault,' Kyro protested. 'The race moved too close to the reed banks. How could I know –'

'Hold your tongue,' Piay commanded from Taita's side. 'The Lord High Chancellor has given you his verdict, and in so doing, he has shown you more mercy than I would have done. More than you deserve. Leave Memphis before Ra's orb completes its journey today, and do not ever let me see your face in the city again.'

Mortified, Kyro gave a quick bow. 'Yes, my lord,' he said, turning away to hurry up the bank, the deep mud sucking at his feet as he went. The four remaining competitors did not bother to dignify his departure with as much as a glance.

Taita's gaze shifted to Gyasi, who was hugging her arms around her sodden dress, which clung tightly to her body. Drenched as she was, her

eyes remained bright, and she was rendered more captivating than ever as glistening droplets of water fell from her limbs.

‘You demonstrated great valour today,’ Taita said.

‘I did what anyone would have done,’ Gyasi replied.

Taita shook his head. ‘You showed courage, when others might have been consumed by the instinct to save themselves. Whether you prove the ultimate victor in this competition or not, you have already distinguished yourself.’

Gyasi lowered her eyes and flushed.

The Kushite, Shubba, then stepped forward. ‘Forgive me, my lords, but I, too, must take my leave of the competition,’ he announced.

‘Why, Shubba?’ Piay asked. ‘You have done no wrong.’

‘I have done my best,’ Shubba replied, ‘but I have reached the limits of my courage. I wish only the best for my fellow competitors. May the gods choose the best amongst them.’ He bowed deeply to Gyasi, Asim and Sadiki.

‘Very well,’ Taita said. ‘A man who knows his own limits possesses both wisdom and humility. Go, with my blessing, Shubba. I wish you well.’

Shubba bowed again, and Piay escorted the Kushite up the gangplank to the galley, leaving Taita with the remaining competitors.

‘Now that only three remain, the contest will move into its final stage. The next challenge will test you far beyond anything you have experienced to this point, so I would suggest you rest and prepare yourselves. You will suffer no judgement should you choose to withdraw gracefully, as Shubba has done.’

‘What is the next challenge?’ Sadiki, the blond-haired man from Memphis, asked.

‘I cannot tell you at this moment,’ Taita replied. ‘It would create an unfair advantage. But I think you should prepare as if you are going to war.’

‘War?’ Asim asked.

‘Yes,’ Taita said. ‘War.’

• • •

s they approached Peru-nefer, the oarsmen straining against the current, Piay and Taita saw a commotion on the quay – merchants and their

Apprentices, sailors and dock workers, all of them jabbering and pointing.

Taita saw that his beloved *Breath of Horus* was drifting listlessly in the Nile current, turning slowly broadside as it was swept on past the port. The majestic sail flapped in the swirling wind, and there was neither steersman nor captain to guide the ship to its destination – no one was visible on deck.

Taita felt icy fingers clutch his heart.

‘Where are your men?’ Piay asked, alarmed.

‘Bring us alongside.’ Taita ordered, his voice grim. ‘Then we shall see what malevolent work has been done here.’

Piay turned to his captain. ‘Can we catch her as she passes?’

‘Aye, we can . . . But better to turn and run with her and the current. Then we can bring her in gently.’

‘As soon as we are alongside, take some of your men and board her, Captain,’ Taita said. ‘When I come aboard, we will search every inch.’

The captain bowed and gave an order to his second in command.

Bronze grappling hooks were brought from the hold as the nomarch’s galley came about. Still there was no movement on the deck of the *Breath of Horus*.

As the captain brought them as close as he dared, five sailors took up the grappling hooks, launching them towards the galley. The ropes snapped tight as soon as the barbs caught in the cedar wood, and the sailors began, foot by foot, to draw the two vessels together. When they were only a few yards apart, the men tied the lines off and pulled themselves across the void.

Shielding his eyes, Taita tried to read the men’s faces as they climbed onto the deck, but the glare of the sun blanked out their features. A few minutes later a gangplank crashed down between the two vessels, so Piay and Taita could cross to the *Breath of Horus*.

Only then did Taita breathe in the meaty odour of slaughter – the stench overwhelming in the searing heat of the day.

When Taita reached the deck, the sailors on board solemnly moved aside to allow him a clear view. His breath caught in his throat.

The rich cedar-wood deck of his galley had been stained red with blood. The benches of the oarsmen, too. The gore was fresh, for here and there thick puddles still gleamed.

‘By the crown of Thoth,’ Taita muttered. ‘What madness is this?’

He pulled out his kerchief and pressed it tightly to his nose.

‘What happened here?’ Piay demanded from behind him. ‘Where is your crew?’

As he looked around in horror, Taita saw that only the captain remained on deck, slumped against the foot of the mast. His throat had been slashed and hung open, and his once-white robe was caked with dried blood.

Taita stepped down on to the deck and felt the soles of his sandals stick to the bloody boards as he walked.

‘Here!’ one of the sailors called urgently, while his mate pointed into the dark recesses of the hold.

As Taita leaned over to look, a blast of foul air rushed up and he jerked back. Clamping his mouth shut, he looked over the edge again, and as his eyes adjusted, he made out the bodies of his slaughtered crew, piled on top of one another, contorted and bloody.

Taita strode over to the dead man at the base of the mast and squatted before him. ‘Nehesy,’ he said, cupping the man’s cheek in his palm. ‘You were ever loyal to me.’

‘The Shuyet did this.’ Piay crouched down next to Taita. ‘He slit the captain’s throat and then tied him to the mast. He wants to send us a message.’

‘Yes,’ Taita said as he reached down, prising the captain’s fingers open to reveal the basalt senet stone clutched in the dead man’s palm. ‘He wants us to understand that there is no escaping him. That no army will come to save us.’

‘We will send another messenger. We need Pharaoh’s army.’

‘That is the point of this spectacle. No emissary we send, by any route, will survive the journey. The Shuyet’s spies will see to that.’ Taita shook his head. ‘No, we will not have Pharaoh’s army to help us in this fight, nor do we have the time to appeal to our friends across the Great Green. We are on our own!’

‘The Shuyet has designed this spectacle to strike fear into the heart of Memphis. News of it will spread quickly. He knows that if we are unable to get word to Thebes, then we will have to raise an army from the city – and this will make it much more difficult.’

Taita nodded in agreement.

‘You think he meant to kill you?’ Piay asked.

‘Not kill. Capture.’

Piay turned grimly back to the hold. ‘And when he discovered that you were not aboard, he slaughtered them.’

‘This message is both for me and about me, and he wants it felt in the streets of the city, as much as in your palace.’

‘What is it that he wants known?’

‘That even I cannot save Memphis from him.’

Piay absorbed Taita’s interpretation gravely. Looking up, his eyes alighted on the white walls of the ancient capital of Lower Egypt. ‘When I first set eyes upon this city,’ he began, ‘it was with Myssa at my side, and those walls were scorched and broken. Now I stand here, looking upon the same walls as they stand strong once more. I swear to you that while Myssa rests inside, I will not let them fall again. I will not let her death be for nothing.’

Piay turned to face Taita. ‘We will build an army from what the city has to offer us, and we’ll equip the galleys we have here in the harbour for war. Memphis will be ready.’

‘This is the task the gods have given us,’ Taita agreed. ‘Let us grasp it with both hands.’

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Part 2

House of Water

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Bek, the new captain of the *Breath of Horus*, was a man of some thirty floods. He had been born in Memphis and knew the river, its currents and sandbars, from the city all the way to the Great Green. As Taita looked up at him standing on the poop-deck, he was reminded of another captain from another time: a man who had loved the formidable little vessel they stood upon almost as much as he did.

The galley had been scrubbed of blood and gore, refurbished and re-crewed. A sharp bronze ramming horn now protruded from her bows, just above the water. The *Breath of Horus* had been built for attack, and Bek was intent on getting every last turn of speed from her.

‘I have promoted Hannu to general,’ Piay said, appearing beside Taita. ‘I had no choice. He kept complaining loudly to anyone who would listen that I was making him do all the work without the perks of the rank.’

Taita laughed. ‘And what did he say to that?’

‘He received the news in his usual manner, grunting and stomping off in a huff. But I could see the corners of his mouth curling up as he turned away – he couldn’t hide his satisfaction entirely.’

Taita heard the note of affection in Piay’s voice – his spirits had brightened considerably since Hannu’s return, despite the disturbing news that his friend had carried with him.

When the *Breath of Horus* finally sailed back into the port of Perunefer, Hannu was standing on the edge of the dock, waiting for them impatiently.

‘What is it, General?’ Piay asked with a grin.

‘You’ll see when we get there,’ Hannu retorted, spinning on his heel and gesturing for Piay and Taita to follow.

Taita trailed Piay and Hannu as they marched away from the wharf and between the warehouses, where the air hummed with activity. The steady beat of hammers could be heard over the rolling rhythm of saws and the grinding of bow drills, cutting into the flesh of new wood. Fires crackled as they devoured the offcuts.

As they came around the corner of the last warehouse, Taita, Piay and Hannu paused to look out across the bustling shipyard. Apprentices hurried back and forth, carrying tools and messages, and foremen strode alongside the deep trenches that harboured a line of seven galleys, shouting their orders to the men who were patching the massive hulls.

‘Another galley,’ Piay marvelled, looking out to where a battered Hyksos merchantman rode at anchor. ‘You have done good work.’

‘Left behind when the Hyksos fled,’ Hannu replied proudly, folding his arms as he surveyed the yard. ‘She has some fire damage, but we’ll make her watertight, just like the others, and ready her for battle.’

Taita studied the line of galleys, held in place by wedges and beams that would be knocked away when the time came to slide the vessels into the Nile. They were a disparate collection. Four were Hyksos war galleys, with their high towers and prows adorned with ornately carved figureheads in the shape of rearing horses. Two others were Egyptian warships – damaged in skirmishes around Memphis as Pharaoh’s forces had pursued the barbarians north. At the far end, Taita recognised the low, long outline of a troop carrier, one of those that had brought the Spartan warriors across the Great Green, to join the battle against the Hyksos at Thebes.

‘Good work indeed, Hannu,’ Taita said, impressed.

‘And on that matter, follow me,’ Hannu replied. He did not acknowledge the compliment, but Taita knew that he had heard him.

Hannu led the way back along the dusty road from the port to the Gate of a Thousand Stars. In a sun-baked square just inside the city walls a banner fluttered: a blue crocodile set against a white background, its jaws wide and its coxcomb tail erect – the emblem of the Blue Crocodile Guard.

‘I brought it from the garrison, where it had been stored away,’ Hannu muttered, waving his hand towards the flag. ‘To instil courage in the hearts of the new recruits as they train.’

Piay nodded approvingly.

‘We cannot expect much in so short a time,’ Hannu continued. ‘But we will at least have men who can fight, who know how to use a sword and shield.’

Taita turned his attention to the new recruits. Many of them were still receiving basic training at the hands of the drill masters – all of them platoon commanders of the Blue Crocodiles. The square rang with the

sound of wood striking wood as men faced off against each other with crudely carved wasters, the drill masters moving between them, stopping from time to time to alter a stance, or demonstrate a grip or a different way of striking at an opponent. Further on, beyond the men practising with their wooden blades, a line of archers loosed arrows at straw targets. And on the far side of the square, another group practised forming a shield wall.

‘How many men have been added?’ Piay asked. ‘Since the proclamation.’

Hannu grunted. ‘It started with a trickle. Ten, twenty . . . men from all walks of life. Merchants, shopkeepers, field workers, boatmen. We have fed them, and trained them. Now look at them. They’ve become a force.’

‘How many?’ Piay repeated.

‘Around six hundred. We have maybe two thousand men in total.’

Taita glanced at Piay; he was still scanning the training grounds, but the concern on his face was clear.

‘It isn’t an army, but it’s not nothing, either,’ Hannu asserted, as if reading their thoughts.

Piay nodded, but Taita knew what he was thinking. Two thousand fighting men was an admirable number to have assembled in such a short time, but how would it compare to the strength of the Shuyet’s army?

‘Nomarch!’

The call reverberated from the city wall. Taita turned and saw a man racing from the shadows. His kilt was stained and his body was smeared with filth.

‘One of my scouts,’ Piay explained.

‘My lord Nomarch,’ the scout began, dropping to one knee in front of Piay. ‘The Shuyet has massed his fleet at Avaris and is preparing to sail upriver.’

‘How many?’

‘Ten thousand men, my lord,’ the scout said, drawing in a deep, trembling breath – it was clear that he had run all the way from Peru-nefer. ‘If not more.’

The nomarch glanced at Taita and Hannu, clearly staggered by the number.

‘You have my gratitude,’ he said to the scout. ‘Go. Rest, and eat. There will be more to do when you have recovered your strength.’

As the scout bowed his head, Piay turned to Taita and Hannu. ‘We are badly outnumbered.’

Hannu kicked a stone across the square. ‘Damn him. Two more weeks and we would have been ready. Just two more weeks . . .’

‘The Shuyet comes,’ Taita replied. ‘We must rise to meet the challenge, whether we are ready or not.’

• • •

At the palace, the Memphis War Council had been urgently assembled. It comprised the Council of Elders, the commanders of the Memphis Guard and senior officers of the Blue Crocodile Guard.

As Piay walked in with Hannu behind him, he sensed the tension in the air. Ankhu was seated in his usual place to the right of the nomarch’s throne, the eldest present and the spokesman of those loyal to the nomarch.

‘Nomarch,’ he said in his creaking voice, ‘perhaps you can help us with our deliberations.’

‘We have little time for discussion,’ Piay sighed as he sat.

‘Only foolish men rush into battle without contemplation.’

Piay turned towards the man who had spoken. Bennu was one of those who had helped to govern Memphis long before Piay had arrived in the city. He was as thin as a reed and contemptuous of the new nomarch’s efforts to restore the city to its former glory. In his eyes, Piay was a pretender, an upstart from Thebes who had been appointed only because he was close to the Lord High Chancellor.

‘Speak your mind, then,’ Piay replied, trying to keep the irritation from his voice.

‘This Shuyet . . .’ Bennu croaked. ‘We have no idea of the size of his army –’

‘Ten thousand strong, at least. All sailing upriver as we speak, bound for Memphis.’

Bennu’s face lost its colour. ‘And you believe that we can somehow prevail against such a host?’

‘We do!’ Taita strode into the hall, with Asim, Gyasi and Sadiki trailing behind him.

‘What is he doing here?’ Bennu asked Piay furiously.

‘He is second only to Pharaoh himself,’ Piay replied, struggling to suppress a grin. ‘He can go where he pleases.’

Bennu turned his beady eyes on Taita as the Lord High Chancellor stepped up to the table. ‘And these . . . strangers? Are we to discuss our strategies in front of them?’

‘Our strategy is hardly a secret,’ Taita replied calmly. ‘We must survive. If one of these three is spying for the enemy, it will hardly affect our chances now. There is little we might conceive of in this meeting hall that is likely to surprise the Shuyet.’

‘General Kamose,’ Piay commanded, gesturing to a large, muscular man, dressed in a thick leather cuirass. ‘Please take us through the battle plan as it stands.’

The general cleared his throat and unfurled a map across the table. ‘We have stationed advance scouts along the river, here, and here, to keep watch on the Shuyet’s progress.’

‘And where do you plan to put the bulk of your force?’ Taita asked.

‘That is the reason for our debate in the first place,’ Bennu interjected brusquely.

Taita raised an eyebrow at Piay.

‘The esteemed Bennu here believes that we should keep our forces back, behind the city walls,’ Ankhu said.

‘And you?’ Taita asked.

‘I think we should meet him outside the city, and thus spare our citizens from the misery of another siege.’

‘But we cannot stand against ten thousand men,’ Bennu countered. ‘Even if the Shuyet had half this number, our men are raw recruits. They will run from the field as soon as they see the battle turn against us. And the battle *will* turn against us . . .’

‘Maybe so,’ replied Taita thoughtfully. ‘But we all know that the mighty walls of Memphis did not save the city from the Hyksos. Nor did they save the barbarians, when their turn came. We would have to be either ignorant or foolish to hope they will save us from the Shuyet. Ankhu is right – we cannot remain here, for that is undoubtedly what the Shuyet wants. We are outnumbered and are forced to take the field before we are ready, so let us at least decide where we will fight.’

As Piay listened to his teacher, he was persuaded by his argument. He stood and addressed the War Council. ‘Lord Taita is right. We must meet the Shuyet’s forces in the field, and as close to Avaris as we dare.’ He turned to General Kamose again. ‘Do you have a strategy that does not involve a siege of the city?’

‘We do, my lord,’ Kamose replied. ‘Our scouts tell us that our enemy has only enough galleys to transport a fraction of his force. So, his army will have to make its way to Memphis on foot, with the galleys matching their pace.’ He pointed to a spot on the map halfway between Avaris and Memphis. ‘This is a day’s sail north from Memphis, but four days’ forced march south of Avaris. If we transport half of our force by river, to this point, the boats can then return to Memphis for our remaining men. We can ready ourselves for the enemy here.’

‘And if we fail in the field?’ Bennu asked.

‘We can fight a rearguard action,’ the general said. ‘Every step our enemy’s men take towards Memphis is a step into our territory, where we know the terrain better than he ever will. By the time he nears Memphis, his army will be depleted. I cannot see them overcoming the might of the city walls.’

‘A good plan,’ Taita commended Kamose. ‘Do you agree, Nomarch?’

‘I do,’ Piay confirmed. ‘With a strategy like that, we may just win.’

‘Stranger things have happened,’ Hannu agreed. ‘And in your company, I’ve seen them with my own eyes.’

Piay chuckled. ‘It is decided, then. General Kamose, take the Blue Crocodiles and sail north. The Shuyet will know we’re coming, but as the Lord High Chancellor has already told us, that is unavoidable. As soon as the galleys return, I will follow with Lord Taita, General Hannu and the Memphis Guard.’

With that, Piay stood, and began walking towards the exit.

‘Where are you going, Nomarch?’ Bennu called after him. ‘There is still much to discuss!’

‘Then I will leave you to it,’ Piay replied. ‘I must speak to the people of Memphis.’

• • •

The final drumbeat rolled out across the forum and the trumpet players lowered their instruments. Total silence fell.

Piay stepped onto the speaker's block and looked at the mass of men, women and children who had gathered in answer to his summons. As he studied their upturned faces, he saw the trust the citizens of Memphis had placed in him.

'The gods look down upon us today, and they are pleased by what they see,' Piay began, his voice carrying easily across the square. 'They see a people who have not been broken by the miseries they have endured. A people who have risen from the ashes in defiance. There were many who thought Memphis could never achieve its former glory.' He flung his arms wide 'But look at us now!'

The crowd roared its approval for their nomarch.

'We who live in Memphis know, better than most, that no state is permanent. That a season of plenty is quickly forgotten, if it's followed by famine. That prosperity is earned. That peace is won. We know that what is built can be destroyed. That what is given can be taken away again . . . if we are not vigilant, if we are not strong, if we are not ready to fight for the gifts the gods have given us.'

Piay saw many heads nodding in the crowd. His mouth was dry and his heart was pounding in his chest. He took another deep breath to steady himself.

'The rumours that have swept through the city since the return of the *Breath of Horus* are true,' Piay continued. 'We now face an enemy who wishes to rip all of this away from us, as the Hyksos once did. He dresses in the form of Anubis, masquerading as the god himself. But this man is no god. He is no pharaoh, either, for in his heart there is no love for the people he means to rule. He is a brutal pretender, who hopes to enslave us all with his chains of terror. But we will *not* let him.'

An angry rumble swelled from one corner of the square and swept like a dust storm across the crowd. Fists shook in the air, and faces burned with defiance.

'As I speak, our army is preparing to leave the city, to intercept the forces marching south from Avaris. When I leave you here, I will set sail to meet the army downriver, and together we will destroy this pretender before he ever sets eyes on the white walls of Memphis.' Piay's voice soared as he

thrust a clenched fist into the air. ‘May the gods give us strength as we fight for liberty, and for our future! For Pharaoh! For *Memphis*!’

As he bellowed the name of the city he governed, the roar of the crowd echoed off the walls of the buildings around the square, so that the very ground they stood on seemed to shake.

‘Nomarch! Nomarch! Nomarch!’

Taita beamed with pride as Piay leapt down from the speaker’s block. Even Hannu was silent for once. As Piay nodded to each of them in turn, he wondered whether his father could hear the booming roar of the crowd from his cell.

‘A rousing speech,’ Hannu admitted.

‘I meant every word. But now comes the real work. May Khonsu smile upon me once again, so that when the task is accomplished, I may have the opportunity to stand and address the people once more.’

Taita laid a hand on Piay’s shoulder. ‘I have no doubt that Khonsu will heed your prayers.’

‘Let’s hope he does,’ Hannu grunted. ‘Because we are all that stands between the Shuyet’s army and Memphis.’

• • •

The line of heavily laden carts bounced slowly along the dusty road from Memphis to Peru-nefer, clouds of fat black flies swirling above the heads of the donkeys that hauled them. Beside the carts, driving the animals on with switches, ambled slaves from the palace – those who could be spared from their duties.

Piay felt his anxiety mounting as he watched the caravan approaching the port. If only they could move quicker! The Blue Crocodiles had already sailed north with General Kamose, and he was eager to join them. But he could not do so until the galleys returned and all the supplies were loaded. Only the *Breath of Horus* had remained in port – replaced in the convoy by two small merchantmen requisitioned by order of the nomarch. Taita would not again be parted from his precious craft – not while the threat of the Shuyet still hung over the delta.

Turning, Piay saw Hannu barging his way through the crowd on the wharf. He was gnawing on a flatbread, ripping off huge chunks and gulping

them down as he walked.

‘All is well?’ Piay asked.

‘As well as can be expected under the circumstances.’

Over Hannu’s shoulder, Piay glimpsed Taita striding towards them with the three remaining competitors – Asim, Gyasi and Sadiki – in tow.

When they reached Piay and Hannu, Taita swept out a hand to his three companions. ‘Our friends here will be joining us on the *Breath of Horus*,’ he said.

Piay frowned. ‘Is this wise? They are unprepared for battle.’

‘It is their next and most difficult test,’ Taita replied. ‘And with any luck, the gods will smile on their participation, and reward us for it.’

Sadiki’s mouth fell open at this revelation. ‘When you said that the next test would be war, I assumed that we would assist with strategy. But you mean for us to fight?’

Taita nodded.

‘What use can we possibly be amongst your soldiers?’ Asim asked.

‘Sharp wits are more useful to me than sharp blades,’ Taita replied.

Gyasi straightened and brushed the hair from her eyes. ‘The Lord High Chancellor is right. If we have not the courage to stand in battle, then how can we ever expect to serve Pharaoh?’

She looked to Taita for approval.

‘Well said, Gyasi,’ Taita said. He turned to Piay. ‘If these three truly are the best that the Lower Kingdom has to offer,’ he continued, ‘then it will be an advantage to have them with us in the heat of battle.’

Hannu wagged a finger at the three competitors. ‘That’s as may be, but if any of you get in my way, I will personally toss you over the side as a feast for the river crocodiles.’

Sadiki recoiled at Hannu’s ferocious manner, but Asim just chuckled.

Gyasi bowed deeply before the Lord High Chancellor. ‘It will be an honour to stand at your side.’

‘Come, then,’ Taita said to the three contestants. ‘Let us leave the nomarch and his assistant to their tasks and take our place on the *Breath of Horus*. I would like to hear your assessments of our strategy.’

Piay and Hannu watched them go. ‘Talk!’ Hannu snorted.

‘At least it will keep them out of our way,’ Piay replied, turning back to observe the line of carts, the first of which had now finally reached the

wharf.

Dock workers hustled over to empty the wagons, wrapping their arms around the jars and bales, forming lines so that the supplies could be passed from one man to the next, into the waiting warehouses. Scribes waited with papyrus parchment and ink to record the supplies as they were delivered.

There were carts filled with green-shooted onions, and others laden with jars of beer. A few carried the balms and oils that the physicians would use to treat the wounded, and one bore a cache of small gods: miniature idols that the sailors could pray to for deliverance at dawn each day.

Newly trained members of the Memphis Guard were being drawn up into ranks on the wharf, their faces determined as they summoned their courage for what was to come. These were the most promising fighters from amongst the men that Hannu had recruited.

Piay felt his chest tighten as he surveyed the proceedings. In his younger days, his arrogance had often deceived him into thinking he was capable of anything, and he had indeed proven victorious in challenges that would have undone lesser men, but as he looked out over the heads of his soldiers, Piay wondered how many of their young lives it would cost to keep the city safe.

‘They will need the help of the gods to come out of this in one piece,’ Hannu said. ‘The Shuyet has ten thousand men – and some of them experienced fighters.’

‘Our soldiers have an advantage they do not.’

Hannu raised an eyebrow.

Piay smiled. ‘We have Taita. As formidable as the Shuyet is, I don’t believe there is anyone alive who can outmanoeuvre his great mind.’

‘Let us hope you are right.’ Hannu swallowed the last of his bread and fixed one glaring eye on Piay. ‘Because I’m just a grubby old soldier with a limp and a bad temper, but now, suddenly, I find myself a general, commanding an army in a war that we are not prepared to fight.’

• • •

The workshops of Memphis were alive with activity as the sun sank into the west, the smiths bending their backs to meet the nomarch’s orders. The furnaces glowed bright and the men sweated,

naked in the heat and acrid smoke. Every scrap of bronze in the city had been collected by an army of apprentices, to be melted and reforged into fresh, gleaming blades and spear tips. The fletchers had been tasked with redoubling their efforts, producing quiver after quiver of newly finned shafts, while the slaves in the palace kitchens worked through the night, withdrawing shovel after shovel of ships' biscuits from the ovens.

In the Hall of Audiences, Piay paced up and down. This was the most dangerous moment, he knew. They had split their men – the Blue Crocodiles and the veteran soldiers from the Memphis Guard had gone ahead, as an advance party, under the command of General Kamose. The raw recruits and the rest of the Memphis Guard awaited the return of Hannu's hastily assembled navy. If the Shuyet had another force, close to Memphis, then he could take the city now – eight hundred men who had never held a sword in battle were all that stood between him and his prize. It was impossible, Piay told himself. The Shuyet could not have more men, could not have marched them south without their knowledge, but still the images of the city on fire, the temples ransacked and the vault stripped bare flickered in front of his eyes.

And what of Kamose? What if the scouts had been wrong? What if an advance force had already been sailing south with a fair wind behind them, not waiting for the Shuyet's army? Then the Blue Crocodiles and the guardsmen they had taken with them would be engulfed, overrun. Would the fleet be returned to Memphis as the *Breath of Horus* had been – the sailors slaughtered and tossed in the holds?

'Any news of Kamose?' Hannu's voice rang out across the hall.

'Nothing. The scouts have not returned.'

'I've heard that when Pharaoh sent the great general Tanus north to meet the Hyksos invaders, he had four hundred vessels and sixty thousand men at his command.'

'You may be a general now, but you are not Tanus,' Piay said, looking askance at his friend.

'I'm just saying that a few more boats with a few more men might make a difference.'

Piay thought of his adventures with Hannu: of their journey south, beyond the land of Myssa's birth; of Sakir the Red Hawk and Hanbaal the slaver; of Jabilo and the Abantu. He thought of Akkan the Child Killer, and

the Cobra. Then he looked at Hannu. They should not be here, waiting for news in a dusty room in a palace – they should be out in the delta, hunting for the Shuyet, running behind his lines, looking for the man who claimed to be the vessel of Anubis.

'At this moment,' Piay said, 'I wish it were just the two of us, old friend. There was a time when I would have believed that you and I, alone, could turn the Shuyet's men back to Avaris.'

'Aye,' Hannu replied with a laugh. 'Once, perhaps, you would have tried, and I would have had no choice but to follow . . . I thank the gods that those days are behind us.'

• • •

Piay passed between the pylons of the inner court of the temple and down the long colonnaded atrium. In front of him, lit by guttering torches, stood the giant acacia-wood doors, on which were carved an image of Ptah, Sekhmet and Nefertem traversing the sky on a solar barque. Slipping through the concealed door beneath the image of Ptah, Piay entered the gloom of the chapel beyond. It was here that the grand master of the Guild of Embalmers would have performed his work in the days before the Hyksos had conquered the city. Now, the massive table, on which for centuries the nobles and priests of Memphis would have lain for mummification, was broken in two – scarred by fire and chisel and pick.

Piay ran his hand over the edge of the table as he walked to the back of the chapel. It had been sculpted from a single block of diorite, three paces long and two wide. Into the dark, mottled surface of the stone had been chiselled the grooves which would drain the blood and bodily fluids released by the scalpels and other instruments of the embalmers.

It had been an exceptional piece of craftsmanship, but now it was just one more broken object.

'So, you are finally here?' The tall man was dressed in crimson, the cloth wrapped around him shot through with threads of gold. His arms hung loosely at his sides, the metal of the bracelets that clustered around his fine-boned wrists winking in the light that came from a small fire on the floor in front of him.

'Where is she?'

‘She is not here, Piay of Thebes.’ The man sank into an easy squat and looked up at Piay, the scarification marks across his face jumping into ragged peaks and then falling away again as the fire flared and spat. ‘It has been many days.’

‘What have you done?’

‘Everything necessary. I have done what she would have wanted. I have done what you asked of me.’

Piay’s hand had been on the haft of his dagger even before he entered the room, but now the blade was in his hand. In two paces, he had pulled the man to his feet and pushed him up against the wall, the razor-sharp edge against his throat.

‘Where is she, Shabaka?’

‘I have taken her home.’

‘That was not for you to do.’

‘It is the way of our people. The body must be returned to the land from whence it came. You are Egyptian – you would not understand.’

But suddenly the man beneath the blade was no longer Shabaka, the embalmer, the soothsayer and witchdoctor. It was Asil, his father.

‘What do you want, boy?’

‘Where is she? Where is Myssa?’

‘You questioned the reach of my arm. You think that I cannot steal from you the only thing that you truly value, when you bury us both within spitting distance of each other?’

Turning, Piay saw a shadow fall across the bars that filled the small window in the door to Asil’s cell. The sound of a beast huffing in the dark filled the corridor outside.

‘The Shuyet comes!’ Asil said, his face paralysed with fear. ‘Anubis is here.’

‘I thought you feared no man.’

‘Show me a man who does not fear death, and I will show you a liar.’

A whining sound filled the cell, followed by the scratching of powerful claws upon the cell door. It was as if the animal outside meant to dig his way into the chamber.

• • •

The galleys strained at their creaking moorings – they had returned early that morning, riding a strong wind from the Great Green. On their decks, Piay could see the sailors preparing for departure as the last of the supplies were loaded into the holds. It would be a slower journey north, but the current would help the oarsmen.

The dream of the night before still clouded Piay's mind, filling his head with unwanted images: his father's face twisted in horror; the whites of Shabaka's eyes in the dark of the embalming chamber. But General Kamose and his men had not been overrun; the plan still held, and in a few hours the army would be united again, ready for the task that lay before it. Piay had no time to dwell on messages that came to him in dreams. His beloved was safe in her tomb, Asil was still in his cell beneath the barracks, and Shabaka had gone south, back to the land of his forefathers, as soon as he had said the last of his incantations over Myssa's body.

Hannu surveyed the ships that rode at anchor as the crowd started to gather on the dockside to see off the last of the nomarch's army.

'This wind cannot hold,' the old soldier said. 'The gods have been with us so far. It will turn.'

Piay's thoughts drifted to another journey: of their departure from Sena and their passage across the Great Green to Lacedaemon. A journey that had started with escape, but ended in shipwreck and disaster. An auspicious start did not guarantee a successful conclusion. 'I hope you are right, old friend,' he said. 'We cannot delay any longer.'

• • •

The gangplanks were pulled up and the ropes flew clear, coiling on the flagstones of the wharf. Oars slid through the slots in the rails, and the men heaved, pulling their vessels out into the current. The drums began to boom, pounding time for the oarsmen, a steady heartbeat that rolled out from each great ship as the flotilla began to move north to meet its fate. Along the wharf, the milling crowd cheered.

On the poop-deck, Taita filled his lungs with a deep draught of air, letting the tension ease from his muscles. To his surprise, instead of the dank scent of the water, he caught the invigorating fragrance of flowering jasmine, brought to him from some distant garden. A good omen.

‘It seems strange not to have Pharaoh here,’ Taita said as Piay returned from a tour of the ship, turning to look south, over the stern of the *Breath of Horus*. In his mind’s eye, he moved down the river and over the fields, through the gates of Thebes and into Pharaoh’s palace, where he had spent so much of his long life.

‘You led an army to free Thebes from the barbarians and sent them fleeing into the sea,’ Piay said. ‘Some say that you are the greatest general Egypt has known.’

‘Then let us pray to great Ra that what knowledge I have gathered in my long life will serve us well in our contest with the Shuyet, that Egypt may come away victorious.’

As they moved north, Taita saw that the usual river traffic was absent – the skiffs and lighters that filled the great waterway were nowhere to be seen. News of the approach of the Shuyet’s navy and the looming battle had spread quickly.

Peering northwards, towards the smoky horizon, Taita imagined the great veil of distance that lay between him and Avaris dropping away, so that he could see the full strength of his adversary. How many ships did the Shuyet have? How close were they?

To starboard, beyond the river’s shoreline, the desert stretched as far as the eye could see, to the heat haze that trembled on the horizon over the burning red sand, inhospitable and cruel. And yet, Taita mused, it was also their protector, for any army would be immediately visible, the ruddy dust from their marching giving them away long before they arrived at the river. For that reason, he was certain that the Shuyet would not approach from that side.

The port side was where the danger lay. Taita looked past the date palms that rose from the riverbank, silhouetted against the silver sky. An enemy force could approach the Memphis ships unseen – creeping through the green waves of barley swaying in the fields, or along the irrigation ditches.

Turning back, Taita called to Bek. ‘Captain, position three lookouts along the port side,’ he commanded.

Then Taita called for Asim, Gyasi and Sadiki, gesturing for them to join him.

The blond one rested his forearms on the rail and looked out at the river ahead to mask his trepidation. The water gleamed like a polished bronze

mirror, and the reflection of Ra's great orb shimmered from the surface.

'I still do not understand what we are here to do, Lord Taita,' Sadiki confessed. 'We are not trained in the arts of combat, and we do not understand strategy or tactics. We are commoners.'

'If you were common, you would not be standing here,' Taita chided, but he could see in Asim's eyes that he agreed with Sadiki.

'Bandits would sometimes attack our caravan,' Asim said, 'and we would be compelled to fight them off. But that is far removed from the clash of great armies.'

Taita turned to Gyasi. 'And you? Do you feel the same?'

While the others had glanced away when Taita looked at them, Gyasi replied without avoiding his eyes. 'I do not. We are not trained soldiers, nor have we been schooled in strategy, but we can still stand and fight.'

Taita nodded his approval. 'I have not brought you here to stand idly by, while others fight the battle for you. No, you will participate, and you will lead men.'

Sadiki looked terrified and Asim shifted his weight nervously, but Gyasi straightened and stood tall, eager to know more.

'There will come a moment in the battle where the ships of our fleet, and those of the Shuyet's, will come close to one another. When that happens, each of you will lead a boarding party onto one of our adversary's vessels, to set fire to that ship and return to this one before it sinks.'

Taita felt the wind change direction, starting to blow north, towards the Great Green. He watched as Bek shouted his orders, and the sail was unfurled. Below it, the men began to draw in their oars, and the low beat of the galley's drum ceased.

When Taita looked back to the three competitors, he saw that Sadiki's head had dropped low, almost to the rail he was leaning on. Without looking round, the blond man murmured: 'I am afraid.'

Taita nodded. 'You are right to be. A battle is a frightening thing, and only the gods can predict its outcome. Your challenge will be to overcome your fear.'

'When the Hyksos invaded, did you feel fear?' Gyasi asked, holding Taita's gaze.

'That was where I learned my first lesson about war,' Taita replied. 'The army was led by the great general Tanus, who was once himself my pupil.

In my long life, I have never seen a braver or more valiant soldier. I sailed on the royal barge with Pharaoh and the members of his court, and we took comfort in the sheer size of our army, and the certainty that barbarians could never defeat well-trained Egyptian soldiers. We were arrogant and naïve . . . I remember it as yesterday, sitting on that hill at dawn, overlooking the plain at Abnub, and seeing the cloud of dust appear on the eastern horizon. I can still feel the confusion that engulfed me as I watched the Hyksos' gleaming chariots that seemed as fast as the wind itself, pulled by those powerful beasts which, until that day, we had never seen used in such a fashion. The sky turned black with their arrows, loosed from an impossible distance. And then Pharaoh suffered his fatal injury.'

Asim, Gyasi and Sadiki were silent.

'But this is how I know that as powerful as this Shuyet – this Anubis – may be, he can nevertheless be defeated,' Taita continued. 'A single arrow from the sky can kill him, if the gods allow it. And the great host that fights for him can be routed, just the same as ours was on that terrible day.'

• • •

An hour north of Memphis, Piay ordered the oarsmen back to their benches. They might have the current and the wind in their favour, but he had seen enough in the dead city to know that the Shuyet would not spare his men. He would march them to exhaustion, and leave the weakest where they fell for the vultures and the jackals.

With every hour that passed, the Shuyet's army was drawing closer to General Kamose's position.

Piay looked across the sweating backs of the rowers as they bent over their oars, watched the flash of water on each side of the *Breath of Horus* as the blades dipped rhythmically, willing the vessel through the water, willing the miles to fall away and for General Kamose's camp to appear on the horizon.

Piay saw Taita studying him, and beckoned for his master to join him.

Leaving his three charges in the prow, Taita strode past the oarsmen and climbed up to the poop-deck, where Piay was peering out across the fields.

'What do those three have to say about our plans?' Piay asked.

'They are afraid.'

‘As they should be,’ Piay said scornfully. ‘They do not belong on a battlefield.’

‘And you?’ Taita asked. ‘Are you afraid?’

‘There was a time, before you came to Memphis, when I would have happily died in the service of Pharaoh. I willed it to happen, so I could join Myssa in the afterlife. When we went to take Asil, the Guild of Thieves fought us street by street, but I went without a sword, without armour. There was a part of me that wanted Asil to kill me. Or perhaps, for us to murder each other, so we could both be released.’ Piay sighed. ‘But that time has passed. The dead city changed me. I want to live again. And so, yes, now I am afraid.’

• • •

The men who had sailed from Memphis the day before had erected a broad swathe of tents between the date palms lining the river and the spreading acacias on higher ground. Taita nodded as he caught sight of the camp, and signalled to Bek to bring the *Breath of Horus* closer to the riverbank. The Memphis Guard were already busy erecting billets for the new arrivals.

Once the anchor stone had been dropped, Taita and Piay were joined by Hannu, and the three men lowered themselves into a skiff. After they had loosed the boat from its moorings, Hannu rowed them ashore.

When the soldiers saw Taita approaching with Piay and Hannu, a great cheer rang out. To have the great mage, Pharaoh’s Lord High Chancellor, with them on the eve of battle gave them courage.

Most of the men sat by their tents, the whine of whetstones filling the air around them as the armourers put new edges on blade after blade. Some others whirled their slingshots, honing their aim, while a group of spearmen, their tall wooden shields stacked to one side, practised striking at targets in front of the camp.

Taita saw that the archers were already more skilled than the last time he had seen them, and they were now dressed in polished leather helmets and breastplates.

The three men picked their way through the sprawling camp, to a larger tent near the centre, where General Kamose and his officers were in deep

discussion over a map.

Kamose bowed when he saw the dignitaries step into the tent. ‘Lord High Chancellor. Nomarch. General Hannu. Our final preparations are underway. We will be ready to meet the Shuyet’s force when it arrives.’

‘What news of his army’s advance?’ Piay asked. ‘Have the scouts reported his current position?’

‘Not yet, my lord.’ Kamose beckoned to a gaunt man, and Taita recognised Raqada, the master of scouts, as he stepped forward. He was a dour man with a short temper, but blessed with a mind of rare cunning and imagination. He had affectionately named his scout corps the Ditch Rats.

‘I have nothing to report, my lords,’ Raqada said gravely.

‘Your scouts have not returned?’ Taita asked.

Raqada shook his head. ‘I fear they have been captured.’

‘Then the Shuyet will have some knowledge of our plans,’ Piay muttered.

‘I would wager that whatever they told him was no more than he had already gleaned from his own spies in Memphis,’ the spymaster said. ‘He will know that the Blue Crocodiles left the city in the galleys and that the only vessel that remained behind was the *Breath of Horus*. He will have guessed, I think, that the nomarch and the Lord High Chancellor would follow with the rest of the Memphis Guard. The only piece of information that perhaps still evades him is our exact location.’

When they walked back out into the camp, the sun was slipping towards the western horizon, the sky streaked with vivid pinks and blues. While the general and his lieutenants continued with their planning, Taita, Piay and Hannu followed the broad path that led to the mess tent.

Perhaps it was because they were now on the eve of battle, and all his senses were heightened, but as Taita ate the delicately flavoured stew, seasoned with cumin and sweetened with dates, it came alive on his tongue, transporting him to a time long before he had been a slave: he saw a woman’s apron flash white in the sunlight, heard the voices of other children calling to him, the splash of cool mountain water in the marble fountain where the fish swam quick and bright below the surface.

When the three men had finished their meal, they watched the glimmering stars begin to appear in the sky above them.

Night flooded down upon the camp from the dark ridge of hills that

stood behind the acacias, eddying around the campfires as it washed towards the river. ‘We should return to the *Breath of Horus* and get some sleep,’ Piay said. ‘Tomorrow’s problems will arrive whether we wait up for them or not.’

But as they stood up, a cry of alarm came from one of the lookouts along the river. It was taken up by another voice, and then another.

The three men hurried through the maze of tents. Reaching the edge of the camp, they stepped away from the glow of the fires. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust to the dim moonlight and the huddle of men standing along the shoreline and looking apprehensively upriver to become visible.

Taita, Piay and Hannu did not have to wait long to see why they had gathered. Within moments, the burning carcass of a boat wallowed around the river bend, casting a shimmering circle of orange light over the ink-black water.

‘Someone has set a felucca alight,’ one of the scouts said.

Taita felt his heart begin to pound in his chest. As the flames leapt towards the sky, he could see that the fire was consuming a tattered sail that tugged and swayed as it burned, and something else, too – something attached to the flaming mast.

As the craft came closer, Piay realised it was a man. The unfortunate soul had been fixed to the spars of the mast with his arms outstretched, and the fire had consumed his tunic and blackened his skin so that he now looked to have been coated with pitch. He was not moving.

As the felucca began to drift into the papyrus beds, Hannu threw himself into the reeds.

‘Help him!’ Piay commanded to the men around him. The lookouts squelched through the mud after Hannu, wading up to their waists in the chill water.

The small boat had been sinking slowly as it drifted along, and now it finally sank in a hiss of steam as the last flames were extinguished. There were curses and shouts, and then Taita heard the men struggling their way back to shore, crashing through the reeds as Kamose arrived with Raqada and a detachment of soldiers. One of the new arrivals raised a torch, spreading light across the sodden men as they staggered from the papyrus beds.

Taita grimaced when he saw the charcoaled arms and legs. They were

carrying the man from the mast.

The lookouts laid the rigid body down on the muddy bank as Taita asked for the torch to be brought closer.

‘He’s one of my Ditch Rats,’ Raqada murmured.

Taita leaned forward to inspect the corpse. ‘They have cut off his eyelids,’ he said grimly. ‘As punishment for spying, presumably.’

‘This is a message for us,’ Piay whispered.

‘Bring him back to the camp,’ Taita said. ‘He will not be denied the afterlife.’

As several of the men carefully carried the charred body back towards the tented city, Taita, Piay and Hannu convened with Genral Kamose. ‘This Shuyet knows well how to fill the hearts of men with fear,’ the general muttered.

‘He does indeed,’ Taita replied. ‘But I see reason for hope.’

‘How so?’ Piay asked.

‘A leader who is certain of victory would not bother with such tricks on the eve of battle.’

‘Then this poor wretch is a good omen,’ Hannu muttered.

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The calls of the waterfowl echoed across the lonely reed beds, causing Piay to stir and throw off his blanket.

He pushed himself up on his elbows and looked past the rows of sailors snoring on their benches, to the lone figure standing in the prow, outlined against the morning sky. Taita had awoken before any of them, and he stood like a sentinel, hands clasped behind his back, his face raised to the rising sun, his eyes closed in meditation.

In that moment, Piay felt humbled that the great mage had chosen to take him in as a child, had chosen to guide him and shape him into the man he had become.

Standing, Piay stretched and then strode across the deck. He waited silently for his master to finish his meditation, but as soon as his eyes opened – before Piay could even utter a word of greeting – Taita said: ‘What is it that you believe the Shuyet wants?’

Piay frowned. ‘He wants Memphis. To secure the capital as the seat of

some resurgent Lower Kingdom. Hannu heard as much in Avaris.'

Taita rubbed his chin. 'How do you think he intends to win it?'

'He hopes to best us in the field,' Piay replied confidently. 'We stand between him and his prize.'

'This is true. But the Shuyet is no mere general. His aim is different.'

'How?' Piay rubbed his eyes, struggling to understand what his master was trying to tell him.

'He cannot simply conquer the people of Memphis and rule them accordingly. He aspires to be god and Pharaoh to them, which means he must inspire not only fear in his subjects, but also love. They are to be citizens in his new kingdom. He cannot annihilate or subjugate them, as a common general would.'

After so many years at his side, Piay knew to await further explanation when his master made a statement that seemed to make no sense.

'The Hyksos and their Shepherd King were cunning, and they understood strength in numbers. They crushed us with superior force, as any ordinary general would. But the Shuyet . . . The Shuyet moves differently.' Piay watched as Taita paused and then said: 'I am not yet certain, but I suspect that my confidence in the Shuyet's desire to keep us within the walls of Memphis may not have been as well founded as it seemed. I fear we have, perhaps, once again misconstrued his true intentions.'

'There is little time to change our plans –'

'We must expect the unexpected.' Taita's voice cracked like a whip. 'Now that he has tortured our spies, we must expect that the Shuyet will know all our strengths and weaknesses. We may have taken him by surprise by venturing forth so boldly, but now our strategy will be clear to him. He will be ready for everything we do. Wake Hannu, and find General Kamose.'

Hearing the urgency in Taita's words, Piay bounded along the deck. But barely had he passed the first three rowing benches when a noise shattered the stillness like the sonorous voice of Osiris passing judgment in the afterlife.

The blast rolled out across the quiet fields and the swaying papyrus, frightening the waterfowl, which thundered into the air in a vast cloud.

The war trumpets were sounding.

• • •

While the sailors responded to the captain’s orders and hurried to their stations, Taita called Asim, Gyasi and Sadiki forward, leading them across the deck to where Piay and Hannu huddled in animated conversation by the stern tower.

Piay frowned as he considered his friend’s words. ‘I doubt Taita would think it wise,’ he said.

‘It is a gamble, that’s true,’ Hannu agreed. ‘But no general would do such a thing. So the Shuyet will not expect it.’

‘For good reason.’

Piay glanced over at Taita, but had no time to reveal what had been discussed as the lookout above them bellowed his warning and the other lookouts picked up the call.

Taita had prepared himself for battle, strapping a leather breastplate over his white robe. The Eye of Horus hung at his waist, and he had donned his helm, which Piay had last seen him wear during the victory over the Hyksos at the Battle of Thebes. The contestants wore similar attire, and they appeared genuinely transformed by it, Taita thought to himself. He was curious to see how each of them would respond, thrust into the chaos of war.

‘Make ready,’ Piay shouted, stabbing a finger ahead as a ship appeared around the bend in the river. It was a long, heavy Hyksos galley, Taita could see. The prow had been carved into a galloping stallion, and the tower aft was high enough to give the ship’s officers commanding views over the battle. The square white sail was marked with the jackal head of Anubis, and Taita heard a grim murmuring ripple through the sailors on the *Breath of Horus* as they saw the enemy for the first time.

The deck of the Hyksos ship was thick with warriors – spears bristled and swords glinted in the rising sun.

With the throng around him gripped by the sight of the enormous vessel ploughing towards them, it was only Taita who noticed the tall masts of more galleys approaching, still hidden by the bend of the river. He counted them silently as they appeared, one after the other, until a total of twenty vessels were in view.

The fleet that Hannu had built was less than half the strength of the

Shuyet's navy, but, looking back across the flotilla, Taita felt proud to see the men of Memphis readying themselves for battle despite the size of the force arrayed against them. They shook their bows in the air and roared their defiance, the noise rolling out across the water like the growl of a hunting lion.

Piay gripped Taita's arm and shook him from his reverie. 'Hannu has a skiff prepared.'

Taita frowned. 'I am not leaving. Not now, when the battle is joined.'

'Not you,' Piay replied. 'The land battle will be fierce. I need to be amongst my men.'

Taita realised that this is what Hannu had been so animatedly advocating as the two friends stood by the tower. 'You were right in suspecting that I would consider it unwise,' he began. 'But Hannu is also right. No general would do it, so the Shuyet will not expect it.'

He held Piay's eyes for a moment, knowing well that this might be the last time they saw each other. Then Taita gave him a nod. 'Go, and may the gods smile upon us both this day, so that at its end, we may meet each other again.'

As Piay bowed and slipped away with Hannu, Taita cupped his hand to his mouth and called to Bek: 'Captain, move the galleys into position! Do not wait for the enemy to attack. Give the order!'

Gyasi, Asim and Sadiki gripped the rail and watched as Taita's strategy began to unfold.

Once the commands rang out across the flotilla, two of the sturdiest galleys surged past the others, with the remainder of the fleet following close behind. These vessels each contained a company of the Blue Crocodiles, men who would not be overcome by terror in the thick of bloody battle.

As the oarsmen heaved, the Memphis galleys took the flanks, making two lines of four ships. The aim was to force the enemy vessels to sail between them, rather than meeting the Shuyet's navy head-on.

'I don't understand,' Sadiki muttered, gazing out at the enemy flagship. 'Why will they not simply drive straight for our foremost galleys, and ram them?'

'They must hold to the central channel,' Taita replied with a smile. 'They are heavily laden and they need the deepest water. If they come too

close they will founder.’

Taita’s breath burned in his throat as the ship with the Anubis sail swept forward.

‘Now we will see how the Shuyet responds.’

• • •

Like bees swarming from an upturned hive, the men of Memphis left from the camp to take up their positions and await the enemy’s advance. Their spear tips glittered and their leather armour shone in the warm rays of Ra’s great orb.

As they hurried up from the shore, where they had moored their skiff, Piay and Hannu glanced towards the Shuyet’s galleys.

‘This day will decide the future of Egypt,’ Piay declared.

Hannu agreed. ‘An Egypt united under the watchful eye of the gods, or a divided one, forever at war with itself.’

Piay and Hannu hurried to the rear of the lines, where General Kamose stood on higher ground, gazing out across the battlefield. He had selected a position to which his men could turn in the chaos of the battle and be encouraged by the sight of their commander.

‘Nomarch. General Hannu.’ Kamose bowed in greeting as they strode up to his post, but his manner was strained.

‘General Kamose,’ Piay greeted him warmly. ‘We’ve come to shake the rust from our swords.’

Kamose frowned. ‘It would be safer for you to remain here, with me. If you were to fall, Nomarch –’

‘He will not fall,’ Hannu growled. ‘And if he does, I’ll be there to pick him up.’

Piay smiled and surveyed the field. Kamose had lined the men up in a traditional formation. In the vanguard, the spearmen had formed a solid wall, locking their long shields together to create a formidable barrier that would bear the brunt of the forthcoming assault. The only gaps were filled with spears, their hafts dug into the ground so they were as rigid as spikes in a lion trap.

Behind the shield wall stood the archers, their gaze focused on the acacia trees from which the enemy would emerge, ready to loose their

shafts when the order was given. They were arranged three lines deep, so one group would always be ready to unleash a volley, while the others nocked another arrow and waited their turn.

Closest to the general's position stood the swordsmen. When the archers withdrew after softening up the Shuyet's force, they would rush forward and engage the enemy. Piay grinned when he saw that the ranks of the swordsmen had been augmented with soldiers from the Blue Crocodile Guard.

'Hopefully their courage will rub off,' Hannu muttered when Piay admired the foresight of positioning the Blues amongst the less experienced men. 'And maybe, if the gods are smiling, a little skill.' Piay could tell from the proud glimmer in Hannu's eye that their presence there had been his idea.

Piay and Hannu looked out beyond the spearmen, to the acacia line, where the soldiers of the Shuyet's army were now massing. As the men continued to stream through the trees, Piay saw a standard-bearer raise a flag – the jackal head of Anubis against a white background.

• • •

The Shuyet's army were an unruly mob, many armed only with tools that had been snatched from the fields – Piay saw hoes and adzes, sickles and billhooks, cudgels and flails. While he had managed to pull in the poor and dispossessed to fight for his cause – Piay felt his gut twist as he tried to estimate the size of the army that spread out into the hazy distance – the Shuyet had not been able to arm them. In contrast, the famous forges of Memphis had not rested since the *Breath of Horus* had returned with Nehesy's crew slaughtered. Many of the men below him held freshly minted blades, sharpened just the day before for the work that lay before them.

There was hope.

Yet, looking around, Piay could see that the terrain presented its own challenges. The river protected their left flank, but on the right the fields rolled away towards a rocky ridge from where the Shuyet could easily launch an attack. General Kamose was clearly aware of the threat, for he had posted several scouts along the top of the ridge.

Hannu drew Piay's attention back to the enemy lines – the Shuyet's lieutenants had now appeared in front of their men. As he watched, Piay saw them raise their hands, readying the men behind them for the attack. General Kamose had seen them, too, for he gave a curt nod and the trumpeter at his side raised his instrument to his lips and blasted out the signal that would ready the troops.

At first it was just a murmur, but then it rose to a roar as the Shuyet's lieutenants dropped their hands and their men rushed forward, yelling curses at the ranks that stood before them. They came like a tide, flattening the green barley that lay between them and the Memphis spearmen. General Kamose, his eyes unblinking, watched them come. When they were within range of the archers, he gave a sharp order and the trumpeter blew another note, higher this time.

As one, the archers loosed their arrows. The sky blackened as the shafts whined and whistled, arcing through the air and dropping in a pelting, merciless rain upon the Shuyet's men. The advancing line was so tightly packed that nearly every shaft found a target. Unlike the men Piay had seen on the galleys, these conscripts didn't have shields or breastplates and helms that might deflect an arrow, and with nothing to stop them, the arrowheads punched easily through flesh and bone. Across the line men fell, their screams mingling with the battle cries of those behind them. Others stumbled on, their flesh bristling with arrows, steps slowing until they dropped to their knees and then pitched forward.

Yet still they came.

Kamose signalled for another volley of arrows. Again, the barrage fell mercilessly on the advancing men beneath it, and a chorus of tortured screams rose from the field.

As he watched the carnage unfold, Piay could tell that Hannu felt uneasy. Observing a battle unfold from distance, as a general, was not for a fighting man like him. It was true that the midst of the action was the last place that the Shuyet would expect to find the Nomarch of Memphis, but Piay knew that Hannu's plan was also selfish – he couldn't bear to stand by and watch while other men fought and died.

'It is time we joined the men,' Hannu said as if reading Piay's thoughts. 'Put our swords to good use.'

General Kamose eyed him askance, as if he was insane, but Piay

understood, and nodded.

The general bowed to the nomarch. ‘May Sekhmet watch over you, my lord.’

• • •

As Piay and Hannu skidded down the bank, away from General Kamose and his lieutenants, the sky darkened again with another volley of arrows. Piay could smell the metallic tang of blood on the breeze, and the ground throbbed under his feet as the Shuyet’s army drove on over their own dead and dying – his ears rang with the roars of the advancing warriors and the howls of those on the brink of the afterlife.

As they hurried to join the swordsmen, the Shuyet’s force reached the shield wall, a tide of men battering the spearmen’s tight formation. The swordsmen would soon be ordered to join them.

A cheer erupted as Piay and Hannu reached the infantry lines. ‘Nomarch! Nomarch! Nomarch!’ the soldiers chanted, elated that the man who ruled them had chosen to fight with them that day, that he would die amongst them for the glory of Egypt, or, alongside them, be victorious.

Hannu grinned. ‘Sekhmet is with us!’ he roared to the men around them, thrusting his sword high into the air. ‘Our enemies will shit themselves as they die, and crawl stinking into the afterlife!’

‘And there they will learn the horrible truth,’ Piay added. ‘That it is a man who leads them, not a god, and that he has cost them their lives. For the real god Anubis will be waiting there to receive them, and he will thank us for the offering!’

The charged air exploded with a thundering roar at Piay’s words as he plunged in amongst his troops, pushing his way through the ranks towards the front line, Hannu scurrying determinedly behind.

‘Forward, men of Memphis,’ a captain of the Blue Crocodiles cried. General Kamose had given the order for the archers to retreat and the swordsmen to advance.

The din of battle grew louder still as they approached the shield wall, the two friends now in the front rank. A fresh wave of enemy soldiers crashed against the beleaguered spearmen with a mighty bellow as they closed on the melee. The wall bent and buckled, but it did not break.

Piay could see that his men had been well prepared, and he clasped Hannu's shoulder to express his gratitude. As the Shuyet's soldiers hammered at the shields with flails and billhooks, the spearmen thrust their weapons through the gaps in the wall, driving the bronze tips deep into throats and chests.

But the wall would not hold for ever.

Piay whispered a quick prayer to his chosen god, Khonsu, then drew his sword.

'Ready yourselves!'

Hannu's command was picked up and shouted from man to man across the field.

'Now!' Piay heard Hannu shout.

The spearmen were ready. Wrenching their shields back, they pivoted to the sides, leaving a broad gap through which the Shuyet's army could flood. The men at the front were already exhausted and bloodied, but the sheer weight of bodies drove them on. Hannu's men were fresh, and they launched themselves at the enemy, hacking and thrusting.

A warrior stepped into Piay's path, though calling him a 'warrior' was a kindness. The man's eyes were wild with terror and spittle frothed from his lips. No doubt he was one of the raw recruits who had made his vow to Anubis, hoping for days of leaning on a spear, pretending to stand guard, in return for food. Never would he have imagined he would find himself in this darkest pit of the Duat.

Piay easily sidestepped the man's blow, but then he hesitated. He could not bring himself to strike, even though the man's guard was open. This was not a soldier – he was just a peasant in the grip of the Shuyet's delusions. Hannu would have told him to cut and wound and move on, to conserve his strength, but something held him back.

The man jerked his blade back up, slipping as he overbalanced. Piay made his decision. He struck, putting his weight behind his sword arm, ramming the blade through the man's ribcage and into his heart – an easy death for someone who had no place on a battlefield.

His opponent's mouth flew open in surprise, then the light in his eyes winked out as he slid off Piay's sword.

Piay and Hannu were soon caught up in a whirlpool of bodies and flashing blades, as the men around them slashed and stabbed. Under their

feet, the black soil was trampled into a red, foaming mud that sucked at their sandals, and Piay's nose was filled with the stench of human waste evacuated from the bowels of the wounded and the terrified.

As the battle raged, Piay's sword arm began to throb. Each thrust and parry sent pain lancing up into his aching shoulder. His legs trembled and his chest tightened with exhaustion.

But as he looked around, Piay saw that the Shuyet's men were flagging more quickly than his own. The Blue Crocodiles were leading the way, organising the new recruits and driving the enemy back.

As his men began to tear the enemy lines apart, Piay felt a renewed surge of energy.

'We can win this fight, I am sure of it!' Hannu called to him over the clanging of swords and the cries of men.

Yet a strange notion crept up on Piay even as he saw the tide of the battle turn. Where were the seasoned warriors that Hannu had seen at the temple in Avaris? he wondered.

Suddenly a long, low blast sounded from somewhere towards the rear of the Shuyet's lines. At the signal, the enemy soldiers turned tail, scrambling over their dead comrades and back towards the acacia line as fast as they could.

'Is that it?' Piay shouted to Hannu, his sword dropping to his side.

Hannu sucked in a deep, juddering breath. 'We will soon find out.'

Piay sensed the eyes of his men on him, waiting for the order to pursue the Shuyet's forces, to cut them down as they ran. But he did not give it. For though it seemed clear that the men were fleeing for their lives, Piay had experienced enough of his adversary's deceptions to suspect this might be yet another one of his traps. 'Hold your ground!' he commanded.

'Nomarch! General Hannu! Nomarch!'

Turning at the sound of the cry, Piay watched as a young, wild-eyed man raced out of the mass of weary warriors. Djenn was his name – a youth who assisted General Kamose.

'What is it?' Hannu barked.

'General Kamose is dead,' Djenn lamented, teetering on his feet.

Hannu gripped the young man's shoulder to steady him. 'How can this be?'

'I was sent to fill his water-hide. When I returned, he lay dead on the

ground, as did Kefer and Menus. Hacked down.'

'Did you see the assailants?'

The young man shook his head and wailed in despair. 'We are lost!'

'Quiet, soldier,' Hannu ordered. 'You are in the presence of the nomarch. Nothing is lost while he is with us.'

Piay instinctively looked back across the battlefield, to the higher ground where Kamose had stood, observing the battle. How could the general have been killed when he stood so far behind their lines? He shook his head in dismay.

'Look!' Hannu was pointing at the ridge, where Kamose had stationed his scouts. The men were nowhere to be seen. The army's right flank was exposed. 'To your right!' he shouted to the men around him. 'Prepare for attack!'

The words had barely left Hannu's lips when Piay saw warriors come pouring over the ridge and down into the fields in front of them, the sun glinting from their bronze swords and leather helms. Unwearied by battle, a blood-curdling battle cry rose from their midst. Piay knew immediately that these were the trained soldiers whom he had been unable to see on the battlefield, held in reserve for just this moment.

'Brace yourselves!' Piay shouted, whirling his blade and exhorting his men to action, but it was too little too late.

The Shuyet's strategy was now clear to Piay, and it was a cold and calculated one. He had sent his inexperienced men out to die. The raw recruits, hungry and desperate men, were to wear down his enemy. Now, he would finish the nomarch's makeshift army with his warriors.

Piay watched as the Shuyet's soldiers plunged deep into his army's right flank. He saw Hannu as he limped to meet the attack, shouting orders to the men around him, but his booming commands were lost in the confusion.

Through the crush of bodies, Piay saw one of the Blue Crocodiles being cut down by three of the Shuyet's brutes. They towered over their fallen victim, bringing their swords down on his prone body as one. All around, the Shuyet's warriors were slicing through their lines. It was about to become a slaughter.

Hannu shoved his way back to Piay's side. 'There's only one path left open to us – if you want these men to see another sunrise. We must retreat, back to the river.'

‘Taita is fighting his own battle there – our galleys against theirs. There is nothing for us to retreat to!’

‘Well, if we stay here, you’ll soon have no army left at all.’

Piay took a moment to think, then he nodded. ‘Give the order.’

‘Retreat to the ships!’ Hannu boomed. ‘Soldiers of Memphis, retreat!’

As the order was carried through their ranks, Piay’s men turned to flee, racing as fast as their exhausted legs would carry them back towards the river. Piay and Hannu threw themselves after them, but Hannu’s injured leg slowed him, and Piay adjusted his own pace to stay with his friend. With each passing moment they fell further behind until they found themselves stumbling alone across the mire the retreating army had left in its wake.

Piay saw the danger first – a group of the Shuyet’s soldiers bearing down on them like a pack of wolves tracking a wounded stag, the leader jabbing his finger at Hannu. Three other warriors loped behind him.

When Piay looked to Hannu for an explanation, his friend replied grimly: ‘One of the guards from Avaris. He swore that he would slit my throat if he ever saw me again, and now he is determined to keep his word.’

Together, Piay and Hannu spun to face their assailants.

Snarling, the guard from the tavern stepped forward. ‘You will regret ever crossing my path, little man,’ he said.

‘The only path I’ll ever regret crossing is his,’ Hannu shot back, indicating Piay, who grinned.

‘That’s the Nomarch of Memphis,’ one of the flanking warriors muttered.

The lead guard straightened and smiled as he raised his sword. ‘I shall enjoy presenting your head to the Shuyet as an offering to Anubis,’ he roared.

Readying his own sword, Piay braced himself. If this was how he was to finally meet the gods, then so be it.

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From the prow of the *Breath of Horus*, Taita watched the Shuyet’s flagship advance, sailing between the two lines of galleys. At any moment, he expected the captain to recognise his strategy and take evasive action, but the Hyksos warship just kept coming.

‘We have them,’ Gyasi breathed.

‘Not until the trap is sprung,’ Taita cautioned.

Despite his words, Taita could scarcely believe their good fortune. Leaning against the rail, he waited for the next stage of his plan to take effect.

As soon as the Shuyet’s flagship had fully crossed the threshold between the two lines of Memphis vessels, the archers, who had been lying on their bellies on the decks of the galleys, jumped to their feet with their bows in their hands, arrows nocked, strings pulled back.

‘Loose!’ the officers on both sides of the river commanded, almost in unison, and in the blink of an eye, the first volley was in the air. Even as the arrows whistled down – thudding into skulls and shoulders and chests – the archers were slotting another arrow into place and drawing back their strings.

‘Why do you think the Shuyet’s sailors have still not altered course?’ Gyasi asked.

‘I do not yet know,’ Taita replied. The screams that echoed out across the water were terrible to hear.

‘Perhaps they have no strategy beyond that of overwhelming force,’ Sadiki whispered hopefully. ‘Like the Hyksos, whose galleys they sail.’

As Taita watched, the sailor manning the flagship’s tiller was struck in the neck and toppled backwards from the deck, crashing into the river. As the pole turned on its own, the vessel began to drift, turning sideways in the current.

A cheer swept across the *Breath of Horus*, and Taita had to admit to himself that his plan had gone better than he could have hoped. Now they only had to sink the flagship, and draw the remainder of the Shuyet’s navy into running the same gauntlet that had so easily disabled it.

As the archers prepared for a third volley, the surviving sailors on the flagship seemed to come to their senses. They dragged shields out from under the rowing benches and sheltered beneath them. Some of the plummeting shafts embedded themselves in the thick, sun-hardened leather, but many simply skidded away harmlessly.

‘They won’t be able to strike back if they’re hiding,’ Asim said. ‘Perhaps this forewarns of some new strategy.’

As if to answer him, a warrior jumped up from under the cover of his

shield and whirled a slingshot around his head, loosing a jagged chunk of rock. The projectile smashed into the face of one of the archers on the starboard galley, killing him instantly.

But when the man jumped up again, the archers were ready, and a score of shafts thundered towards him. His missile flew away wildly as he lurched back to the deck.

As the Shuyet's flagship continued to drift under full sail, arrows rained down on the soldiers still cowering on deck. Behind it, Taita could see the rest of the Shuyet's fleet. Their sails billowed in the wind coming from the Great Green, and the rising sun made the white cloth glow. But as he studied the vessels, Taita could see they were a motley group. The hulls were badly patched, the rails broken here and there, figureheads shattered and masts leaning. The Shuyet might have superior numbers, but they had the better ships.

'The time has arrived,' Taita announced, turning to the three contestants. 'I have not been entirely transparent with you. When I said you would lead men in boarding vessels, I meant it. What I held back from you is that one of you must do so pretending to be me. You must board the flagship and ensure that it ends up on the bottom of the river.'

All three contestants blanched with trepidation as one of the galleys that had been idling in reserve pulled up alongside the *Breath of Horus*.

'One of you must show your valour,' Taita continued, gesturing to the galley, 'and take on this crucial task. We have not a single moment to waste.'

At his beckoning, several slaves hurried over, with shears, a razor and makeup. Taita himself began peeling off his white robe, while a slave waited with a black one to replace it. 'Which of you will do it? Who possesses the courage?'

Gyasi, Asim and Sadiki each looked to one another, and then back at Taita, as if searching for the answer. Finally, Gyasi reached up and pulled away the band that held her hair, allowing it to fall free in the cool Nile breeze. 'Cut off my hair,' she said, waving for the slave with the shears to approach. 'I will do it.'

Taita smiled and nodded. 'I had hoped it would be you.'

'You have demonstrated great courage and selflessness. You have dedicated your life to Egypt,' Gyasi said to Taita as her thick, black hair

began to fall around her shoulders, then down to her feet. ‘Any who would aspire to become vizier for Lower Egypt should not expect to show any less.’

Taita nodded again. ‘You have spoken wisely. Should I survive this battle, I will ensure that Pharaoh hears your name, and all of Egypt knows of your bravery.’

Asim and Sadiki both seemed to grasp that something profound was unfolding before them, and that the contest was perhaps no longer a contest at all. They bowed their heads respectfully as Gyasi’s head was shaved bald, and Taita’s green malachite makeup applied to her eyelids. Then they looked away as the slaves unbuckled her cuirass and she slipped out of her own robe. As she stood naked in the morning sun, the slaves quickly rubbed moringa and almond oil into her skin, making it shine like burnished gold. Finally, they tugged Taita’s white robe over her head, and when Asim and Sadiki looked back to behold her in her disguise, they sensed something more: a woman transformed.

Indeed, even Taita was amazed at how much she looked like him. A little shorter, true, but it was a resemblance strong enough to sow doubt in the minds of any who had not seen them side by side.

A gangplank was extended between the *Breath of Horus* and the galley which would bear Gyasi to the enemy vessel. Taita watched her carefully, but she crossed the deck without hesitation; if she felt any fear, it was well hidden.

As Gyasi stepped onto the gangplank and readied herself to walk across, she looked back and smiled. ‘For Taita!’ she said. ‘And for Egypt!’

Taita smiled as he watched her cross over to the waiting ship, where the boarding party raised their swords in triumphant salute. ‘Lord Taita!’

As the galley’s oarsmen began to propel the ship away from the *Breath of Horus* and towards the Shuyet’s flagship, Sadiki stepped back from the rail, pointing. ‘Lord Taita, look there!’

A commotion had erupted in the papyrus beds on the other side of the river. Taita would have thought it was another disturbed hippopotamus if not for a lookout’s shout of alarm – the same upheaval was happening in the reeds ahead of them.

Dozen of skiffs appeared from the swaying beds, each one propelled by a man standing aft with a long pole. Once they were in open water, oars

were snatched up.

‘Archers!’ Taita called as the boats swept towards the *Breath of Horus*. ‘Archers! To me!’

Though they were small, the skiffs were crammed with men crouching low. Together they pushed themselves up, revealing they were bowmen.

Now Taita understood why the flagship’s captain had not altered his course. The Shuyet had been luring the Memphis fleet into his own trap, keeping their attention focused elsewhere while his men massed in the reeds and boarded their skiffs.

Taita saw what was about to happen in an instant. Animated, he commanded: ‘Sound the alarm! Alert our ships!’

The trumpeter on the poop-deck blasted a long, jarring note of warning, as the archers reached the rail of the *Breath of Horus* and began to loose shaft after shaft towards the skiffs, but it was already too late. In each skiff, sparks showered from fire-strikers as men lit the tips of each arrow. Black smoke rolled out low over the river and the air was immediately full of the stink of burning pitch.

As bewildered sailors leaned over the sides of the Memphis galleys, trying to grasp the reason for the trumpet blast of warning, arrows pounded into the oil-soaked wood of the hulls and the furled masses of the sails. Terrified cries were heard – for the fear of fire on board a ship haunted all sailors – as flames rippled across the sailcloth and raged along the hulls.

In the blink of an eye, the conflagrations on three of the vessels became too great to withstand, and sailors and archers alike abandoned their ships, throwing themselves over the sides.

More movement came from the dark green depths of the papyrus that lined the shore on each bank. From where they had been hiding, more of the Shuyet’s men rose and began to shoot the men in the water.

‘The Shuyet knew what we would be planning before we’d even considered it ourselves,’ Sadiki muttered in horror.

Sickened, Taita turned away from the slaughter. However they attempted to outmanoeuvre the Shuyet, he was always one step ahead of them. Had he been too arrogant? Taita had long known there was no one in Egypt who could match his sharp wits, but he had been remiss in thinking that this would always be the case.

‘Two galleys down already,’ Asim muttered, ‘and the third . . .’

His voice trailed off as he saw Taita turn his attention to the rest of the Shuyet's navy. They had been hanging back, but now, as they saw the flames take hold of the Memphis galleys, they surged forward under full sail. As they approached, Taita could see that the ships had all been fitted with bronze ramming horns.

Taita turned back to look at the Shuyet's flagship. A new man was now at the steering pole of the vessel and had steadied the craft, but that had only made it easier for Gyasi to lead the boarding party onto the deck of the ship – the clang of swords meeting each other rang out, sharp and clear across the water.

With the rest of the Shuyet's navy bearing down on him, the captain of the Memphis ship commanded his men to cut the ropes that bound them to the Shuyet's flagship, but it was already too late. As the sailors hacked hurriedly at the ties and the ship began to turn, the bronze battering ram of the lead vessel slammed into the boarding galley amidships. The timber cracked like thunder as it shattered, and the crew flew from their feet. A fatal blow had been struck, Taita knew. The ship was sagging, planks snapping as the hull began to come apart, the ramming ship pushing it ever on.

Men plunged from the sides of the beleaguered boarding galley into the cool depths, only to be met by more arrows when they surfaced. The grey water was now ruddy with the reflected light from the burning ships, and Taita could also see dark clouds of blood forming around the floating bodies. An instant later, the water began to roil around the corpses. The gore had attracted the river crocodiles.

'Where is Gyasi?' Asim asked, his voice grim.

Taita looked again towards the Shuyet's flagship, but as he scanned the bitter fighting that raged across its decks, he could see no sign of his white robe, nor of the woman who wore it. He watched in dismay as, deprived of reinforcements, the boarding party's strength waned against the superior numbers they faced on the flagship's deck. One by one, they were cut down, as the Shuyet's navy bore down on the remaining Memphis galleys.

'We must flee! Now!' Taita glanced round to see Sadiki cowering in terror. He fell to his knees and pressed his forehead to the deck in silent prayer.

'I agree with Sadiki,' Asim said. 'Any man can see there is no hope for

us in this fight. We can only run.'

'What do you suggest?' Taita asked, although he had already decided on the necessary action. His question was almost lost beneath the roar of the fire from the burning ships and the screams of the men dying in the river.

'We must pull back. Perhaps we can retreat to Memphis for a final stand.'

'And you?' Taita directed his question at Sadiki, still huddled on the deck. 'What would you do?'

'I would ask your leave to depart, and renounce my place in this contest, as Shubba did,' Sadiki replied, lifting his tear-streaked face. 'I have no desire to end up as Gyasi has.'

'Do not fear the worst just yet,' Taita said. 'I believe that if we retreat now, the Shuyet's galleys will permit our escape. You can forget your fears of capture.'

'Why would they not press their advantage?' Sadiki asked.

'They have won the battle here,' Taita replied, 'and have little fear of our remaining strength. But more than that, they have Gyasi. And, for now, they believe she is Pharaoh's Lord High Chancellor. They will want to make sure she reaches the Shuyet safely.'

A trumpet blast rang out across the water, as if to confirm Taita's assertion. Sadiki's eyes widened with realisation. 'Did you know this would happen, when you sent Gyasi aboard the flagship?'

Taita smiles. 'Not for certain. But I hoped.'

'So, she was sacrificed,' Asim muttered grimly. 'She is the false currency with which you have bought our escape.'

Taita gazed inscrutably back at his two remaining contestants. 'I have done what was necessary,' he asserted guiltlessly, 'to safeguard the great land that I have been tasked by the gods to protect.' He then bellowed out an order to Bek: 'Captain, give the signal to retreat! All those who can. We will sail south and regroup!'

• • •

The moonlight shimmered across the black waters of the Nile. On the poop-deck of the *Breath of Horus*, Taita stood motionless and silent, thinking of old friends and old loves, and how death could strike

in an instant.

The Shuyet's vessels had not pursued them, as Taita had predicted. Bek had unfurled the sails as soon as they had turned south, and they had taken the wind instantly, driving them upriver – the *Breath of Horus* leading the retreat.

Having put distance between them and the enemy armada, Taita had given the order to anchor.

Taita drew in the scent of the cooling river, listening to the reed beds whispering, and the creaking of the lines that held the five galleys of the Memphis flotilla that had survived the river battle.

If he had been back at Pharaoh's palace in Thebes, the slaves would have been preparing him for his bath – a time of peace and reflection.

But now Taita could only think of war.

From the moment that the vessels had anchored in this sheltered spot, he had been turning over tactics in his mind. Now, he knew what he had to do. He had to make another sacrifice, to save the dream of Egypt.

Turning, Taita looked out to where a constellation of fires burned in the dark. The army was camped alongside what remained of the Memphis navy. A good number of the new recruits to the Memphis Guard had survived the day's defeat, and he knew that the Blue Crocodiles would make sure that they were ready for what was to come. Piay's bravery and Hannu's last-moment command to retreat had saved the army from a rout, or so the men had told him when Taita had walked amongst them. But of the two friends, there was still no sign.

At the creak of a board, Taita glanced back to the deck of the *Breath of Horus*. Beyond the benches where the oarsmen slept, a commanding figure strode towards the stern. Before the moon lit his face, Taita would have sworn it was Tanus, striding forth in the flesh once more.

Taita smiled as Piay pulled himself up the ladder to the poop-deck. 'Where is Hannu?' he asked.

Piay grinned. 'Not dead yet. He demanded beer as soon as we saw the campfires, and went off in search of it. I expect he will join us here soon.'

'I am glad to hear it.' Taita smiled.

'And your three shadows? What of the contestants?'

'Asim and Sadiki have returned to Memphis. Their courage had given out.'

‘And Gyasi?’

‘She is the Shuyet’s prisoner?’

‘But how?’

Taita smiled again. ‘I asked one of them to board the Shuyet’s flagship, dressed in my clothing, and wearing my makeup. It was the final test.’

Piay’s eyes widened in amazement. ‘And it was the woman who volunteered?’

‘The woman,’ Taita confirmed, his eyes glittering in the dark.

‘Now, everything depends on what we do next,’ Piay said as he absorbed his master’s words.

Taita’s smile faded. ‘I understand sacrifice more than most. I feel the loss of each one of those men who bravely gave their lives today, so Memphis may remain free. But the threat remains. There is still too much at stake for us to sit idle. We must strike the Shuyet’s force when he does not expect it.’

‘Then you mean to do it tonight?’ Piay asked.

Taita trailed his fingers along the oiled cedar wood of the rail as if he was caressing a lover’s skin – and in a way, he was, for in his mind the *Breath of Horus* had come to represent Lostris. And now he would once again offer her up to the gods. But for the first time he felt that he was finally coming close to knowing the Shuyet’s mind, drawing near to an understanding of the game they were playing. It was time to make the decisive move.

‘I will send the *Breath of Horus* into the heart of the Shuyet’s fleet, to destroy, and be destroyed.’

Taita could tell by the way Piay’s forehead wrinkled that the nomarch grasped just how difficult this sacrifice was for him.

‘The Shuyet will not expect an attack at night,’ Taita said. ‘Indeed, some would say that only a fool would risk the river’s currents in the dark.’

‘If I am a fool, then let me be a lucky one,’ Piay replied with alacrity, turning his face to the moon above. ‘Khonsu watches over us tonight. I like our chances.’

• • •

s Piay paced between the campfires and tents of the choked camp, he heard

A whispered prayers for survival turn to murmurs of hope – the sight of the nomarch, alive, immediately raised the spirits of his soldiers.

He heard Hannu before he saw him. The old soldier was holding forth, surrounded by a group of new recruits, a jug of beer on the table in front of him. Piay chuckled to himself as he circled around behind his friend.

‘They had the numbers, but it seems they had no wits,’ Hannu said as Piay joined the men who stood behind the general, listening to his story. ‘One thought I was easy prey, being shorter, and with a leg that doesn’t do what it should. So he came at me alone.’

‘Ah,’ Piay said. ‘That would be like approaching a cornered desert lynx.’

The soldiers around him chuckled and then turned to look at the nomarch, recognising his voice immediately, bowing their heads in respect, but Hannu was already on his second jug of beer and took no notice.

‘I’d met that lout before, in Avaris, doing the Shuyet’s dirty work,’ Hannu continued. ‘I didn’t think much of him then. I was in the shallows, water up to my knees. He towered over me, waving his sword over his head.’ Hannu shook his head, incredulous. ‘You know as well as I that victory sometimes turns on the smallest thing. That fool didn’t think to look down at his feet and see he was sinking into the mud. In his mind, he was already cutting off my head.’

‘But you saw,’ Piay said with a smile.

Hannu nodded. ‘He was stuck fast. Couldn’t balance himself. Couldn’t strike to save his life. Which is the point of the story.’ He jabbed a finger at a random member of the crowd he had drawn. ‘Even in the water, even with my leg, I could move faster. When his sword came down, I was already a step away. A couple of thrusts and I’d gutted him. His stupid expression was a sight. He couldn’t believe what had happened.’

‘And the nomarch?’ one of the recruits asked. ‘Where was he?’

Hannu fixed the man with a vicious stare. ‘The nomarch . . . He was already in the river. Left me on the bank with the four of them, he did.’

‘I heard it was ten men,’ Piay said. ‘And one of them was on a horse.’

Hannu scratched his head thoughtfully. ‘I don’t remember a man on a horse. Disgusting creatures.’

‘And the river crocodiles,’ another recruit asked, winking at Piay.

‘Aye, the crocodiles,’ Hannu said, taking a deep pull from his beer cup. ‘Now, let me tell you about crocodiles . . .’

‘I think it’s time to go, old friend,’ Piay said, pushing forward and setting his hand on Hannu’s shoulder. ‘There is much to do.’

• • •

The *Breath of Horus* swept on, the seasoned sailor at the steering pole making minute adjustments to his course. Despite the light of Khonsu’s orb glinting off the water, the way ahead was hazardous, the currents difficult to navigate. From where he was standing on the prow, Piay glanced back, past the stern, and into the night. Four more galleys ploughed through the water behind his flagship, following the same line.

The men heaved at their oars, their chanting, that kept the beat of the strokes, so low that it was barely audible. For Taita’s plan to work, the *Breath of Horus* had to be as close as possible to the enemy before it was seen. Turning his attention to the bank, Piay scanned the date palms and the fields beyond, but there was no sign of troops or scouts.

They had to be near now, Piay decided, as the steersman eased the galley around a long, gentle curve in the river. Crossing the length of the deck, he climbed the ladder to the poop-deck and looked to the north. There, in the distance, an orange glow hung over what must be the Shuyet’s camp.

Piay signalled to the steersman to bring the vessel in close to the bank while the men below shipped their oars. Squatting, he listened as the galleys behind them were driven through the reeds and up onto the shore, so that the men inside could disembark. Eventually, Hannu’s hooting call came to him, the signal that his Blue Crocodiles and what remained of the Memphis Guard were ready. When it came, Piay felt the familiar rush of excitement that always filled him before any battle. This is what he lived for, not listening to endless debates amongst the greybeards in the halls of the nomarch’s palace.

Taking a deep breath, Piay imagined what lay in front of them. The sailors would be asleep on their benches, as would the troops in their tents

around the campfires that still lit up the sky. There would be lookouts, of course, but Piay suspected that the Shuyet's lieutenants would have rewarded his men after the success of the day. Many of them would be drunk. There was little discipline in the Shuyet's army – they had seen it on the battlefield. And that would be their undoing.

'It's time,' he said to the steersman. 'Take her back out into the current.'

Dropping back down to the main deck, Piay moved amongst the benches. 'Row as fast as you can now,' he murmured, 'then when you hear the call from their lookouts, abandon ship.'

As the oarsmen grunted their assent, Piay hurried on and lowered himself into the suffocating heat of the dark hold. Around him, he heard the rats scurrying. He could smell the sharp, bitter tang of their urine, and behind it the unmistakable odour of pitch.

It was time to strike. Taita's plan would take the enemy by surprise – of that there was no doubt – but it would also either save Memphis or leave it entirely undefended. But this is what the Shuyet had forced Taita to do – to risk everything on one last counteraction.

When the cry of a lookout finally echoed across the water, much later than Piay had expected, a commotion erupted on deck as the sailors dropped their oars and threw themselves over the side, thundering into the water that crashed against the hull.

The *Breath of Horus* sped on.

Leaning forward, Piay felt around until his fingers closed on the pile of sailcloth pillaged from the other vessels in the fleet. He struck his flint, once, twice, three times. A spark ignited the oil that had been poured over the sails, and an instant later they began to crackle with flame.

Piay didn't wait to see what happened next. Scrambling back, he hauled himself out into the cool of the night, the air instantly chilling the sweat on his burning brow. Behind him, the hold was flooded with brilliant waves of amber light and the roaring of the fire.

What would Lostris have said about Taita's choice? Piay wondered as he stared into the flames. His beautiful ship, constructed in the memory of his forever-love, would soon be consumed and sink beneath the surface. But it might just save the dream of Egypt.

More of the Shuyet's lookouts were now calling into the night, their warnings spreading, but even if they saw the glow arising from the hold,

they could surely not anticipate the devastation that was about to be inflicted upon them.

Piay allowed himself a single tight smile as he climbed once more onto the poop-deck and saw the glowing firepots hanging aft on every one of the Shuyet's ships. Straining at anchor, the vessels were packed so closely together that it would have been possible to walk halfway across the great river.

No one on those ships would expect the great flagship of the Lord High Chancellor to be sacrificed in such a manner. Piay had been astonished by both the nature of the scheme and Taita's resolve, even after he had told him how the great General Tanus had chosen to use fire to disrupt the Hyksos fleet in the furious fighting that had followed the invasion.

When he was sure that the current would deliver the *Breath of Horus* to its final destination, Piay lashed the steering pole tight to the rail. Then, without breaking step, he launched himself towards the side of the ship, leaping up, with one foot upon the rail, and then propelling himself into the void. Plunging into the bone-chilling water, he immediately swam to the surface. He did not want to miss what was coming next.

Taking a breath, Piay watched the *Breath of Horus* surge towards the line of vessels like the glowing core of a furnace. Flames roared across the deck, curling around the mast and swooping upwards.

Terrified shouts rippled out over the water as the Shuyet's sailors lurched to their feet and saw their doom racing towards them.

The *Breath of Horus* was not a large vessel, but it had been designed and built for a king – it was swift in the current, unstoppable. It smashed into the line of ships with a sound so loud it was as if the very heavens had broken open. The force of the impact sent the anchored galleys crashing into one another, splintering hulls and scattering the crews. But that was only the start. The voracious flames, that had burned so bright in the ship's hull, leapt from the *Breath of Horus* onto one of the smaller vessels into which it had ploughed, and from there they jumped quickly to another, then another.

As Piay swam to the bank, he glanced back, watching the night become day as a firestorm engulfed the Shuyet's navy, illuminating the sprawling camp that lay beyond it. Piay could imagine the terror twisting the faces of the bleary-eyed warriors as they dragged themselves from deep, drunken

sleep, trying to comprehend the horrors around them. The soldiers running to the riverbank to watch in consternation as their navy burned, while Hannu and his men marched on their rear.

The gods have smiled on us tonight, Piay thought.

• • •

Limping along at the head of his men, Hannu heard the *Breath of Horus* strike its target. Behind him, five hundred men turned as one as the fire roared into the night sky.

Pulling out his sword, Hannu grasped the hilt tightly. This was the moment that they would avenge General Kamose, and all the men who had fallen to the Shuyet's horde. Hannu grinned as he considered the irony – his men would now be the instruments by which Anubis' army would be reunited with their commander-in-chief.

As the men behind him saw the Shuyet's camp appear through the trees, Hannu heard a murmur spread through the ranks, and they surged forward.

Mesmerised by the blaze on the river, the Shuyet's men failed to turn to meet the onrushing Blue Crocodiles until it was too late. Hannu hacked and slashed his way through the mass of men, many like those he had seen sailing down the river, and in Avaris. But the looks he saw on their faces in this moment were very different from what he had seen then. Before, he had seen hardness and determination. Now, all he saw was terror.

The Shuyet's army fled before Hannu's Blue Crocodiles, racing away along the riverbank and into the night.

Hannu couldn't stop smiling as he watched them run.

It had been a long time since he had felt so free. Not since the Hyksos had murdered his wife, not since a barbarian axe had given him the limp that he carried with him every day, not since he was a much younger man had he felt the joy of the hunt so keenly.

• • •

It was small wonder that their army had been overwhelmed on the battlefield, Piay thought as he scanned the Shuyet's camp. It was bigger than any town in the delta, almost as big as Memphis itself – a

sprawling mess of patched tents and donkey kraals and half-dug pit latrines.

From his vantage point on a low scrubby hill above the camp, Piay watched Hannu's men surging between the tents, cutting down any and all who stood in their way. In minutes, they would fall on the rear of the Shuyet's army, where the men milled impotently at the river's edge.

Piay and Taita had discussed their next move at length. Now they were certain that Gyasi was the only contestant who could be the Shuyet's spy, Piay wanted to force her to lead them to her master's lair, but Taita had been more cautious.

'If she is as we suspect, then she will make her move soon enough.'

'And if not?' Piay had asked.

'Then we have lost nothing. But if we expose her, then who knows what she will tell us and where she will take us? Even if we torture her, she can tell us what she likes. And I do not believe the Shuyet would not have considered that I could discover his spy. He will have had traps constructed in the delta, to keep his army from being stumbled upon.'

'So, we do nothing,' Piay grumbled.

'No – we behave as if we do not have the knowledge we think we have. We must rescue Gyasi. The contest has not ended. She is not a spy. But when she makes her move, we will be ready.'

In the centre of the tented city was a structure that was substantially larger than those around it. In appearance it resembled the command tent of General Kamose, but it was far bigger, covering enough ground, Piay guessed, to accommodate forty or fifty men.

The rest of the camp had emptied out as the Shuyet's men ran down to the shoreline, but twenty or so guards remained at their posts around this large tent. If Gyasi was still in the camp, this is where she would be – Piay was certain of it.

Piay watched as Hannu's men made their way towards the tent. A force of five hundred bearing down on twenty men. From this distance – and over the sound of the fires on the river – he couldn't hear the shouts of alarm, the battle cries of the Blue Crocodiles, the Shuyet's men calling to each other to stand firm. He could only see the flashing of bronze blades in the light from the burning ships, see the men falling and crawling and dying.

It was over before it had even truly begun.

And as Hannu's men moved on, Piay drew his sword and started to run.

• • •

The space around the tent was deserted. The guards that Piay had seen from the top of the hill lay where they had fallen. The Blue Crocodiles had taken their revenge – not a man remained alive.

Pushing back the tent flap, Piay peered inside. Hannu's men hadn't bothered to search the structure. They were moving fast, cutting down all those who stood before them, their eyes on the mass of men at the river. They could already taste the victory.

Gyasi was tied to one of the great posts that held up the roof of the tent, looking for all the world like a younger version of Taita – dressed in his flowing white robe and wearing his green malachite makeup, the resemblance was uncanny. She was beautiful without her hair, Piay thought; somehow more delicate, vulnerable.

A dejected group of soldiers and sailors surrounded her. Piay estimated there were at least fourscore, all bound at the wrists and clumped in small groups, sitting on the ground, awaiting whatever punishment the enemy had in store for them. Some were wounded, but their faces brightened as soon as they saw the nomarch.

Pulling a dagger from the waistband of his kilt, Piay moved to free the first man, a youth with a shock of red hair. 'Cut them loose,' he told him, handing him the blade, while he went himself to liberate Gyasi.

'Thank you, my lord,' Gyasi said as soon as she was free, bowing before the nomarch.

'Come, let's get you to safety. We have a long way to go.'

• • •

A pall of acrid smoke drifted over the abandoned camp, the rising sun turning it an unwholesome pink. Beneath it bodies were littered between crushed tents and dead campfires, the vultures and jackals already beginning their grim work. The air was thick with the metallic tang of blood and the reek of burning.

From where he had chosen to stand, on the higher ground, Taita turned away from what remained of the Shuyet's camp and looked out over the grey river that was starting to catch the first light of the new day. The

blackened ribs of at least ten galleys pushed up from the water, a few remaining flames still licking across the charred wood.

Around them, bodies turned slowly in the swirling currents, pale and bloated. Some of the men had died in the firestorm caused by the *Breath of Horus*; others had been picked off by the archers under Hannu's command as they tried to swim to safety.

Of the *Breath of Horus* there was no sign. Whatever remained of the ship that he had so lovingly conjured back to life was now scattered across the riverbed.

The previous night's battle had been short and bloody. Hannu and the Blue Crocodiles had fallen on the Shuyet's army as they watched their navy burn. The mighty firestorm and the shadows it had cast had so affected their minds that five hundred men materialising from the darkness had appeared to them like ten times that number. Few had stood firm. In a matter of moments, they had been routed, cries of terror and despair rising as the men fled, pursued by the Blue Crocodiles. The Blues had chased them north for miles, only pulling back at daybreak.

Through the thick smoke, two mismatched figures made their way towards Taita. Piay's kilt was nearly black with soot and filth, but he had a lightness to his step that Taita was pleased to see. The other man looked like a terrifying vision from the depths of the Duat. Hannu's white eyes stared out of a crimson visage. He was slaked from head to toe in the drying blood of his enemies, his dripping sword slapping against his good leg as he limped.

'One day, there will be tales told of this great victory, and of those who led the brave men of Memphis,' Taita said, when the pair reached him. 'But whatever you might think, this is not the end.'

Piay looked back across the camp, frowning. 'It is true that we did not destroy the Shuyet's army, but they are broken now. They will not take the field against us any time soon.'

Hannu wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and flicked the blood away. 'And I would wager that there will be far fewer new recruits waiting outside the Temple of Baal once word of this slaughter travels across the Lower Kingdom.'

Squatting, Taita looked towards the rising sun. 'All of this is true, but we would be foolish to take too much comfort from it. If there is one thing

that we can be certain of, it is that the Shuyet is already plotting his next move – if he has not already set it in motion.'

'What man who has not been chosen by the gods could imagine himself Pharaoh?' Hannu grumbled. 'He just wants an army of slaves to do his bidding.'

'I am starting to feel as if I know him as a brother,' Taita replied. 'And I do not believe he is interested in either wealth or power. He wants a divided Egypt, one in which the Lower Kingdom that began with the Red Pretender is restored to its former glory. He wants the very opposite of what we are fighting for, but he believes in his cause wholeheartedly.'

'What do you suggest, then, my master?' Piay asked.

Taita closed his eyes. 'We must keep our scouts roaming the land. And when we find where he has made his camp, we must be prepared to strike swiftly, and as savagely as we did last night. The Shuyet must be punished for all he has wrought, if the principle of Ma'at is to be established in this new Egypt.'

'Aye, well, I am all for punishment,' Hannu said. 'But it can wait until after I have washed this victory down with a jug of beer.'

With a respectful nod to Taita, Hannu trudged down the slope towards a small group of Blue Crocodiles resting on the riverbank. Stripped naked, they had washed the blood from their bodies and were now drying in the morning sun, laughing and smiling with the euphoria of men who had stood at the entrance to the Duat, looked into it, and yet survived.

Piay slumped to the ground, exhausted. 'At least, for a while, we can rest.' Piay exhaled as he closed his eyes.

In that moment, Taita saw in him the frightened, lonely boy who had been delivered into his care so many years before.

'How is Gyasi?' Piay asked.

'Sleeping,' Taita replied. 'They didn't harm her. She'll soon recover her strength.'

'Did she have anything to say about her time in the Shuyet's camp?'

Taita shook his head, then, pushing himself to his feet, he said: 'Come, we must return to Memphis. The Shuyet's army is defeated. It is time for the people of Memphis to celebrate their victorious soldiers and their Nomarch.'

• • •

The golden light thrown by the lamps washed across the limestone, so that the entire temple hall seemed to glow. Zahra let herself be drawn back to her childhood, to when her father had first told her that the architects who had designed the building had done so in accordance with ancient instruction, so that all those who came to worship would feel the presence of the god.

The hem of Zahra's cloak swished across the flagstones as she padded towards the statue of Seth and placed an offering at his feet. After Nimlot's death at the hands of Assis, the Hyksos had torn down the old statues and re-dedicated the temple to the Lord of the Red Land, the god of disorder and violence.

This was the first time she had returned to the place where her father had died. Then, she had been a child. Now, she was a woman who had seen almost thirty floods, so changed by struggle that she could barely remember the child that she had been.

Zahra kneeled in front of the god and muttered a prayer. A part of her had dreaded returning to this place and the memories that would be awoken by doing so, but now that she was here, she felt a deep peace, and a connection with her father that she had not expected. She could hear his voice, see the way he moved his hands as he completed the daily rituals, the way he would share his meal, dividing what was on his plate into three equal portions, the way he would read, his finger moving alongside the script, his lips moving slightly as he savoured the knowledge contained on the scrolls preserved in the temple's library. Even though she honoured him with everything that she did, she still missed Nimlot deeply – his wise counsel, his love.

Standing, Zahra eased down her hood so that her black hair tumbled down her back.

'Where are you?' she demanded.

Her words echoed into the farthest corners of the hall. She knew that there were no priests in the temple – Qar had paid the followers of Seth a princely sum to abandon the building, so that brother and sister could make their pilgrimage unmolested. It was only right, he had told her, that they visit the place where their journey had begun, on the night when everything

would change. When Zahra had asked him what he meant, he had only smiled. Qar was filled with plans these days, many of which he did not see the need to reveal to his sister.

Yes, Qar had changed, and Zahra had grown to despise him. He had become exactly as Heru had warned the night that they had revenged themselves on Assis. He was petulant, arrogant, reckless, and while he claimed to be willing to go to any ends to see the Lower Kingdom liberated from the Hyksos and returned to its former glory, he sought that glory only for himself. Zahra knew that her father would not have approved, and she was also certain that she had always understood Nimlot better than Qar.

Prowling towards the annexes, Zahra heard voices. One belonged to her brother, the other to Heru, who had been more loyal to her father than either of them could ever have hoped. His entire life had been dedicated to his mentor's children, as their lives were dedicated to their father's vision. He offered his advice, certainly, but whatever notion Qar dreamed up – and it was usually Qar – Heru made sure that it became reality.

Not once had he questioned Qar when he had said that he wanted to build a fortress in the swamps and fill it with an army. Heru had overseen the recruitment of the men from across Lower Egypt, their numbers growing by the day. When Qar had sent raiders to rob the caravans in the Sinai, Heru had not opposed him.

Zahra sighed. If only it had been Heru who had overseen the rebuilding of the citadel – the sourcing of the stone, the timber – and the raising of the fortress walls. If only it had been Heru who had bribed and threatened the merchants and levy-takers, so that it could all be done in secret. But no – Qar had insisted that this was her work. 'You are clever,' he had said. 'You will find ways without drawing the attention of the Hyksos.'

And she had, but it had been dull and tiring. Increasingly, she had suspected that Qar had made it her work to keep her away from the business of building the army and whatever other schemes he was devising.

Zahra strode on, following the mouldering odour of ancient papyrus into the library. Qar was pacing around the chamber, throwing his arms in the air as each new idea assailed him. Heru listened quietly, nodding.

They both turned when Zahra walked in, Heru smiling at her with a deep fondness. 'We are bettered by your presence,' he said.

Zahra kissed Heru on the cheek, something she would have done to her

father, but as she turned back to her brother, she caught a flash of jealousy in his eyes.

'Leave us,' Qar said to Heru. 'My sister and I would be alone with our memories.'

Rather than heeding Qar's command, Heru looked to Zahra. Only when she nodded did he take his leave.

As soon as Heru had left the room, Qar turned to Zahra. 'We have received word that the Hyksos have been defeated at Thebes. How, I cannot say, but even as we speak the barbarians are preparing for Lord Taita's army to march north.'

Zahra raised an eyebrow at the news. 'Then Father's dream is possible. Lower Egypt will be free. Is that what you meant when you said that everything changes this night?'

'No!' Qar said coldly. 'The Upper Kingdom is as much our enemy as the Hyksos. If they drive the barbarians out of the delta, we will have no opportunity to make our move.'

Qar spun away, but as he did so, Zahra thought she glimpsed an odd expression on his face. When he turned back, he was holding something as black and polished as onyx.

Raising the Anubis mask, Qar set it upon his head.

Zahra gasped and took a step back. 'That was Father's!'

'The mask was the reason I wanted to return to the temple.' Qar's voice was muffled, but to Zahra it also sounded different – gruffer.

'Take it off!' Zahra insisted.

'No. An army will not follow any man, but it will follow the god of the dead, immortal and all-powerful. As Qar, I was just a man. But when I put on the mask, I am Qar no more. Now, I am Anubis. The god inhabits me, just as he inhabited our father. And when we come to our final battle, it will be as Anubis that I will show our enemies the path to the afterlife.'

'And while you are leading our army into battle, what of me?'

'You have important work to do. The fortress –'

'No. I will not be pushed into the shadows. Father would not have wanted that for me. I was the one he loved. He trusted me.'

Her words cut her brother deeply, just as she had intended. In the silence that followed, Zahra could feel the weight of Qar's cold stare through the eyes of the mask. She shivered.

‘I thought you would say as much,’ he said eventually. ‘But this is how it shall be from now on.’

‘I will not allow it.’

Once again he fell silent, eyeing her askance.

‘Qar –’

‘Qar is dead. My name now is the Shuyet.’ Qar raised his arms wide, as if performing to an invisible audience. ‘A new name for one who is both man and god. The Shuyet – the unknowable, the immortal, the all-powerful.’

Zahra felt the overwhelming urge to slap her brother. She had to prevent this madness, prevent Qar from dishonouring her father’s vision. ‘You are making a fool of yourself,’ she said coldly.

‘You are a woman,’ Qar said contemptuously. ‘You are ungrateful, and deceitful. From now on, you will have no part in the fulfilment of Father’s dream.’

‘You are not the one decide that, brother.’

‘I am no longer your brother. The Shuyet is my name,’ he shouted, lunging at his sister, sending her sprawling backwards.

As the back of her skull struck the flagstones, dulling her senses, Qar approached quickly, still wearing the mask of Anubis. ‘I am the one who will fulfil Father’s vision,’ he spat bitterly. ‘I am the one who will lead the Lower Kingdom into a new age of glory.’

Qar sank to one knee, grabbing his sister roughly by the hair as the world spun around her. ‘You will obey me! I am your master, your god!’

Zahra felt her forehead crack resoundingly against the flagstones, and then again, and again, her eyes fluttering as her vision faded.

Only one thought came through the pain: My brother is going to kill me.

• • •

As the great galley groaned around him, Piay lay with his eyes closed. He wanted to feel elation – the Shuyet’s army had been defeated, his navy all but destroyed – but he knew that with their victory, he had also hastened the end of his time as the Nomarch of Memphis. With the Shuyet humbled, Pharaoh would appoint another nomarch, and he would become Piay of Thebes once again. It was what he

had wanted, what he had longed for, but now it was within reach, he was consumed with jealousy. The men he sailed with were his men, from his city – to which they now returned. A city which, because of him, remained free. Who would shepherd it into the future? Who would finish the work he had begun?

At the creak of boards, Piay reached for his sword. ‘Who’s there?’

As he peered into the shadows, he recognised his visitor.

It was Gyasi.

She stood before him, wearing only a white silk slip, her shaven head bare. In the dim lamplight, the curves of her body pressed against the fabric and her eyes sparkled.

She held a finger to her lips and approached him quietly, her bare feet padding over the deck without a sound. Then she took his face in her hands, and pulled it close to her own.

As she pressed her full lips to his, Piay felt a rush of emotion as he thought of Myssa, and how long it had been since he had known the pleasures of a woman’s body.

As she lifted his hand to cup her breast and pressed herself against him, Piay’s long dormant desire came flooding back in a way that he had thought impossible. And while it came tinged with feelings of shame, as though being with a woman again was somehow a betrayal of his beloved, he ignored those thoughts and allowed himself to run his thumb over her nipple, pebble-hard under the silk.

Stepping back, Gyasi shrugged off her slip and stood before him, naked in the torchlight.

‘I can’t,’ Piay whispered, thinking back to his conversation with Taita as the *Breath of Horus* rocked beneath them. She was the Shuyet’s creature, sent to deceive and mislead them.

‘I think you can,’ she countered, smiling. ‘I have seen how you look at me. And I welcome it. That the Nomarch of Memphis would come for me, that he would save me from the enemy . . . himself. I know what it is you want.’

‘No. I cannot.’ But even as he said the words, he knew that he could – he would. Taita could not be sure that Gyasi was the Shuyet’s spy. He had said that they must wait for her to make her move.

‘Would Myssa have wanted you to remain this way?’ she purred.

Piay's eyes widened. 'I don't know.' His voice softened. 'I don't know what she wanted, in those final days.'

'She would have wanted you to cherish your memories of her – but not to live in them, caged by them. Myssa would not have wanted you to use her death as an excuse to withdraw from life.'

'You don't know what she would have wanted.'

'Perhaps not,' Gyasi admitted. 'But I know what you desire.'

Stepping towards him, she took his hand and placed it between her legs, pressing herself against his fingers. She was shaven, as was the Egyptian fashion, and he felt her insistent wetness, but despite his primal yearning, he resisted. She took his face between her hands again as the tears rolled down his cheeks, bringing her mouth to his and teasing him with her tongue. He realised as he opened his mouth to her that, for the first time in what seemed like an eternity, he felt free of his grief. And with its sudden departure, Piay felt his loins swell and stiffen.

Pulling his kilt aside, Gyasi took his manhood in her hand, guiding him between her legs and into herself, baring her teeth as she did so, a lioness taking her prize. Piay called out as she thrust her hips forward, driving him deep into the raw, liquid heat that lay inside her.

'You will give me what is mine,' she hissed into his ear as he lost himself in pleasure. 'You will give me what I was promised.'

• • •

The white walls of Memphis wavered in the heat haze, the date palms swaying lazily in the breeze that rose from the river. This was no mirage, though there was no doubt that most of those aboard the remaining ships of the war flotilla had thought that they would never see the city again.

Across the benches, the weary oarsmen fell silent as the ancient city came into view. Then, as one, they cheered, lifting their clenched fists into the air.

As he listened to the voices raised in triumph, from where he stood in the prow, Taita felt a deep sense of satisfaction settle upon him.

The fanfare announcing the return of the army rang out from the towers that watched over Peru-nefer, as the heralds spotted the sails in the hazy

distance. Taita knew that throughout the city, the sound would draw people from the forges and warehouses, from the temples and shrines. Victory had never been assured – far from it – and after the Hyksos had inflicted so much suffering, everyone in Memphis would have feared the hand of another tyrant.

‘That is a sight that stirs the soul,’ Piay said as he joined his master. ‘Memphis.’

‘Now perhaps we can begin our work to build this new kingdom and to usher in the golden age of which we have all dreamed,’ Taita said, but even as the words escaped his lips, he knew that there was still much to do. The Shuyet’s army might have been defeated, but the man himself was still in the shadows, moving his pieces around the board. The Shuyet had to be stopped – once and for all.

A multitude of cheering citizens thronged the edge of the wharf: children and women with infants in their arms, old men who had come straight from the fields.

Gradually, the chaotic din coalesced into one sound: ‘Nomarch! Nomarch!’

The jubilant mob was praising the man who had brought them so much hope in such a short time.

Taita glanced at Piay and watched in surprise as a tear gleamed in the corner of his eye.

‘Come,’ Taita said, ‘enjoy your moment.’

• • •

When they reached the city, Piay immediately announced a feast for the heroes of Memphis – the soldiers and sailors who had fought alongside him. While the men had the grime washed from their bodies by the slaves in the barracks and put on pristine kilts, the palace kitchens became a hive of activity.

As long tables were erected in the central atrium of the palace and jars of beer hauled from the cellars, the smell of roasting lamb rose from the ovens.

To celebrate their victory, the Blue Crocodiles and the men of the Memphis Guard gorged themselves. There were pomegranates, watermelon

and honeyed dates, followed by tilapia baked in vine leaves, flatbreads and a stew of lentils and fava beans flavoured delicately with garlic and cumin – the palace slaves had emptied the markets of Memphis to provide for the army – all of it washed down with endless cups of beer. When the lamb arrived, they fell upon it, the juices spraying across their chins.

Taita sat on the fringes of the feast, sharing in the moment, but barely picking at his food. He watched Gyasi carefully as she laughed with the men sitting either side of her. Asim and Sadiki were also present. The two men had been recalled to the palace as soon as the fleet had returned to Memphis, but Taita had been sure to separate the three. Asim was seated next to Hannu, and Sadiki was enduring one of Ankhu's history lessons. They had both been told that they were to receive a reward for their service to Pharaoh, and neither man would be disappointed with the fine gifts that Taita had chosen for them from the city vault.

Eventually, Taita slipped away to his chamber, lighting a small pot of incense to calm himself and clear his head. For a while, he sat by the window, enjoying the night breeze on his face as he looked out across the flickering lights of the city, and then, when he felt his thoughts had finally settled, he retired to his bed.

• • •

Waking before dawn, in the most silent part of the night, Taita washed himself, put on his robe and applied his makeup. Slipping out of the palace, he made his way to the river gate. The slaves were waiting for him, as he had arranged, with the nomarch's chariot; the stallion that drew it tossing its mane and snorting at the shadows.

Soon, he was pulling away from Memphis, towards the plateau. Taita marvelled at the beauty of his beloved land as a crimson band rose on the eastern horizon. The desert foxes ran from the chariot as he entered the necropolis, ducking into the burrows they had dug into the old tombs, the flycatchers swooping under the stallion's feet as the insects rose to greet the morning light.

When the Great Pyramid appeared, Taita felt his heart flutter in a way that he had not experienced since he was a boy.

Hobbling the stallion near the tunnel entrance, Taita hurried around the

corner of the great monument as the shadows flooded away through the channels and crevices the wind had scored into desert waste. The entrance to the tomb remained closed, sealed by the power of the medu neter. *Taita imagined slipping into the dank interior, lighting the oil lamps that he had left at the foot of Imhotep's tomb. His skin tingled with excitement as he thought of looking once more on the spells that covered the walls – he could feel them resonating, even from outside the pyramid.*

With a tremendous effort, he wrenched himself away, shielding his eyes against the rising sun. As the world re-formed around him, Taita's heart thundered in his chest, and he realised what little control he had over his actions. If anything, the spells were controlling him. This was why Imhotep had sealed them in his tomb.

Taita had told himself that it was only here that he would be able to think deeply on how to counter the Shuyet's next strike – only in a sanctum constructed by a mind as great as his own, the mind that called to him across the ages. In the presence of the spells that, when deciphered, would propel Egypt into a future even greater than its past, Taita would be able to confirm his suspicions about his adversary, or perhaps achieve a new insight.

But he had been deceiving himself. He had not told Piay that he would be visiting this place. He had wanted to be able to indulge himself without censure. Now he saw how wrong he had been, how far astray the promise of the spells had led him. Taita prayed that he had the strength of will to stop himself before he gave up this life for the next one.

Walking to the great pyramid, Taita sank to his knees, his back against the cool stone, and closed his eyes. Gradually, his thoughts stilled and he felt his will reassert itself.

He let his mind drift, his heartbeat slowing and his breathing becoming like the swell of the Great Green. Gradually the edges of the world around him sank beneath those waves.

Taita could not be sure how much time had passed since he had closed his eyes, but when he looked around, he found himself standing at the foot of a sweeping dune, looking out over the moonlit necropolis.

'Come to my aid, I beseech you,' Taita called, his voice rising above the whine of the wind across the sands. 'Guide me.'

Taita listened to the beat of his heart as he looked out over the City of

the Dead. Nothing stirred. Then, finally, a shadow began to coalesce at the heart of the necropolis, a figure moving purposefully towards him.

As it closed on him, Taita recognised the green ibis head of Thoth. God of writing, of wisdom, of magic. He had not spoken the name of the deity he wished to invoke, but the gods knew.

Seeming to grow in stature with each step he took, Thoth approached, towering ever higher over Taita, until he came to a halt a spear's throw from him. His headdress shone – the lunar disc poised on top of a crescent moon – and in his left hand he held the ankh, *the symbol of eternal life.*

For a while Taita could not speak – this close to the god, supernatural power rushed through his veins, forcing his heart to beat twice as fast, his breath to catch in his throat. But when Thoth levelled his arm and pointed the ankh, *Taita felt his lips begin to move.*

'Great Thoth, I seek guidance,' Taita began. 'You, who are the receptacle of all wisdom, understand the struggle that consumes me. I feel this world slipping away from me. I see the afterlife and all the mysteries it contains, so near I could close my fingers upon it. But I also understand that there is still work for me to do in this world. I must protect Egypt. And yet the urge to leave this world behind blinds me. Is my adversary truly as I have come to suspect?'

The howl of the wind echoed across the desolate landscape and Taita feared that the god was not going to respond. But then, he raised his hands to his face. It was a mask, Taita saw, as Thoth peeled it away. Underneath were the eyes, the nose, the mouth he knew so well. Lostris was left standing before him in a silk dress, radiant in the moonlight that shone down on the necropolis. Lostris in her prime – tall, stately and beautiful. Queen Lostris.

Taita blinked in confusion. 'My queen,' he whispered in awe.

'My Taita,' she answered, in a voice that chimed like a bell. 'You know in your heart the answer to your question. You know this truth is why I have appeared to you, to remind you of things forgotten, of what can, and should be.'

Taita felt himself overwhelmed at seeing his beloved again.

'It is not yet time,' Lostris said, as if she could read his thoughts. 'You have a purpose here, Taita. You are Egypt and Egypt is you, and for now, one cannot exist without the other.'

'Have I not earned the promise of the afterlife?' Taita asked.

‘I am filled with joy at the thought of spending eternity with you, and I know that you desire to be at my side. But there is a warp and a weft to the affairs of mortals, a pattern designed by the gods. No man must attempt to alter it, not even you, Taita.’

Taita bowed his head, accepting Lostris’ words.

‘Yes,’ his queen whispered gently. ‘Egypt still needs you, Taita. Do not allow yourself to be led astray by what the incantations on the walls of the tomb may promise. These spells have been revealed to you, so that in deciphering them and calling forth their power, you may fulfil your purpose. Not so that you may forsake it.’ Lostris smiled. ‘Remember, my Tata, that I am always with you.’

A deep sadness swelled in Taita’s heart when he heard the nickname that Lostris had given him as a child. You must be patient, he told himself. Egypt had to be united. A great reward would be waiting – she would be there to greet him.

• • •

When the feast was over, Piay made his way to the barracks. He could hear the raucous laughter of the soldiers within – the celebrations would continue long into the night. Beside the main entrance, stairs led down to the cells. Tonight, they were unguarded, and Piay stepped down into the cool, dank air.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, Piay stopped and listened, wincing at the smell of human waste. Silence. The men held captive here lived out their days sleeping on urine-soaked straw, growing pale and half-blind like fish swimming in the depths of an underwater cave.

When he reached his father’s cell, he called into the dark abyss inside: ‘Asil.’

‘What do you want?’ his father demanded.

‘Forgiveness,’ Piay said.

Asil snorted, then laughed, a dry, sandpaper cackle. ‘You’ve come to temper your guilt for having placed your father in this pit. Well, I won’t give you any reprieve. You have made your choice – thrown in your lot with men and women you do not know over the father who begot you. There are few in this world who could betray their own kin as coldly as

you, *Piay of Thebes*.' Asil formed the last three words as if he was rolling a pebble around his mouth. 'But the fact that you can sleep peacefully, having done what you have done, tells me the kind of man you are.'

'If you can show forgiveness, then I can show it, too.'

Piay's words hung in the air and the silence behind the door deepened.

'Forgiveness? What are you talking about?'

'I am not a cruel man. You are old, and soon the rigours of imprisonment will begin to stifle the flame that still flickers inside you.'

'You sound like Taita,' Asil snapped. 'Why don't you say what you mean?'

'Very well. I've come to offer you a chance to escape from this place.'

There was silence. 'How?' Asil said, eventually, his voice flat.

'Renounce your claim to the leadership of the Guild of Thieves. Admit your crimes before the people in the market square –'

'Never!' Asil interjected, his voice swelling with indignation.

'Do this and I will agree to banish you.'

'Why should I do anything?' Asil hissed. 'You promised me a window, light and fresh air, when you visited before. I helped you, and yet I'm still rotting here, in this stinking hole.' The old man must have leaned forward, for Piay was caught in a blast of foul breath. 'Banishment is not freedom,' Asil hissed. 'You said it yourself, I am an old man. I will not survive it.'

'It is a mercy.'

'Well, then it is a thin mercy.'

Piay had spent a long time considering his offer to Asil. Hannu would have called him a fool. Taita would have disapproved. 'A nomarch must be like a stone resisting the desert winds,' he would have said. And yet here he was.

Asil laughed, a cold and hollow sound. 'No, I see it now. This is how you finally defeat me.'

'I do not seek victory –'

'You do. In this way you can feel like a good man, a righteous man, a man who showed mercy to his black-hearted father. You'll be able to hold your head high and bask in the approval of the one you've chosen over me. And I'll crawl away, whipped and broken, with nothing to show for the life I've lived. Defeated, and seen by all to have lost.'

'Take my offer,' Piay pressed. 'Live.'

‘I will not give you the satisfaction. I am Asil, the leader of the Guild of Thieves. You will not take that away from me. You will not defeat me, just as you will not defeat the Shuyet.’

• • •

Taita could not rest. He had been awoken by the end of his dream. Pacing the length of his chamber, he eventually came to a halt at the window, looking out across the moon-dappled rooftops. Only the torches at the temples burned, as they did all night, for the light of the gods – their eternal flame – could never be extinguished.

The air was filled with the scent of cooling stone and the musty smell of the river drifting in from Peru-nefer on the breeze. A bowl of flatbread and honey-soaked figs sat untouched on the windowsill. Taita had not felt hungry since they had arrived back in Memphis.

He had laid his plans well, like a spider spinning its web, as one of the less charitable members of Pharaoh’s court had once described him. But he was wise enough to know that even the best-laid plans could go awry. It was the gods, in the end, who decided what would be.

Turning away from the window, Taita moved to the low table where his medicine chest stood, its lid open. From a hidden compartment he retrieved a small drawstring bag, fashioned from the softest leather. He weighed it in his hand, then opened it and removed the Periapt of Lostris – a long golden chain on which hung a five-pointed star of exquisite workmanship. Slipping the chain over his head, Taita lifted the star and touched it to his lips. Inside was a lock of hair that Taita had snipped from Lostris’ head as she lay on the embalmer’s table.

Reaching back into the drawstring bag, Taita withdrew six lengths of pink ribbon and tied five of them carefully, one by one, around his wrist. Finally, he let the last one spiral gently to the floor of his chamber, where it would be clearly visible to anyone entering the room.

His work complete, Taita lost himself in his nightly ritual of smearing perfumed oils from his medicine chest into his skin. Then, dimly, he heard the whisper of approaching feet.

Taita turned to face the door. A moment later Gyasi appeared – her eyes glittering, her face flushed and her breathing ragged. With one hand tucked

behind her back, she leaned against the stone doorpost to catch her breath, the lamplight catching the fine stubble that now covered her skull.

‘My Lord Taita,’ Gyasi said, bowing deeply. ‘Is my arrival a surprise to you?’

‘On the contrary, I have been waiting for you.’

Gyasi smiled. ‘I had suspected that you would anticipate my coming.’

She slipped into the chamber, looking around to make sure they were alone.

‘Do you know who I am?’ she asked.

‘I know full well,’ he replied. ‘You are the Shuyet’s emissary.’

Gyasi smiled again – a coy, flattering smile – and nodded as she began to circle him. ‘If you’ve known all this time, why then did you not have me arrested and interrogated?’

‘As your presence in this room attests, you serve a grander purpose,’ Taita replied calmly.

Gyasi narrowed her eyes. ‘I can’t help but be curious, my lord. When did you realise that I was a spy?’

‘When I first beheld you. There were others I considered, but with each challenge I became more certain. And then you confirmed it with your decision to lead the boarding party. You knew that you were in little danger – that you would be captured and kept safe, and, ultimately, rescued. And you were correct.’

‘The great Taita. Too clever even for the Shuyet’s schemes,’ Gyasi mocked.

Taita tried not to show the least hint of self-satisfaction, but he felt pleased that things were unfolding just as he had envisioned. He knew that the Shuyet would not have been able to resist sending someone to compete in his competition, someone who could get close to him.

‘What now, Gyasi?’ Taita asked.

‘Now?’ A smile curled back across Gyasi’s lips. ‘Now I have a surprise for you.’

As if she was unveiling a gift, Gyasi withdrew the hand that had remained hidden behind her back. She was clutching a knife, the bronze blade stained and dripping. Looking down at the limestone flags, Taita could now see the blood that had followed her into the chamber.

While he knew that someone as young and vital as Gyasi could wound

him, Taita doubted that she could take his life. He was not afraid. Instead, he stared at the bloody knife in dismay. This was something he had not calculated.

‘What have you done, Gyasi?’ he asked.

She grinned, and her eyes gleamed darkly. ‘I have done as my master did with the scribe in the vault. I have left the name of Anubis in blood, so that in your absence, fear will grip this city.’

‘Whom have you killed?’

Gyasi smiled. ‘Men are so easily deceived.’

Taita glared at her. ‘You will be punished for this crime,’ he said coldly.

‘But that’s not what you want.’ Gyasi giggled, toying with him. ‘Your great mind yearns to meet the Shuyet, and I am the only one who can take you to Hardai. So, you will remain quiet, until we are well clear of the city walls.’

As Gyasi tied his hands behind his back, Taita felt a twist of unease. Now was the moment of greatest risk, and even he could not see how things would play out. His survival would be in the hands of the gods.

‘The slightest sound from your lips and I will bring a swift end to the legend of Taita the mage,’ Gyasi said. ‘Do you understand me?’

‘I will not cry out, have no fear of that,’ Taita replied. ‘I will go with you without a struggle.’

Gyasi laughed. ‘You are wise, but I wonder if you will be so certain of yourself when you are face to face with the Shuyet?’ she said.

• • •

In the depths of his nightmare, Piay saw his father: the old man was standing on the edge of the necropolis, and the skin on his face was so taut that all Piay could see was his skull, the hollows of the eye sockets filled with shadow, the thin lips pulled back from yellowing teeth.

The vision vanished as Piay felt himself catapulted into consciousness. Rough hands were shaking him. Through his daze, he realised the sheet covering his body was sodden with sweat.

Pushing himself up, Piay looked into the face of one of the palace guards. In the light of the lamp, his face was a mask of horror.

‘What is it?’ Piay demanded. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘You must come with us, Nomarch . . .’ the guard babbled.

‘Murder,’ the man behind him muttered.

Piay jumped from his bed and pulled on his kilt. ‘Who has been murdered?’

‘Two men,’ the first guard replied.

The guards hurried out of the room, holding the lamp in front of them, Piay chasing after the circle of light.

He smelled the metallic tang of blood drifting through the deserted corridors long before he saw it. As the two guards led him into the silent throne room, the lamp revealed two bodies sprawled on the flagstones in front of the throne, a lake of gleaming blood around them.

Piay stepped into the chamber. Though the two bodies were face down, he recognised both of them instantly – Asim and Sadiki, the two defeated contestants. His thoughts raced in time with the pounding of his heart. Why were they in the throne room at this time of night? The only explanation was that the killer had lured them there.

But who would want to murder these two men? They had made no enemies in Memphis, that he knew of, and had done nothing that could have brought about this fate.

Dismayed, Piay barked urgent orders to the guards: ‘Fetch Taita. And find Gyasi.’

As soon as the men had raced away, Piay took a lamp and prowled around the bloody scene. These poor souls had not been cut down by the swords of warriors. Their bodies had been opened up by a small blade, the weapon of a cut-throat.

As Taita had taught him, Piay imagined the scene as if the events that had led to it had transpired in front of him. The first of the contestants – Asim, perhaps, from the way his blood was already congealing – had ventured into the throne room. The murderer had taken him by surprise and slashed his throat.

The killer had then lured Sadiki into the chamber. The moment his eyes had settled on Asim’s body, the murderer had despatched him in the same manner.

As Piay considered that bloody deed, a notion gripped him and he swung the light back towards the door into the chamber.

There, on the limestone flags was a trail to follow: a line of ruby droplets.

But Piay glimpsed something more, too. His heart skipped a beat as he lurched forward to examine the wall beside the doorway.

Kneeling, he moved the lamp closer. There, traced on the creamy limestone, was the bloody outline of the symbol for Anubis, just as it had appeared at the scene of Djau-Aa's murder inside the vault.

Piay jumped up at the sound of running feet. Breathless, the two guards careened into the chamber.

'We cannot find Taita,' one of them gasped. 'And Gyasi's chamber is empty.'

'We discovered this in Taita's chamber,' the second guard added. 'It was lying on the floor near the door, as if it had been dropped deliberately.' He held up a long pink ribbon.

Piay studied the ribbon, his thoughts racing. So, Gyasi was the Shuyet's spy. Taita had been certain after she had volunteered to board the enemy's flagship during the river battle, but this confirmed it – for only she would have known Asim and Sadiki well enough to lure them to their deaths. She had killed them both to leave a clear message from her master.

Piay's stomach knotted. Gyasi had made her move. Now, it was up to him to execute the second part of Taita's plan – to follow the clues his master had left and discover the Shuyet's stronghold.

• • •

Under the light of the full moon, the cart trundled out through the gate and along the dusty road towards the river. The woman who walked beside it, her woollen cloak pulled close around her, the hood covering her head, lazily flicked a switch at the rump of the donkey hauling the wagon.

On the wall above the gate, the guards were passing the watch in idle chatter. They had no interest in a merchant hauling her wares out of Memphis.

Hidden in the back of the cart, under a mound of cloth reeking of mould, Taita simmered at the indignity of his captivity. The hide strips that bound his hands behind his back cut deeply into his flesh, and a filthy rag

had been stuffed into his mouth in case he cried out for help. Every breath was an effort.

Of course, he had no intention of raising the alarm, and he had promised as much, but Gyasi could not be sure.

For what seemed like an age, the wagon rumbled through the ruts. Hurled from side to side, Taita's joints protested with every jolt. Finally, the rocking eased and Taita imagined that the wagon had left the main road to Peru-nefer and was moving along one of the softer mud tracks that led down to the river.

When the cart finally came to a halt, Taita heard a scrabbling, then the cloth was dragged off him and he was helped out onto the soft ground by Gyasi. They were in a lonely spot, under a row of date palms. Taita could smell the river and hear the water gurgling against the bank.

Gyasi leaned in and yanked the rag from Taita's mouth. Her knife glinted in the moonlight as she pricked it against his neck. 'No sound,' she reminded him.

Taita nodded.

Gyasi prodded him towards the river and they waded out to a moored skiff. The vessel was small, like the ones fishermen used everywhere along the Nile, with a thin mast and a sail the colour of rotting papyrus. To Taita's eyes, it did not look river-worthy – the bundles of strapped reeds were sagging along the hull – but it would draw no attention.

Gyasi pushed Taita into the skiff and dragged a cloth over him. Once she had climbed aboard, Taita felt the weight of the craft shift and the lurching motion as the skiff eased out into the current.

In the suffocating dark beneath the cloth, Taita thought of Piay. He prayed his charge had found his message, and was already preparing to follow him downriver.

• • •

With each gust of wind that carried the skiff further away from Memphis, Gyasi grew more comfortable, until she began to sing as she sailed. Her voice, like the rest of her, was beautiful, but Taita barely heard a word. Instead, his thoughts flew beyond their tiny craft, calculating the distance they had travelled and the direction they were

heading.

Taita marked the passing of the day by the gradual rise of the oppressive heat. By the time Gyasi pulled in to the riverbank – where she untied his bonds, allowing the blood to flow again in his limbs, and handed him a water-hide – Taita felt like a waterfowl that had been roasted in a clay oven.

‘I do not wish you to suffer unduly.’ The Shuyet’s agent smiled. ‘At least, not yet.’

Under her hawklike scrutiny, Gyasi allowed her captive to wander along the riverbank to relieve himself and stretch his long, stork-thin legs. With a sad shake of his head, Taita proclaimed that he was lost and would never be able to make it back to Memphis alone, even if he could escape. Then he announced that he was looking forward to engaging with the Shuyet’s powerful mind. Taita was pleased with his performance. With each pretence, he sensed Gyasi’s suspicions ebbing, her scrutiny becoming less intense.

When Gyasi fumbled with the mooring rope, Taita took one of the pink ribbons from his wrist and tied it around the neck of the tallest bulrush.

This was how Taita’s spies operated in the wilds and how Piay had been trained. Hannu would be with him, and he had battlefield eyes. He would not miss such an obvious sign.

Helping Taita back on to the skiff, Gyasi flicked the mooring rope free before she raised her sail. Smiling to himself, Taita crawled back undercover.

• • •

Zahra awoke to a vision of sunlight through a window. Her mind told her that the window was the one in her chamber in Hardai – that she was home – but her eyes told her otherwise. The sunlight splintered into shards of unbearable brightness in front of them, and the stone aperture seemed to fracture, as if she was looking at two different windows at the same time. She closed her eyes. The pain in her head was like a noise, the roar of the khamsin*, and over it she could hear nothing, think of nothing.*

She reached up to her forehead, feeling the bandage that was tight against her skull. It was stiff with blood where her brother had beaten her

head against the temple floor, but underneath she could feel a pulpy mass.

Zahra tried to sit, but her heart raced and the roar of the khamsin *grew louder, making her scream out in pain. She longed for darkness, for the cool night, to be plunged to the bottom of the black Nile, where it would be silent and cold, and she could lie tangled in the weeds where no one would ever find her.*

'Drink this . . .' Heru's voice came to her as if from a great distance.

'What is it?'

'Red Shepenn. It will help with the pain.'

The liquid was bitter, the rim of the cup cold and sharp against her lip.

'I found you beneath the temple,' Heru said slowly. 'The priests had taken you to the undercroft. What happened between you and Qar? He will not speak of it.'

Zahra felt the drug begin to take effect, her breathing becoming easier.

'The priests had laid you out as if you had already begun your journey to the next life,' Heru said when Zahra remained silent, turning her face away from him. 'And there have been many days when I also thought that you would never wake . . .'

'Leave me, Heru.'

'Do you not want to know –'

'Leave me!'

When Heru had gone, Zahra swung her legs off the edge of the bed, then turned on to her stomach, so she could push herself upright. Her heart still pounded in her chest, but the khamsin *had been quietened by the drug Heru had given her and the sunlight no longer burned her eyes.*

She found her way to the window and looked down over the walls of Hardai, out over the pontoon causeway that ran from the great gate to the marsh beyond. There, a tented city had sprung up – patched and stained, hazy through the woodsmoke that came from every quarter, full of donkeys and feral dogs. How many men had Qar assembled? How many had answered the call of the Shuyet?

Closing her eyes, Zahra retched as the light and colour and noise became too much. With the Red Shepenn coursing down her chin, she sank slowly to the cool stone of the floor.

• • •

The flamingo balanced on one leg in the cool water, curving its supple neck around with graceful ease to groom its wing with its hooked black beak.

Brilliant pink was everywhere that morning, in the flock of wading birds scattered along the bank of the murky river, in the broad streaks that coloured the dawn sky above the steaming, desolate delta – and in the two ribbons clutched behind Taita's back.

They had passed the night just north of Avaris, on a tongue of mud where the river split and then split again on its way to the Great Green. Gyasi had lit a fire to keep the animals away, but the insects could not be so easily driven off. Great clouds of sandflies had swirled above them as the dried reeds crackled in the flames, drawing the bats from over the water.

Gyasi had stayed awake, her back to the fire, while Taita slept in the skiff, secure in the knowledge that Paiy and Hannu would be on the river, following the trail that he had left for them.

They had been on the water for three hours now, heading north with the current as the sun began to rise.

Leaping out of the prow, Gyasi hauled the skiff towards the muddy bank. Beyond it, another, smaller waterway plunged deep into the flat landscape. Taita followed and once Gyasi's back was turned, he hastily tied the ribbons to the tallest reed on the riverbank.

'How far to our destination?' Taita asked.

'Half a day or thereabouts, along the waterways,' his captor replied dismissively.

Taita looked over Gyasi's shaven head, past a line of swaying sycamores to a land patchworked with pools and watercourses that reflected the sky like a polished bronze mirror. Vast lakes of reeds shivered in a gentle breeze that did little to disperse the sweaty heat, already oppressive despite the early hour. The air was thick with the reek of rot, and clouded with flies.

Gyasi shielded her eyes against the glare as she peered across the bleak marshland. 'One wrong step and you will be pulled down to your death. Only the waterways provide safe passage, and not all of them, for hidden dangers lurk everywhere.'

Taita understood why the Shuyet had hidden here. There would be crocodiles lurking amongst the reeds, red spitting cobras and hippos, too.

This was a fortress built by nature. Death waited all around.

For a while Gyasi remained looking out over the delta, while Taita squatted on the edge of the reed beds, imagining what was to come.

‘If you entertained any dreams of rescue, I expect you can see now just how bleak your prospects have become,’ Gyasi said. ‘Once you enter the marshes of the Shuyet, all hope dies.’

• • •

The skiff eased across the poisonous black water, its oily surface streaked with rainbows. The wind was far weaker here, and Gyasi had to constantly adjust the sail to catch what breeze there was. Soon, Taita guessed, she would have no choice but to row. Everything his captor had said about the place was true. Through his many years, he had travelled far and wide, but he had never experienced a place as inhospitable as this. At that moment, he would even have welcomed the cauldron heat of the Sinai.

Yet the marshland was not a dead place. It throbbed with sound – the *chit-chittering* of frogs in the reeds and the raucous honking of huge flocks of geese filling the colourless sky. Dragonflies flitted above the dark pools, bejewelled and glittering in the sunlight, while otters slid up and down the banks, searching for prey, and monitor lizards moved sinuously through the water.

‘The marsh looks like death, but within it, there is life,’ Gyasi said. ‘This is what Anubis means to those who follow the Shuyet.’

The waterway wound sinuously between the muddy banks, making it impossible to see ahead, past the towering vegetation. Here and there new channels would branch off, and Taita noticed that Gyasi’s eyes would flicker warily as they passed some of them, hinting, he thought, at the dangers that lay within.

Night was falling. The pools darkened and shadows lengthened. Taita wondered how his captor would find her way through the treacherous landscape without a lamp to guide them.

Barely had the thought crossed his mind when he glimpsed a light ahead, flickering through the reeds.

As they rounded a long mound covered in tangled vegetation, Taita

gasped with surprise. A constellation of flickering lights spread out before him across a large island at the centre of a network of stagnant pools, all of it hidden from anyone approaching by the natural formation of the landscape.

Here was the Shuyet's fortress.

The structure was formidable, the walls rising up to blot out the starlit horizon. Squinting into the fading light, Taita saw guards holding lanterns as they moved along the walls, and other men at work at the edge of the water, hauling supplies from small vessels.

This was where the Shuyet's army had retreated. But this was no broken mass, huddling in ramshackle tents – the stronghold looked impregnable.

Taita marvelled at the construction. How long must it have taken the Shuyet to build? How many men must he have sweated under the lick of the taskmaster's whip? Here indeed was the genius of the adversary who had confounded them at every turn, a master schemer who had chosen the most secure place for this citadel, and then by the power of his will had ensured his dream was given form.

'Hardai . . .' Gyasi said, breathing out the name so that it sounded like a prayer. 'This place cannot be conquered. The Shuyet designed it so that as long as there are people willing to defend it, it will not fall. And there will never be a lack of those willing to fight, and die, in the name of Anubis.'

For all of her confidence, Taita could see that Gyasi was eager to reach the island before the land was completely hidden, and she leaned harder on the oars as they approached the fortress.

As they closed on a jetty, Taita looked up at the walls of Hardai – the amber bricks made from the thick clay of the delta – and the citadel that rose behind them. He imagined an army trying to take the stronghold. Archers positioned along the walls would easily cut down any approaching force, and those who did make it to the island fortress still had the high walls to contend with. A siege would be worse; the men camped in the marsh would quickly fall sick – marsh fever, poisonous water, dysentery. Gyasi was right – as long as there were men willing to fight for the Shuyet, Hardai would not fall.

Having secured her skiff, Gyasi took Taita's arm and hauled him to his feet. Taita did not resist. Instead, as they made their way from the jetty towards the imposing gate, he surveyed the faces of the men and women

they passed. He was sure that the Shuyet would still be recruiting men from across the Lower Kingdom, but he could see that the river battle had tested the morale of his forces.

As they made their way through the gate, Taita saw just how thick the brick walls were – four full paces. Inside the fortress, the barracks had been built up against the ramparts, adding extra strength to the defences. And from the central square, the citadel rose above the rest of the buildings – a circular keep, built of stone robbed from buildings across the Lower Kingdom. Perhaps it had been here before the fortress was built, Taita thought to himself – the den of a river pirate – but he could think of no legend or fable that told of such a place.

The screech of an owl broke the stillness of the twilight. Once it faded, Taita was struck by how silent the fortress was. He sensed a suffocating atmosphere of fear lying across the place, as if the men and women who resided there were afraid to raise their voices when the day's labours had come to an end.

Gyasi pulled Taita to the citadel's gate. Guards stood on either side of the entrance. They knew Gyasi, Taita could see, despite her changed appearance, and bowed respectfully in greeting, even as their eyes flitted curiously in his direction.

'Open the gate,' Gyasi demanded. 'I need to see Heru.'

The guards pushed open the gate, and Gyasi escorted Taita inside. They crossed a small courtyard, and stepped into a large, airy entrance hall. Unlike the outer shell of the citadel, it was finely finished, in the manner of the grand buildings of Memphis – the walls were smooth and painted with scenes of men fishing in the delta, the lines perfect. Taita admired the craftsmanship as they crossed the enormous hall. Only the best architects and masons could have conceived of such work, let alone completed it.

'This palace is a marvel,' Taita exclaimed.

Gyasi snorted. 'The Upper Kingdom is not the only realm in Egypt that is blessed with great craftsmen. Perhaps you forget who built the great monuments. Long before Thebes, there was Memphis.'

'I remember more than you might think,' Taita replied.

As they moved from the entrance hall into a smaller antechamber, the choking, rotting odour from the marsh assailed them, compelling Taita to cover his nose and mouth with his sleeve. Gyasi smiled. 'This location was

not chosen for its invigorating air,' she said.

Lamps had been lit along the corridors, and their dancing light twisted Gyasi's features as she guided Taita along the flagstones, disfiguring her handsome face. Perhaps this was the true Gyasi, Taita thought, as she ushered him into a low-ceilinged chamber. Perhaps she had revealed herself to him fully now that she had no need for concealment.

'Wait here,' Gyasi commanded.

As soon as he was alone, Taita turned his attention to the room in which he found himself. In the centre stood a piece of furniture unlike anything he had ever seen before – a throne carved from a single piece of ebony. Reaching out, he let his fingers trail across the wood, feeling the old magic still trapped within it resonate through his body.

Taita stepped back from the throne as soon as he heard voices approaching. A tall man with burning eyes, wearing a black robe, marched into the room. He was accompanied by Gyasi and two muscular guards wearing leather cuirasses and carrying long javelins. This must be the man known as 'the scribe', Taita decided.

'Lord High Chancellor,' the tall man said as he approached. The guttural accent of the Lower Kingdom was barely detectable in his speech, but there was no doubting his origins – the blood of the people of the delta ran strongly in his veins.

Taita bowed in feigned humility. 'And whom do I have the pleasure of greeting?'

'I am Heru,' the tall man replied. 'I serve the god Anubis himself, the great Shuyet.'

Taita nodded.

'I have heard much about you since you arrived in Memphis,' Heru said. 'Though I must admit, I find it difficult to believe it all.'

'Tell me what it is you have heard, and I will tell you whether or not it is true,' Taita said calmly.

'That you were once a eunuch-attendant to Queen Lostris of the Upper Kingdom,' Heru said contemptuously. 'That you served Pharaoh Mamose, and that you were there when the Hyksos invaded, and witnessed his great defeat on the Plains of Adnub.'

'That is the truth,' Taita confirmed.

'That would make you ancient. And yet, to look at you, you appear

younger than I am.'

'The gods have blessed me.'

Something about this response made Heru smile. 'Perhaps it has something to do with your condition. Where one strength is stolen, another emerges.'

'Perhaps, but all men must come to terms with losing what was taken from me by force. And yet, they do not live longer for the lack of it. Virility is not everything.'

Heru laughed at this. 'I believe the Shuyet would agree.'

Taita smiled – Heru's words confirmed what he had long come to believe.

'What now?' Taita asked.

'Now you will be weighed in the balance.' Turning to Gyasi, Heru nodded. 'Prepare yourself,' he boomed as Gyasi ducked through the door into the passageway. 'The Shuyet is coming.'

• • •

Zahra prowled through the shadows, following a man who hurried blindly through the quiet streets of Avaris.

He was not aware of being followed.

But he should have been, Zahra thought to herself. He should have known.

As he rounded a corner, the man's face briefly caught the moonlight. It was her brother, Qar.

Zahra trailed her brother silently as he made his way towards the Temple of Baal. The once proud structure, where the Hyksos had worshipped their god, had been stripped and plundered upon their flight from Avaris. Now, it loomed in the dusk, a collapsing relic of Hyksos might.

Ahead of her, Qar reached a doorway and stopped to light a torch. Zahra saw the sparks from the fire-striker shower out into the dark, then the flame took hold. Finally, her brother glanced behind him.

Zahra wore a black cloak, but she knew her brother's eyes were sharp. As he turned, she slipped behind one of the defaced pillars in the temple compound and waited. Had he seen her? She would know soon enough.

When he turned again and descended the stone steps that led down into

the bowels of the temple, Zahra smiled to herself. Once again, he was being impetuous, and it had blinded him. She would never have allowed herself to be followed. She would never have been so foolish.

Zahra had not told Heru what she had resolved to do. There would be time for that later. Heru had stepped into the role of their father, and like Nimlot, he loved her. He only tolerated Qar. Egypt could never be united by someone like him – someone who had taken her love, and used it against her. Someone whose fear crippled his ability to act, and who, in turn, sought to use fear to cripple others.

But Zahra did not feel fear. Not anymore.

Something had changed in her on that fateful night when Qar had smashed her head against the flagstones. The wound had healed, but her mind had been altered. She raised her fingers to the skin above her right eye, to the shiny scar tissue and the depression that she hid under her hair. There was an anger inside her now that came like a storm, and nothing could calm her. Then the god would inhabit her – forcing his way into her skin, tossing her this way and that, shaking her until she thought her bones would break – and she would wake with no knowledge of what had happened or where she had been, what she had done. At other times, she would be left unable to move, unable to speak. And then there were moments like this one, Zahra thought as she followed her brother. Qar needed a light to guide him. She needed no such assistance. Her feet knew their way down the sloping stone steps, and they would not fail her. They would not make a sound.

At the bottom of the passageway, Zahra entered the low-ceilinged chamber just as Qar was leaving it through the doorway that opened into the larger chamber, the one where the Hyksos had created their god's inner sanctum.

Zahra crossed the floor, following her brother. As she slipped inside, she saw Qar climbing the steps to a dais that had been constructed on the far side of the chamber, his torch illuminating the throne that had been set there – a single piece of ebony that had been brought overland from beyond the kingdom of Kush. He stood, mesmerised before it.

Beside the throne rested their father's Anubis mask, on a small table.

'Did you think that you would be the one to sit on that throne?' Zahra asked evenly.

Qar started at the sound of her voice, echoing in the vast, empty space. He spun around, his eyes wide. 'What are you doing here? You don't belong here.'

Zahra smiled as she crossed the floor. 'I belong here just as much as you do. It was our father's vision. That is Father's mask.'

'I am the Shuyet. You are nothing!' Qar said dismissively.

Zahra laughed as she climbed the steps to the dais where her brother waited, her normally melodious voice filled with menace. In her black robes, she seemed to grow taller as she stepped to the top of the platform. Terrified, Qar shrank before her.

'I am the Shuyet,' he repeated, in a quivering voice.

'No, Qar,' she replied calmly, reaching for the Anubis mask and running her long, elegant fingers along its snout. 'You are just a boy. A scared little boy who unleashed his own feelings of worthlessness on the little sister who loved him. The little sister who loves him no more.'

She took hold of the mask and lifted it above her head, then set it down on her own shoulders. Her brother fell back in fright, thrusting his torch ahead of him as if trying to keep an animal at bay.

'Who are you?' he asked tremulously.

The Anubis mask stared back at him, and tilted its jackal head to the side. 'I am the Shuyet,' it growled.

Then in one swift motion, Zahra drew a short knife from her robe, took a pace forward and swept the blade across Qar's exposed throat. He gasped, falling to his knees as his blood ran, pouring over his own robes and soaking them through, his torch dropping from his hand and rolling away across the dais.

Zahra looked down on him as he choked on his blood, his life ebbing away.

'The portal to the afterlife is open to you,' she said. 'Your prophecy has come true. Qar is dead. My brother is no more.'

As Qar slumped forward, Zahra caught her reflection in the spreading pool of his blood. She cocked her head as she considered it, the Anubis mask staring back up at her, then crouched down, and dipped the tip of her finger in the thickening liquid. Lifting it, she made a few quick, precise strokes on the floor of the dais – the sign of Anubis in her brother's blood.

• • •

‘The Shuyet is coming,’ Heru announced again, his deep voice reverberating off the bare stone walls of the near-empty throne room.

Taita allowed himself a subtle smile. These displays were as transparent as any temple ritual. And although he felt none of the awe that was intended, he was eager to finally meet his adversary.

Taita glimpsed the shadow first, and then a tall, slender figure in black robes appeared, its head covered by the gleaming jackal-head mask of Anubis. Behind it came Gyasi, dragging a young man by a chain fixed to a heavy leather collar around his neck. The prisoner was filthy, his breechclout soiled and his body and hair caked with mud. Taita could only imagine the kind of cell Gyasi had pulled him from.

‘Kneel before the god,’ Heru intoned. ‘Kneel before the Shuyet.’

Stepping forward, the guard behind him jabbed Taita smartly in the back of his knee with the butt of his javelin. A jolt of pain shot up into his hip and he fell to the floor, gasping as his hands hit the cold flagstones.

From his prone position, Taita caught the eyes of the young man, who had also been forced to kneel, Heru twisting his arm behind his back. His fear of what was to come was etched on his face, and although he tried to mouth a word to Taita, his lips were trembling and it was impossible to make out what he was trying to say.

‘It is time,’ Heru said, as Gyasi pulled the youth to his feet. ‘The judgment will begin.’

‘On what will you be judged?’ Gyasi asked. ‘Where are you sinless, Djenn of Memphis?’ It was then that Taita recognised General Kamose’s runner. He had escaped the slaughter on the hill, only to be captured and dragged to the Shuyet’s lair.

‘I am come to you . . .’ the young man began, his voice unsteady. ‘I am . . . I am void of wrong, without guile, a harmless one. Let me not be declared guilty.’

Taita looked up at the Shuyet, but the mask of Anubis only nodded almost imperceptibly to acknowledge the ancient words.

‘Where?’ Gyasi asked again.

Djenn took a deep breath and raised his head towards the Shuyet, but

his nerve failed and he looked away. ‘O, Eater of the Shadow,’ he said, ‘I am not the cause of weeping to any.’

‘And?’ Heru prodded, when Djenn remained silent.

‘O, Breaker of Bones, I am not a teller of lies,’ Djenn continued, tears beginning to spill down his cheeks.

‘And?’ Heru prodded again.

‘O, Eater of Blood, I have not cursed a god.’

‘You have chosen,’ Heru said. ‘And now your heart shall be weighed.’

As he spoke these words, Gyasi struck Djenn from behind with the knife she had used to kill Asim and Sadiki. The blade found the cartilage between the base of his skull and the first vertabrae of the young man’s spine. Taita heard the grate of metal on bone as it punched home, and Djenn let out a choked cry as he fell to the floor.

Taita had thought that Gyasi had killed the youth – she had struck with force and found her target – but when he looked across at the prone body, he saw that Djenn’s eyes were still alive in his head. He was paralysed, and Taita knew that his soul would leave his body soon, but while he still had breath in his lungs he would remain with them in the throne room, to witness the rest of the Shuyet’s ritual.

Taking an obsidian knife – a wicked shard of volcanic glass – from Heru’s hands, Gyasi sank to one knee and rolled Djenn on to his side. As she began to cut, Taita watched the man’s eyes grow large, his pupils dilating with the pain, but he could not cry out; he was powerless under the blade.

A great spurt of dark blood erupted from Djenn’s mouth as Gyasi thrust her arm into his abdomen. Taita had himself learned the embalmers’ craft, had studied their texts and many times assisted those in the House of Beauty, but he had never seen someone defile a body like this. Gyasi took no care – she used her blade to slash through the stomach and hack at Djenn’s lungs, her face blank and emotionless as she dug deep inside him for her prize.

The floor became slick with blood and Taita tried to stand as the gore approached, but the guard forced him back down again and he watched, helpless, as it pooled around him, soaking into his robe.

Heru stepped forward, this time with a set of golden scales. An ostrich feather lay in the one pan. Into the other, Gyasi deposited Djenn’s heart.

‘You have been found wanting, Djenn of Memphis,’ Heru said as the scale tipped heavily to one side, tossing the feather into the air. ‘You shall not pass.’

As the feather spiralled down through the light thrown by the torches, Taita watched Djenn’s eyes cloud over as his soul left his body.

‘Don’t worry,’ Gyasi said, wiping the glistening blood from her arms as the Shuyet turned away and began to stride towards the door of the throne room, Heru following close behind. ‘Your turn will come.’

Looking back at Djenn, Taita saw that the ostrich feather – the symbol of Ma’at, of truth and justice – lay soaking up his blood, turning slowly crimson in the torchlight.

• • •

The body bobbed face down in the warm Nile current. Death had come very recently, for the blood that clouded the water around it had not yet summoned the river crocodiles to a feast.

As Hannu and Piay watched the corpse’s passage from the prow of the war galley, Hannu offered an appreciative nod.

‘One of the Shuyet’s lookouts,’ he said. ‘Our advance scouts are doing good work.’

Piay remained unmoved. ‘Even so, we cannot count on the element of surprise. There will always be one lookout that escapes our scrutiny and warns his master.’

‘We’ll be ready,’ Hannu grunted.

Though it was only just after dawn, the heat was already suffocating. The sun hung in a hazy silver sky and the marshes of the delta steamed, the choking stench of rotting vegetation enveloping the line of vessels making their way downriver from Memphis.

Hannu eyed his old friend as Piay searched the waters ahead. He had seen grief change a person many times – carving out a solid core from the soft sandstone of youth and creating something new, something more resilient. Piay didn’t laugh as much as he used to. But then nor did he boast or presume that life was a banquet laid out for his pleasure. He had become quieter, more reflective, a man who thought through his options and no longer acted with the recklessness that had defined him in times past.

Hannu admired this older, wiser Piay, though he would never admit it – there was an unwritten code that could never be broken.

Pushing his thoughts aside, Hannu turned his eyes back to the reed beds and twisted sycamores that lay off the port rail. When the guards had searched the palace and grounds and found Taita missing along with Gyasi, it was Piay who had pieced together what must have transpired. Many others would have given in to despair. What chance would there be of finding one man in a sprawling land like Egypt?

But Piay understood his master's mind, and knew Taita would not have allowed himself to be taken so easily if his capture was not part of some larger scheme. And where others might have ignored such a mundane item, Piay had focused his attention on the pink ribbon found on the floor of Taita's chamber. Nothing that surrounded Taita happened by chance – he had wanted it to be found.

The guards on the wall above the gate remembered a lone merchant driving out of the city in the middle of the night, and they had located an abandoned wagon along the riverbank. It was clear that a skiff had been pushed out into the water.

'Taita has risked his life to give us an opportunity,' Piay had said. 'A chance to wipe out the viper in his lair before he has the chance to strike again.'

Back at the palace, Hannu had awoken the captains of the Blue Crocodiles and commanded them to prepare for action.

What remained of the three companies that had taken the field against the Shuyet's army were hastily reorganised into two patched-up units of three hundred men while supplies were loaded into the galleys, and before the sun had reached its zenith the oarsmen were heaving their vessels downriver.

It was Hannu who had glimpsed the first pink ribbon, fluttering from the bulrushes in the fading light of the day. That was the moment they knew that they were on the right course, and that Piay had judged his master correctly. From then on, it was just a case of focusing their attention on the river's bank.

They had anchored south of Avaris the first night. The moon was full, but hidden by cloud, and the steersmen were unwilling to brave the river in the half-light. It had been a sombre evening, for even this far from the

Shuyet's stronghold they did not dare disembark and light fires to warm themselves by.

Hannu checked the water's edge, scanning back and forth until his eyes ached. He began to wonder if Taita had left any more ribbons. But then he caught movement on the edge of his vision.

'There,' he said, jabbing a finger.

'Good work,' Piay said.

Turning to look across the benches of muscled oarsmen, Piay summoned the captain to bring the galley to a halt and drop the anchor stone. The captain raised an arm to signal to the other ships behind to do the same. Once the galley was straining at its rope, Hannu and Piay clambered into one of the skiffs they'd been towing and Hannu took up an oar.

A branching watercourse carved a path between two vast reed beds. As he rowed them towards the shore, Hannu glimpsed footprints in the mud on the bank, and then movement. In the hot breeze, pink ribbons twirled from the tallest bulrush.

'There,' Hannu said. 'Taita points our way.'

'Two ribbons. The first time we have seen such a sign. Taita is telling us this place is different.'

Hannu nodded. 'The end of the river voyage and a new one along the waterways.'

Jumping from the skiff, the two men splashed to the bank and squelched through the sucking mud until they stood on dry land, swatting at the sandflies that assailed them. Shielding his eyes, Hannu looked out across the marshland that spread as far as they could see. 'There's no doubt why the Shuyet made his camp here,' he grunted. 'No soul would venture into this foul place by choice.'

'A stronghold made by the gods themselves,' Piay agreed.

Hannu crouched, letting his fingers sift through the damp soil as he squinted into the distance. There would be safe paths across the treacherous, sucking marshland, but he was not the man to find them. 'We have to follow the water,' Hannu said. 'The land is too dangerous.'

'The water will have its own dangers,' Piay replied. 'The Shuyet will have made sure the approach to his fortress is protected. I doubt we will be able to approach without being seen.'

'Aye, well, whichever way, we won't be able to go any further in these

galleys,’ Hannu said, standing.

Piay looked back to the galleys, moving in the gentle swell of the river. ‘I swear this now,’ he said. ‘Even if we have to swim there, we will save Taita’s life.’

• • •

Only the whispered, rhythmic rowing chant of the Blue Crocodiles broke the silence as they bent their backs over their oars. In the boats, no one else spoke, afraid that their voices might carry to the enemy.

In the prow of the lead skiff, Piay had wrapped a scarf across his mouth and nose to protect himself from the choking reek, but it made little difference. The waterway was narrow, the wall of reeds on each side reaching up to join with the sycamores that overhung the channel – a tunnel filled with greens and yellows, spattered with dappled shade. A man’s eyes could easily deceive him here, Piay thought as he watched the men around him trying to suppress their unease. They were soldiers, and they liked to have an enemy in front of them. Not being able to see what lay around the next bend made them feel as if they were constantly drifting into an ambush.

There had been no respite from the oppressive heat from the moment they had left the river – an expeditionary force of ten skiffs, filled with eighty men. The air was thick and still, clouded with insects. Not knowing how long their voyage would take, they had to be sparing with their water. It was all around them, but here the river was poisoned, fouled by the bubbles that rose to the surface and burst to release the rank smell of rotten eggs.

They drifted on, so far north now that the music of the marshes was broken by the shrieks of gulls wheeling across the sky. Occasionally, a loud splash would have those with bows quickly nocking a shaft, anticipating some savage attack. Even when none came, their senses continued to tingle. There could be no rest.

Before long they came to the first of the branching channels. Piay raised his hand and the Blue Crocodiles lifted their oars out of the brackish water.

‘No ribbons here to guide us,’ Hannu grunted.

‘We could get lost in this place,’ Piay breathed, ‘going round in circles, no doubt just as the Shuyet intended.’

Hannu cursed under his breath.

Piay gave a signal, choosing a direction, and oars were lowered back into the water. With slow, steady strokes, the boats advanced.

• • •

Their progress was slower than they had anticipated. The labyrinth of waterways was difficult to navigate as they explored branching courses, only to come up against fallen sycamores or pools of thick mud. Every now and then they would glimpse the spoor of hippos or catch the water-trail of river crocodiles speeding just beneath the surface.

Gradually, though, they began to find their way along a route that took them steadily north.

When he felt Hannu’s finger tapping on his shoulder, Piay glanced back to see his assistant peering towards the sunset.

‘I’d hoped that we would at least locate the fortress before night fell,’ Hannu muttered.

Piay looked around. The light seemed to be quitting the marshland far faster than it would the open desert, the shadows quickly collecting in the pools and beneath the vegetation.

‘These waterways are treacherous enough in daylight.’ Hannu grimaced. ‘We cannot navigate them in the darkness.’

‘We will have to camp, then,’ Piay said, feeling the tension of the moment grip him. ‘While there is still some light left, let’s find a place to sleep.’

‘I would bet that every inch is crawling with vipers and scorpions,’ Hannu grumbled.

‘We can tie up the skiffs and some can sleep in them.’

‘Good,’ Hannu said. ‘I’ll not take my chances on land.’

Through a gap in the vegetation, Piay looked out across the marsh as the sun sank into the west. What if they were too late? What if Taita was already dead?

• • •

Sleep did not come easily. Though Piay lay looking up at the milky trail of stars in the sky above him, lulled by the gentle swaying of the skiff, he could do no more than drift in and out of consciousness. He told himself that if they were attacked, the lookouts would raise the alarm, but he started at every night sound – an owl hooting, a splash near the riverbank, the grunting of a distant hippopotamus.

And so he was only dozing when the agonised cry tore through the night. Instantly hauling himself up on the rocking boat, he snatched up his sword as Hannu did the same.

Shouts echoed from the other moored skiffs and from the places where his men were camped. ‘We are under attack!’ a voice cried, before being cut off.

Silhouettes flew from the bank, splashing into the water as the din of battle grew. Against the lightening sky, Piay glimpsed swords flashing as the enemy fell upon the Blue Crocodiles still in the camp.

‘Where are the lookouts?’ Piay exclaimed.

‘Dead,’ Hannu snapped, bracing himself as the skiff rocked even more wildly.

Those on the water would never be able to get to their comrades in time, Piay could see, and even if they could clamber up the banks and through the thick vegetation, they would be at an immediate disadvantage.

Some of his men were already slithering through the undergrowth towards safety, while others simply threw themselves into the river. Their flailing, as they desperately swam for the skiffs, only attracted the river crocodiles, and in no time the black water was boiling with struggling men and hungry beasts.

Piay glimpsed a light flare somewhere on the bank above him and an instant later a burning arrow flew within a hand’s breadth of this head.

‘Back to the boats!’ Piay roared. ‘Fall back, Blues!’

Hannu had already grasped the oars and started to heave the skiff away. Piay caught a soldier’s hand as they ploughed through the water, trying to drag him on board, but as he came over the side a blazing shaft thumped into his neck, another into his chest.

The night lit up as blazing arrows rained down. Flames roared up from the skiff behind them on the waterway, the Blue Crocodiles aboard choosing to throw themselves into the water and risk being torn apart by

crocodiles than be burned alive.

As the screams died away, Piay found that he was trembling with rage. This route to the Shuyet's stronghold was as dangerous as he had feared. How many Blue Crocodiles had they now lost?

He would make the Shuyet pay for every life, Piay vowed. Every one.

• • •

'Taita. Do you hear me? I have food for you.'

Taita opened his heavy eyes to see Gyasi standing next to where he lay, a wooden bowl in her hands. 'It may not look like much when compared to the delicacies you are accustomed to, but it's what we eat here.'

Taita roused himself and climbed to his feet. The cell in which he found himself was filthy, and his robe was stained with dried blood. It had not been a dream, then, he thought to himself. Djenn had been judged by the Shuyet and found wanting.

'Suit yourself,' Gyasi said when Taita made no move to take the bowl from her hands. 'But I warn you, you will not survive here if you think yourself better than us.'

'How could I?' Taita replied flatly. 'I am your captive.'

Gyasi laughed. 'How wise you are! And now the Shuyet wants to see you.'

Taita heard footsteps approaching and two guards appeared outside the cell. Her smile as sly as ever, Gyasi commanded the men to unlock the door. Then she led the way along a narrow corridor and up a flight of stone steps, to a chamber that looked out over the great expanse of marshland that surrounded the citadel. It was still two hours to morning, the sky the colour of a ripe plum.

Inside, the Shuyet sat, attended by Heru, a golden senet set glinting from the table in the torchlight.

'Leave us, Gyasi,' Heru ordered as soon as she had pushed Taita to his knees. 'We will have need of you later, but your blade can rest for now.'

'Anubis, Protector of Graves,' Taita said, bowing his head as Gyasi complied with Heru's command. 'I am honoured to be in your presence.'

'You are not afraid?' Heru's voice was a low growl.

Taita smiled. ‘I fear neither man nor god, despite your show earlier.’

‘All who know of the great Taita speak of your matchless intellect,’ Heru continued. ‘The Shuyet has found it to be . . . adequate.’

‘I thank you,’ Taita said, with the faintest of smiles at the jackal mask. ‘I regret that it took me so long to divine the nature of our contest.’

‘Sharp as your mind is, it is no match for a god’s,’ Heru said.

‘Of that, there can be no doubt,’ Taita replied. ‘But now that we are here, I would swap a truth for a truth.’

‘What child’s game is this? You are *our* captive!’ Heru hissed, even as his master raised a hand to silence him. ‘The Shuyet is Anubis. The god lives within him . . .’

After a long pause, the god spoke at last, in a hollow voice. ‘What is the truth you would know?’

‘I would know what you want from me.’

‘And with what truth will you unlock this knowledge?’

Taita smiled. The time had come to reveal what he had known to be true from the moment he set eyes on Gyasi. The truth that Lostris had confirmed for him in his dream. ‘I know that you are a woman.’

The Anubis mask continued to stare at him, cold and quiet.

At last, the Shuyet grasped the gleaming black jackal mask and pushed it up and off her head. As her black hair tumbled in gleaming coils around her shoulders, her high cheekbones were revealed, her full lips, her eyes as blue as the darkest sapphire. The beauty of that face could take a man’s breath away, but for the wide, shallow depression in her forehead. Taita was momentarily silenced by it, and the shock of recognition.

‘Are you surprised?’ the Shuyet asked, her voice now mellifluous.

‘Yes,’ Taita said. ‘I knew that you were a woman. But I did not expect you to be the woman we met in the desert, on our way back to Memphis from the dead city. You must have only just laid waste to the returning caravan ahead of us.’

The Shuyet smiled in affirmation. ‘Heru, bring our guest to the table.’

‘Is that wise –?’

‘This is not an assassin. He is a man of wisdom.’

The scribe stepped forward and helped Taita to his feet.

Seated across from the Shuyet, Taita could sense the power within her. Here was someone with the natural ability to command men – a remarkable,

fearsome woman.

‘And no one knows the truth?’ he asked. He could not imagine how she had managed to keep such a secret from so many for so long.

‘Gyasi does, of course. So does Heru. And a few others who attend to me. It really is not so difficult a secret to keep when there are none who suspect what I truly am. Without the mask, I can come and go amongst my people as I please, and no one is any the wiser. You yourself did not suspect me in the desert.’

‘That is true,’ Taita conceded. ‘How did Gyasi and Heru come to be in your service?’

‘Gyasi grew up here. I met her when I first arrived to oversee the rebuilding of this citadel, after my brother had pilfered enough money for . . .’ She gestured to the walls, and the ceiling over their heads. ‘She was just a child then.’

‘And Heru?’

‘My father was Heru’s mentor. He has been at my side since I was a girl. He knew the great dreams my father had for this land. For a long time, after my father’s murder by the Hyksos, he tried to talk me out of pursuing them. But after my brother died, he understood my determination, and he dedicated himself to helping me. Heru loved my father, and he believes I will fulfil his dreams.’

‘Your father dreamed of a Lower Egypt restored to what it was in the days of the Red Pharaoh.’

The Shuyet nodded. ‘He did. He believed that the heart of Egypt, the land of the ancients – Memphis and the delta – must be reclaimed from the Hyksos and protected from the sons of Mamose.’ She paused. ‘Heru became my voice, and with his guidance I was transformed into Anubis. After that, men did not question me. Those whose fathers had served the Lower Kingdom, who had taken up arms as brigands or raiders during the reign of the Hyksos, flocked to my side. I took the small force my brother had built, and turned it into an army.’

Heru appeared at Taita’s side, an alabaster cup carved into the form of a lotus flower in each hand.

‘But you have not answered my question,’ Taita said. ‘What do you want from me? Everything you have done has been to bring me here. You murdered the scribe in the vault, knowing that it would bring me to

Memphis. You tried to capture me in the dead city, and when your men failed, you sent Gyasi to me.'

Heru appeared again at Taita's side with a bronze jug, pouring a stream of aromatic wine into the Shuyet's cup, the wine turning the lotus pink, as if suddenly it had come into bloom on the table before her.

'Some wine, Lord High Chancellor? It is always coldest here before the dawn.'

'I know you have discovered Imhotep's tomb,' the Shuyet said as Heru poured the wine into Taita's cup. 'That you have been inside. I know the Sons of Apis are no more. I know you are the Chosen One of Imhotep, and that one of the spells he left for you opens the portal to the realm of gods. That in this way, the power of Anubis could truly be harnessed, and deployed, to keep Lower Egypt safe.'

Taita's eyes widened, startled at how much the woman before him knew.

'Did you think you were the only one who studied the ancient scrolls?' she asked, taking a sip from her cup. 'This is our land, after all. We are the true descendants of the old people.'

'You have no idea what you are asking. You cannot wield Imhotep's spells.'

'My mind is sharp, Taita, you know that. I see the hidden patterns in this world. My father taught me well. I will not approach them foolishly.'

'You will learn nothing from me,' Taita pronounced firmly.

'Oh, but I will, Lord High Chancellor. Once I have defeated the pitiful force sent for your rescue, and Piay has joined you in captivity, I will compel you to take me there, to open the tomb and teach me how to use the spells.'

'There is nothing you can do to me that would result in my opening the tomb for you.'

The Shuyet chuckled. 'I know you are strong, formidable despite your age and your will is fierce. But I also know that you love Piay like a son. Do you doubt that I will hesitate to judge him as I judged Djenn? Do you think I will hesitate to break him? And I will make you watch, until you give me what I want.'

Standing, the Shuyet approached the window. 'Let me show you something, Lord High Chancellor.'

Taita stood and followed her. Across the marsh the sun was rising. The sky looked bruised, blues and purples fading to a sickly yellow along the horizon. But closer to the citadel, perhaps half a day's walk, a fire raged, the reeds ablaze. Taita knew that somewhere out there, Piay and Hannu and the Blue Crocodiles were caught, men trapped by the flames in the mist of dawn. 'You knew Piay would find a way to follow me,' Taita said as the Shuyet took another sip from her cup. 'But he will not be so easy to take captive.'

'It matters not. In a few months I will be able to compel him to come to me. Gyasi is pregnant with his child. One way or another, he will come.'

Taita paused to consider this new piece of information.

'A truth for a truth, you said,' the Shuyet continued.

'What is the truth you would know?' Taita asked.

'I would know the spell you used to seal Imhotep's tomb.'

Taita felt hands on him even as he heard the Shuyet's words, felt his head pulled back, Gyasi's knife at his throat. Heru appeared before him with the lotus cup, the wine inside slopping over the edge.

'Open his mouth,' the Shuyet said. 'Cut it open if you have to. Make him drink.'

The *peseshkef* blade was of bronze, the edge sharp enough to cut silk. Taita heard the Shuyet walking away, humming gently to herself, as Heru forced the knife between his teeth.

• • •

'I saw the vulture and the cobra stand on either side of the river, divided by the waters. I saw the waters rise and fall one hundred seasons. I saw one hundred sheaves of corn, and one hundred birds fly over the river. Below them I saw the dust of battle and the flash of swords. I saw the smoke of burning cities mingle with the dust.

'At last I saw the cobra and the vulture come together in congress. I saw them mating and entwined on a sheet of pure blue silk. There were blue banners on the city walls and banners of blue flew on the temple pylons.

'I saw the blue pennants on the chariots that drove out across the world. I saw monuments so tall and mighty that they would stand for ten thousand years. I saw the people of fifty nations bow down before them.'

Taita sighed and pressed his fingers into his temples, then he said: 'That was all my vision.'

Opening his eyes, he looked down upon his mistress, her head resting lightly on her silken pillow. She was as frail as a wounded bird, her skin as pale and translucent as mother-of-pearl.

Taita knew that he was in Lostris' bedchamber in the Palace of Memnon, the night before she had been taken from him. She had asked him to work the Mazes of Ammon-Ra, and – for the last time – he had, sliding over the edge of reality into the realm of dreams and visions.

'So, do the blue banners fly, Taita?' Lostris asked.

'They do, my mistress . . . From the walls of Thebes, they fly.'

'The two kingdoms are united, Taita. So why do you not rejoice?'

'It is too soon, mistress. One hundred seasons have not yet passed. There is a new enemy. One we did not foresee. A handmaid of Anubis.'

'Zahra . . .' Lotris sighed.

'Zahra?'

'Her mind is wounded. It is the work of her brother and the Lord of the Red Land. He entered her when her blood was shed inside his temple.'

Lostris raised her hand. Taita saw how thin her arm had become, the bones of her wrist pushing against her brittle skin. As he watched, she drew the outline of the spell Taita had used to seal Imhotep's tomb with her index finger, leaving it shimmering in the air between them.

'To defeat her, my Taita, you need to heal her. She is not the enemy that you think she is.'

The outline of the incantation swam before Taita. It was a plain thing, but no less beautiful for its simplicity. Read one way, it was a spell for closing – the 'closed mouth'. Read the other way, it was a spell for opening – the 'open hand'. But Imhotep had also been a physician, and Taita now saw that there was another way to use the spell.

'You could not heal me, Taita, but you can heal Zahra. She is my heir, just as Piay is the inheritor of Tanus' spirit.'

Leaning forward, Taita reached out to touch the gods' letters. 'I could not heal you then, but I can now . . .'

Standing, Taita stripped the cover from his mistress, revealing her naked body on the linen sheets. Just as he remembered, her body was that of a woman who had carried three others in her womb. She was unnaturally

thin, almost emaciated, but her belly protruded like a pale ivory ball, out of proportion with her slim arms and legs.

Taita laid his hands lightly on her belly, just as he had done so many years before, upon the silvery streaks where the skin had once stretched to accommodate life. He felt again the thing that was within her and knew again that it was not life he felt beneath his hands, but death.

'Let me take it from you. It is a thing of Seth.'

'I tried to hide it from you . . .'

Taita began to recite the spell, his hands still on Lostris' abdomen. Her flesh yielded to his touch, the skin growing thinner, the muscle fibres unravelling like papyrus soaked in water.

'Take it away, Taita. Stop the pain.'

The thing of flesh and blood that sat inside her womb was visible now. It pulsed with life, but that life was that of its host; nothing within it was alive.

Taking a copper scalpel from his medicine chest, Taita blessed the blade quickly in the flame of his lamp, then he began to cut the tumour away from the wall of Lostris' womb.

• • •

The wetlands looked as though they were on fire, the stagnant pools reflecting the light of the rising sun. Soon, Piay thought with grim anticipation, they would be.

The Blue Crocodiles were gathered up on the final lip of land, in front of the wide lake that lay before the Shuyet's stronghold. After the surprise attack, the skiffs had voyaged back and forth to the galleys, to ferry the rest of the two companies of Blues to this place.

Piay lamented the men he had lost in the attack, and in the chaos that had followed, but the time had come to make the Shuyet pay. As he scanned the hundreds who remained, he prayed silently to Khonsu that Taita was still alive.

Turning, Piay looked across the lake to the Shuyet's fortress, the golden bricks gleaming red in the rising sun. He had to admit, it was impressive, towering over the large, flat island it occupied.

Hannu stepped to his side, his face grave as he, too, surveyed the magnitude of the task that awaited them.

‘That is the only way across,’ Piay said, pointing to the pale line of the pontoon causeway that ran across the water, barely wide enough for two men to pass.

‘So it looks,’ Hannu grumbled. ‘But in venturing across it, we will be providing the Shuyet’s archers with target practice. And even when we make it to the other side, the task of breaking into the fortress will be formidable.’

Piay nodded grimly. ‘But we cannot delay. Only a fraction of the force we met south of Avaris can be contained inside that fortress. We must find a way of luring them out before the rest of the Shuyet’s army arrives.’

From the walls came the blare of a ram’s horn. In response, Piay heard the tramp of feet. The Shuyet’s units were gathering.

‘We don’t have much time.’

‘Aye, or options,’ Hannu retorted. ‘That is the only way open to us.’

‘In that case, we might as well get moving.’ Piay raised his sword in the air, muttered a quiet prayer to Khonsu, and stepped out towards the causeway.

‘Move out!’ Hannu roared behind him.

As the regiment began to move, Piay’s skin prickled in the rising heat. Soon the marsh would be like a furnace. The air over the bogs was already wavering like the steam above a pot of stew; great clouds of sandflies swirled in the turbulent air.

As he stepped onto the causeway, Piay began to second-guess himself. The Blue Crocodiles were ready to fight, but was he not leading them into another slaughter – just as he had in the dead city?

‘That Shuyet bastard has planned this well,’ Hannu grunted, sensing Piay’s unease.

Piay looked back at the soldiers trickling onto the long pontoon bridge, listening to the thunder of their sandalled feet. Only a few men now remained on land – it was too late to turn back. He glanced up at the fortress walls. So far, there had been no movement. The gate was still shut, and the force the Shuyet had massed behind it remained there. The river crocodiles on the far bank coughed and hissed at one another as the sun began to warm them, eyeing Piay’s men curiously, but otherwise an oppressive stillness lay over the marshlands, as if the gods sensed the importance of what was to come.

A small bird swooped down, landing on the back of one of the beasts and pecking hungrily at the insects alighting on its leathery skin. As the crocodile opened its jaws irritably, the huge gate of the fortress also began to move. Piay could see lines of archers waiting behind it, ready to advance, their bows already nocked.

Hannu had also seen the archers. ‘Shields!’ he bellowed back at the men marching behind them, and, as one, the Blue Crocodiles raised their shields.

On the island ahead of them, the Shuyet’s archers trotted out and lined up, their feet planted firmly in the yielding black soil that formed the shore of the lake.

‘Shields ready!’ Hannu boomed again as the archers loosed their first barrage.

For a moment, the world seemed to still as Piay watched the arrows – hundreds of them – arcing high over the lake.

And then . . . chaos. Arrowheads pelted against the shields of the Blue Crocodiles, here and there punching through the hide and wood, puncturing forearms and smashing deep into flesh, shattering shoulder blades. A cacophony of cries and cursing erupted behind Piay as his men were hit with the first deadly cascade. Turning, he saw a man topple from the causeway, the shaft of an arrow lodged in his eye socket, the tip protruding from his neck. It would not be long, Piay knew, before the lake’s murky water would be filled with bodies.

‘Shields ready!’ Hannu shouted again.

Piay glanced up to see a second barrage already dropping from the sky. Some of his men were on their knees now, still holding their shields, but exposing those behind them to the deadly rain from the Shuyet’s archers.

The water around the causeway began to bubble as the fallen were assailed by the river crocodiles.

As a third barrage was loosed, Hannu grabbed Piay’s arm urgently. ‘We have to get across now, or we will all die here.’

Piay desperately scanned the island shore. Not far from the lines of archers, a row of skiffs were moored, their ropes pinned under chunks of rock. No doubt that was how the Shuyet brought supplies to his fortress. Closer to the end of the causeway that connected the fortress to the marshland that surrounded it, he saw the grey bulks of five hippos cooling themselves in the stagnant lake water. Piay smiled. ‘I have a plan.’

Beside him, Hannu grunted sceptically. He'd heard Piay utter the same words many times over the years, and only rarely had things worked out the way that his friend had intended.

'Look,' Piay said, pointing to the hippos.

'What of them?'

'We get them to move.' Piay whirled. 'A bow!'

As Piay grabbed a bow for himself and nocked an arrow, Hannu's eyes widened. 'Ah . . . I have it. The beasts will clear our path for us.'

Time seemed to slow once more as Piay loosed his arrow in the direction of the hippos.

He watched in anticipation, his breath held tight in his chest, as the arrow fell from the sky and thumped into the flank of one of the basking beasts. Enraged, it let out a deafening roar and convulsed into sudden and violent movement. Lurching forward in a wave of cascading water, the mighty hippopotamus crashed up onto the island, distracting the Shuyet's archers.

In the respite that followed, Piay issued his orders: 'Aim at those hippos. And quickly, if you hope to set foot on dry land again.'

Within moments his men had nocked their own weapons and loosed a cluster of arrows towards the island.

'Now,' Piay said as he watched the hippos eagerly. 'Let chaos reign.'

As the arrows pounded into the beasts, the water became a torrent of foaming spray as the animals were whipped into a frenzy.

'Again!' Piay cried.

The Blue Crocodiles sent another flight of arrows at the hippos. Furious, they roared and swung their mighty heads, and, spotting the Shuyet's archers in front of them, they broke into a devastating, thundering rampage.

As the huge beasts stampeded towards them, their orderly lines collapsed – the Shuyet's archers dropped their bows in panic and began to run.

The hippos mowed the men down, the air filling with fresh screams – this time from the island, rather than the causeway. Piay didn't wait to watch the carnage unfold. Thrusting his sword high into the air, he bellowed: 'Now! Blues! Together!'

With their weapons drawn, the Blue Crocodiles threw themselves along the causeway behind Piay and Hannu.

• • •

Images bubbled up. Taita saw Heru's face as he forced his teeth apart with the *peseshkef* blade, as he plied him with the potion that had twisted his mind and turned his stomach. He saw Gyasi standing over him. He heard the voice that had come and gone in the depths of his derangement – Zahra, as he knew her now, slyly questioning him about Imhotep's tomb and the spell she needed to open it.

Had he revealed the *medu neter* to her? Taita did not believe so, but the interrogation had taken its toll before his dream of Lostris had claimed him. Reaching up, he let his fingers run over the tear where the *peseshkef* had caught his lip, ragged and deep.

'Are you ready to witness the show that has been prepared for you, my lord?' Gyasi smiled as she stepped over the threshold and into the dank cell.

Where once her angular features, her high cheekbones, had made her attractive, now they struck him as vile, repulsive.

'Prepared for me?'

'Why, of course. You are the Shuyet's esteemed guest.'

Hauling Taita to his feet, Gyasi took his arm and escorted him out into the torchlit passage that lay beyond his cell. They moved down the hallway until they reached a stairwell. When Taita hesitated, Gyasi shoved him forward.

They climbed the stone stairs, just as they had a few hours earlier, but this time they kept climbing, until at last the steps let out onto the roof of the citadel.

There, at the parapet, looking out over the walls of the fortress and the marsh below, stood the Shuyet, a powerful and imposing figure in black, with the Anubis mask covering her head.

At the sound of their footsteps, the Shuyet turned. 'I am glad you could join me, Taita. Welcome. I come here when I wish to look out across this great land, and the delta that has nurtured and protected my people.' She paused, and Taita sensed her smile behind the mask.

Squinting against the sun, Taita turned his attention to the vast, swampy landscape that stretched before them. Below, the long causeway that ran across the lake from the island upon which the Shuyet's fortress stood was studded with arrows, strewn with the bodies of the Blue Crocodiles. Others

floated, lifeless, in the lake.

But Taita could also see more of the Blue Crocodiles, their backs to the lapping water, engaged in hand-to-hand fighting with the Shuyet's men.

Taita scanned the shore far below for Piay. Finally, he found him.

Piay's leather armour gleamed in the bright morning sunlight, his sword blade flashing as he hacked and stabbed at the wall of bodies in front of him. In his younger days, Piay had been fond of boasting that there was no finer swordsmen in all Egypt, and to watch him now, it was hard to gainsay him.

Taita exhaled at the welcome sight. Even from his distant vantage, he was filled with hope as he watched the Nomarch of Memphis cutting down his adversaries.

'He fights valiantly,' the Shuyet admitted. 'It is a shame that his men do not have the same stamina.'

Indeed, all around Piay, one by one, the Blue Crocodiles were being cut down as they were overwhelmed by the larger force arrayed against them. Hannu fought like a demon at Piay's side, but as he watched, Taita saw another unit being drawn up inside the walls. How long could the two men stand against the Shuyet's army?

'I offer you a truth for a truth,' Taita said.

'That game did not go so well for you the last time,' the Shuyet hissed through the mask.

'And yet you still do not know the spell to open Imhotep's tomb.'

'It makes no difference. In an hour, Piay will be squatting next to you in your cell. And even if he is not, even if he escapes, even if he hides in the depths of the earth, in the tombs of the old people, there will I search for him and there I will find him.'

'Take off the mask, Zahra.'

At the sound of her true name, the Shuyet gasped. 'How do you know that name?'

'Take it off and I will tell you.'

'I do not answer to that name anymore. I have not answered to it for a long time.'

'But nevertheless, it is the name your father gave you. In abandoning it, you wound his memory. Take it off, Zahra.'

Slowly, as if compelled by a power she could not resist, Zahra lifted the

Anubis mask from her head, and her long, dark hair tumbled over her shoulders. As she pushed it back, the wound that she had suffered the night that her brother had thrown her against the flagstones caught the light – a shallow crater of scarred skin.

Taita smiled. ‘That’s better,’ he said.

• • •

Zahra looked at the man who stood in front of her. The dark patches where Djenn’s blood had soaked into his white robe; his lacerated lip; the stubble covering his skull: this was defeat if ever she had seen it.

‘Are you not tired, Taita? Of serving the sons of Mamose? Of remaking the world for them?’

‘There are many things you do not know about the sons of Mamose, as you call them,’ Taita replied. ‘And you forget that I am the Chosen One of Imhotep. Why would he choose me, when he could have chosen one of his own, a descendant of the old people? Why, Zahra?’

Zahra felt her anger flare at Taita’s words. ‘How do you know my name? I took off the mask, so tell me now. Who told you?’

‘It was my own beloved,’ Taita said simply.

Zahra looked at him in bewilderment, her rage building. ‘Your riddles make no sense.’

Taita smiled. ‘I have no desire to deceive you, Zahra. On the contrary, I hope to draw back the curtain that has shrouded your mind in darkness.’ He paused and stared at her intently. ‘You are not like the man who made you what you are now. You are not like your brother.’

‘You know nothing of my brother!’ She knew that she could not hold back her anger now – nothing would calm her, nothing would assuage the storm that was building inside of her.

‘And yet I know that he shed your blood in the temple of the Lord of the Red Land.’

Zahra felt her blood run cold. ‘You cannot know that,’ she hissed.

‘It is Seth who rules your mind now.’

‘No!’

‘What happened to your brother, Zahra?’

‘He was a fool. He twisted our father’s teaching, betrayed his memory. He died cowering in fear, as all fools do.’

‘And this is what your father would have wanted?’ Taita said.

‘You do not get to speak of my father!’ Zahra shouted, finally losing control of her temper, her hands beginning to shake as though palsied. ‘You are my captive and you will obey my commands.’

‘You are a creature of Seth, Zahra. And I have been sent to heal you.’

Zahra ground her teeth together, her jaw muscles bulging. She could feel the hands of the god upon her now, twisting her one way and then the other, shaking her, tossing her to the ground and pinning her to the flagstones. She shrieked, every muscle in her body knotting like cured teak. Spasm after spasm racked her until she felt her eyes rolling back in her head . . . and then, as always, the god took her.

• • •

Closing his eyes, Taita allowed the words of the *medu neter* to take shape in his mind, the sound of each of them as clear as if the gods were whispering to him. Quietly, he began to utter them, allowing their power to escape his lips as he reached out towards where Zahra lay jerking on the flagstones.

‘What are you doing?’ Gyasi’s voice was high, panicked. The scar tissue had begun to pull back from the old wound on Zahra’s forehead as Taita’s spell took hold, the skin melting away like beeswax under a flame.

In two strides, Gyasi had her knife at Taita’s throat. ‘I will kill you now. Stop what you are doing.’

Beneath the skin, the gourd of Zahra’s skull had knitted together in a thick fold, the weight of it pressing down on the matter beneath. As the bone began to fall away, Taita opened his eyes and gazed on thoughtfully. The sac that held soft, amorphous curds of the brain was undamaged, but Taita could see by the thickening of the membrane that his suspicion had been correct.

‘Undo what you have done!’ Gyasi shouted. ‘Make her whole again! She cannot live like this!’

‘You must know, Gyasi, that I have never met a man who understands the human body better than I,’ Taita began. ‘And yet, and yet . . . The head

is still a puzzle to me. Naturally, I understand that the eyes see, the nose smells, the mouth tastes and the ears hear – but what is the purpose of the pale porridge that fills the skull? I have never been able to fathom it myself, and no man has ever been able to offer me a satisfactory explanation. There is, however, a paradox here, in that if this glutinous mass is interfered with, even by the pressure of trapped fluid upon it, the patient is certainly doomed. And yet, and yet . . . your mistress lives.'

'Reverse the incantation,' Gyasi growled, the tip of her knife drawing a bead of blood from Taita's throat.

'You realise that she may well be changed, Gyasi,' Taita said. 'That she may no longer be what she was.'

Gyasi nodded as Taita began to mutter the *medu neter* again, softer this time, reversing the spell.

'Yes,' Gyasi said, wide-eyed, as the bone knitted, as the skin regrew, reforming without the depression that had disfigured her mistress's face. 'Yes.'

• • •

Piay knew that his men were tired – too tired to prevail against the force arrayed against them. They had given everything, and now, after a furious charge led by Hannu, the Shuyet's men had withdrawn, to regroup, but they would come again and the Blue Crocodiles would be overrun.

Even as he turned to find Hannu, a tall man dressed in black led another fresh company of the Shuyet's soldiers out through the fortress gate. 'Who is that?' Piay asked. 'Is that the Shuyet?'

'No,' Hannu replied, shaking his head. 'That's the scribe who speaks for him. The one who was at the tavern in Avaris.'

The Blue Crocodiles had fallen back, forming a crescent around the mouth of the causeway.

'Drive them back, into the lake!' Piay heard the scribe command.

'Ready yourselves!' Hannu barked.

The Blue Crocodiles braced themselves as a wave of warriors crashed into them, the press of those behind crushing those at the front.

'Fools,' Hannu said. 'They throw their lives away. They cannot even

raise their sword arms.’

‘But they have numbers,’ Piay replied. ‘I don’t think the Shuyet cares how many of his men fall if it means our destruction.’

‘Well, then, let them come!’ Hannu shouted. ‘If the portal to the afterlife is calling our names, then let us make it so choked with the dead that Anubis himself will be angry, and judgment will rain down on the Shuyet even after we’re gone!’

Piay grinned. He loved his friend like this, when his fearlessness spread to all those fighting around him.

The bark of the Shuyet’s scribe cut through the din and the mass of warriors heeded the command, withdrawing once again. From behind him, Piay heard the shouts of his own men, emboldened by the enemy’s retreat. Piay did not share in their joy. He suspected that the move simply signalled a new tactic, and began scanning the enemy ranks for signs of what was coming next.

He didn’t have to wait long. On the walls high above them, Piay saw a line of archers take their positions.

Piay barely had time to cry out a warning before the shafts were loosed. Crouching down, he whipped his shield above his head. An instant later his body shook from the thud of arrows slamming against it. One punched through the thick, seasoned leather and he saw the barbed arrowhead was made of flint. It was bound to the shaft in such a way that if any physician attempted to draw it out, the arrowhead would detach and remain embedded deep in the flesh, where it would cause an agonising, lingering death – an old Hyksos trick.

‘Advance,’ Hannu bellowed.

Lifting their shields, the Blue Crocodiles raced forward, driving into the front line of the Shuyet’s men and cutting them down. When they retreated, a fresh layer of bodies covered the bloody ground.

‘They are too many!’ Piay shouted. ‘We must lop the head off the snake!’ He pointed his sword at the tall scribe issuing commands.

‘What do you want to do?’ Hannu shouted back.

‘Cut a path! I will take him myself!’

Hannu roared with delight. ‘Blues on me!’ he yelled. ‘Now!’

• • •

Zahra felt the god release her. He had been gentle this time, but still her body ached, and she knew that bruises would bloom where he had thrown her onto the flagstones and held her down.

‘In my younger days, I was a physician,’ Taita said as Gyasi scurried to her mistress’s side. ‘Imhotep was also a healer, and the spells he left behind can be used to open and close the body. Your mind was changed as a result of your injury. But the power of the *medu neter* has healed you.’

‘I feel different,’ Zahra said, confusedly touching her fingers to her forehead as Gyasi helped her to her feet. Her mouth fell open as she found only firm bone, covered by smooth, unblemished skin.

‘When you were injured in the temple of Seth, the Lord of the Red Land entered you.’

‘Lies!’ Gyasi said, her eyes blazing furiously. ‘Lies!’ she repeated. ‘Anubis saved her. She is his vessel. It is his will that lives in her.’

‘I do not lie.’ Taita’s response was directed at Gyasi, but his eyes were trained on Zahra.

‘Gyasi is right to question you,’ Zahra said slowly. ‘You are our enemy. You serve the sons of Mamose.’

‘I know your mind,’ Taita began cautiously. ‘I knew another like it, a very long time ago, and there have been few others that have compared. This is why I suspected, from very early on, that you were a woman.’

Zahra blinked – then smiled. It was a smile that reflected an essentially benevolent mind that had been liberated from its shackles. But it was quickly dampened by the shadow that fell across her face as she gazed down upon the bitter battle beneath them. ‘What has been put in motion cannot readily be stopped,’ she lamented. ‘Those men down there, fighting for Anubis. They will not obey the order of a woman.’

‘Perhaps not,’ Taita acknowledged. Then he gestured to where she had set the Anubis mask. ‘But they will heed the command of a god. Put on the mask one last time, Zahra. Dismiss your servants, and be free of this folly.’

‘I have shed blood,’ she murmured guiltily. ‘I have killed many people. There will be punishment for such crimes. Indeed, there should be.’

‘Your future is what I am interested in, Zahra,’ Taita replied. ‘All who have borne the burden of leadership have blood on their hands, whether or not they acknowledge it. I cannot excuse what you have done, but if I condemn you, I would have to condemn many others, myself included.’

Zahra looked at him and he smiled again.

‘Lies!’

Taita was barely able to sidestep the short blade as Gyasi lunged for him, her eyes wild with fury.

‘Enough, Gyasi! Stop!’ Zahra shouted. ‘I have been blind,’ she continued. ‘Blinded by my desire to see my father’s vision fulfilled. And in my blindness, I have become Qar. I have become the thing he created – the Shuyet – in the throes of his hatred.’ For a moment, as her realisation overtook her, she closed her eyes and turned away. ‘But no more,’ she said. ‘The Shuyet is no more.’

‘No!’ Gyasi howled, and before either Taita or Zahra could stop her, she snatched the Anubis mask from where Zahra had set it aside. ‘You have been poisoned by Taita’s lies! The mage who has always been our enemy!’ she roared, pointing an accusing finger at Zahra. ‘But you are right about one thing. The Shuyet is not any one person. The spirit of Anubis can inhabit whoever he chooses. And just as the essence of the Shuyet moved on from Qar when you killed him, so, too, will it now move on from you.’

Gyasi lifted the Anubis mask and set it down over her own head. ‘Now, I am the Shuyet. I have become Anubis in the flesh. And now, just like Qar before you, you must die.’

Gyasi charged headlong at Zahra, with her blade glinting in the sunlight.

‘Gyasi!’ Taita shouted. ‘Stop!’

But just when he felt certain that her fate was sealed, Zahra reached into her robes and whipped out her own short blade. Sidestepping Gyasi’s charge in one fluid movement, she swiped the knife along the base of the jackal mask, where her acolyte’s throat remained exposed.

Gyasi stumbled as her blood poured from the wound, and her head lolled backwards. The weight of the mask carried her towards the parapet, and she tripped, tumbled, and fell, disappearing from view without so much as a cry.

• • •

The Blue Crocodiles pierced the front line like a hot blade, roaring their battle cry. The Shuyet’s scribe was yelling orders, his voice cracking with fury as he raged for his soldiers to drive the enemy back.

Piay set his gaze firmly on the tall, black-robed man and began to cut his own path through the warriors in front of him.

The Shuyet's scribe saw him coming, and smiled. He drew his sword from his belt, and readied himself.

'You must be the illegitimate Nomarch of Memphis. Taita's faithful dog.'

'And you are the Shuyet's scribe. A sheep, led to slaughter.'

The scribe laughed. 'I am Heru. I have spent my life serving Anubis, and now I will offer you to the god of the dead, in gratitude for our victory here today. Thanks to you and your master, Memphis will very soon be ours.'

The two combatants circled each other. Finally, Heru swung his sword, and Piay could see that for all his bluster, the scribe was no match for him with a blade. Deflecting Heru's strike, he drove his own weapon towards the scribe's midriff.

Awkwardly, Heru fended Piay's sword away, falling as he did so, his feet slipping from under him.

Piay stabbed down, cutting open the scribe's robe, peeling the flesh from the man's ribs. But even as he raised his sword to finish his opponent, from the corner of his eye he saw a shadow fall from the citadel. A black figure, cartwheeling against the pale stone of the walls.

'No!' Heru cried, following Piay's gaze.

Piay did not see the impact, but he knew that no mortal could have survived such a fall.

'Run!' he shouted after the scribe, as the man took advantage of Piay's hesitation – scrambling to his feet and taking to his heels. 'Run! Your master is no more. The curse of Anubis is broken!'

• • •

Zahra sank to her knees, her knife dropping from her hands. 'We cannot stand against them,' she said as Taita approached her. 'We cannot.'

Taita squatted next to her. 'What do you mean, Zahra? What is it that you know?'

Again, she raised her hand to her forehead, her fingers trembling. 'The

hubris of the Pharaohs – of the Red Pharaoh and the sons of Mamose – led them to fail in their duty to protect Egypt from invaders in the past, and our great land has suffered deeply for it. Now another invader turns his eyes to our shores.'

'What invader? Are the Hyksos returning?'

'Not the Hyksos,' she replied gravely. 'Worse.'

'Who?'

'They call themselves the Shardana. They come from the Great Green. My army was built to fight the Hyksos, but then you defeated the barbarians and drove them from the delta. Now, the Shardana see a divided land, with no one to protect it. Do you see now why I needed Imhotep's spells? They are coming, and not even the might of Thebes will drive them back into the sea.'

'Sea peoples?' Taita ventured.

'The greatest and most warlike of that race. The Weshesh and Denyen are their vassals, and the Tjekker and the Peleset run from them, calling them the Sardi – the ones who laugh while they kill.'

'How did you learn of their plans?' Taita asked.

'The Peleset seek an alliance. They believe that the Shardana will drive them from their islands with the army they are massing in the west. And then, when the Peleset are defeated, they will turn their eyes towards the delta.'

'And you believe them?'

'They have no reason to deceive me. The people of the delta have long been their enemies. We are their last hope. They sought Heru out – they know every vessel that moves on the Great Green, and they were not fooled by the Hyksos galley that he used to visit the cities along the coast. The Peleset know the Hyksos are broken. And then they sent an envoy here, to Hardai. Only they remember this place – it was they who built the citadel in the years before the rise of the Red Pharaoh, and it is the bones of their dead that lie in the chambers beneath it.'

• • •

reathing heavily, Piay crouched beside the fallen body of the Shuyet. He inhaled sharply as he grasped the Anubis mask, and pulled it off.

He had prepared himself, but he was not ready for the face that greeted him, the almond eyes that gazed, open and lifeless, into the empty sky. ‘Gyasi,’ he said in amazement. ‘The Shuyet was a woman, and she was amongst us the whole time.’

‘Explains a lot,’ Hannu muttered.

Piay stared down at Gyasi for a moment longer, as a host of different thoughts and emotions swirled through his head. She had awakened feelings in him that he had thought would remain forever buried. She had drawn him back to life. And yet, it was all a deception. All this time, the Shuyet had been right there in front of him. How did he miss it? As he gazed at her face, he shook his head.

Finally, Piay stood and turned to Hannu. ‘Have some men take the body out and burn it. Burn the mask with it. We can’t risk someone else thinking he can take the Shuyet’s place. The threat she posed ends here.’

As Hannu directed his men to carry Gyasi’s body away, Piay sank to his knees. The battle had been furious, but now it was done. The fortress had been overcome. ‘The battlefield was littered with bodies, clouds of sandflies swirling over the bloody pools that steamed in the fierce heat of the midday sun. Overhead, vultures circled, waiting for the last of the living to depart so that they could descend and feast.

In pursuit of Heru, Piay had hacked his way through the last line of the Shuyet’s soldiers, who, fighting with their backs to the fortress, had failed to see the figure in the Anubis mask tumble from the parapet.

Hurling himself through the gate in the mighty brick wall, Piay had been just in time to see Heru drop to his knees in front of the prone body. A disbelieving cry of despair had torn the air, as the scribe had mourned the loss of his mistress – a cry that was taken up by those near enough to realise the truth of what had happened and carried across those who remained on the field of battle.

Piay had thought that Heru would fight, make a last stand against the wall of the citadel, but, instead, the Scribe had jumped to his feet and made for the main gate.

Cupping a hand to his mouth, Piay called to Hannu. ‘Come, we must still hunt down the Scribe and find Taita.’

• • •

The battle had turned so quickly that the gate to the citadel stood half-open. The guards had begun to barricade it with a jumble of wooden chests, benches and chairs, but the Shuyet had fallen to her death before they could complete their work.

‘Step inside and you will die,’ someone called out from inside.

Through a gap in the makeshift barricade, Piay glimpsed four guards, waiting with their hands on their sword hilts. ‘The battle is over,’ Piay replied calmly. ‘Put down your swords, and leave in peace.’

‘We will die for the Shuyet.’

Piay turned to Hannu, who shrugged and spoke loudly, more for the benefit of the four guards than Piay. ‘As futile a gesture as I have ever seen, since the Shuyet is already dead, but let’s have it.’

On Hannu’s order, the Blue Crocodiles rushed forward, kicking and heaving at the barricade until the heavy objects fell away. The Shuyet’s guards lunged through the spaces that had been revealed, stabbing with their blades, but even after the exhausting battle, the elite soldiers were light on their feet. They danced back from each strike.

Snatching a spear from one of his men, Hannu hurled it into one of the larger gaps that they had created. A cry rang out as the bronze spearhead thumped into the chest of one of the Shuyet’s men and he fell back, hands clawing at the shaft.

As the other guards darted away, dragging their stricken comrade with them, the remnants of the barricade were torn down and Piay and Hannu slipped through, ahead of their men.

Crossing the courtyard, they entered the citadel’s opulent entrance hall, following the trail of blood that spattered the flagstones. Beyond a small antechamber, down a dimly lit corridor, two of the guards waited for them either side of a doorway, their blades levelled.

‘There is nowhere to run,’ Piay called. ‘Give yourselves up.’

The Blue Crocodiles edged forward. They outnumbered the guards five to one, but the Shuyet’s men showed no signs of surrendering. Finally, Piay swung his sword and let out a battle cry, his men surging behind him as he ran towards the guards.

The sound of blades clashing echoed off the stone walls, but the Blue Crocodiles made short work of the Shuyet’s remaining loyalists, cutting them down without receiving so much as a scratch in return.

‘Taita!’ Piay called out, stepping over the bodies, his voice echoing up the stairwell that lay beyond the doorway where the Shuyet’s guards had chosen to make their stand and through the empty stone halls. ‘Taita!’

But no one replied.

‘The blood leads up the stairs,’ Hannu said. ‘I wager we will find what we are looking for at the top.’

• • •

The wind tugged at Piay’s tunic as he stepped onto the roof of the Shuyet’s citadel. A storm was brewing out over the Great Green, the air turning thick and humid, and the vultures that had been waiting to pick the battlefield clean had been scattered by the turbulence.

The last of the citadel’s guards stood over his comrade – the man Hannu had speared at the main gate – his sword drawn.

‘Where is the Scribe?’ Piay asked. ‘Where’s Heru?’

‘He . . . He has followed the Shuyet,’ the guard stuttered. ‘He and my captain.’ He gestured to the man that lay on the flagstones at his feet – it was clear that the officer had succumbed to his wound; his tunic was caked with blood. ‘He will hear his mother’s voice again . . . He will see his father’s house . . .’

‘Ay, I see that,’ Hannu said, pointing over the wall. ‘He has begun his journey . . .’

Piay knew what would be revealed to him, but nevertheless he stepped to the parapet and looked down the dizzying height to where Heru’s broken body lay, the flagstones around it splashed with congealing blood.

• • •

‘Taita!’ Piay called out as he and Hannu stepped back into the stairwell, his voice echoing through the citadel. ‘Taita!’

‘Here,’ came the calm reply from below.

Descending, Piay found Taita waiting for him on the floor below, a woman at his side.

Taita smiled. ‘You have done well, Piay. Better than I ever could have hoped.’

Piay bowed gratefully. ‘Thank you, my lord.’

‘This is Zahra,’ Taita said.

‘Zahra,’ Piay repeated, already entranced by the powerful, intelligent aura that radiated from her.

‘Zahra is as promising a mind as I have met since the day my queen crossed into the afterlife. She has lived all over the delta, and I believe she should oversee the renaissance of Lower Egypt in my absence. I have felt this way since we first encountered her in the desert. Do you remember, Piay?’

Piay’s eyes widened anew in recognition. ‘Yes. The merchant, on the road back to the caravan.’

‘She was held captive by the Shuyet,’ Taita said, as Zahra glanced at him hesitantly. ‘She came here willingly, but once she did, she could not leave.’

As Zahra gazed at Piay with her almond eyes, he felt compelled to extend a hand. When she took it, a shiver ran up his spine.

‘She will relieve you, and assume the responsibilities of the Nomarch of Memphis,’ Taita said. ‘With Pharaoh’s approval, of course.’

Piay looked at his master in sudden confusion. ‘And where will I go?’

‘I know this is what you want, Piay. I have seen it written on your face since the day I arrived at Peru-nefer.’

‘I don’t deny it,’ Piay conceded.

Taita smiled again. ‘There will be a new role for you.’ He paused, allowing his words to linger in the air between them before he added: ‘In my place, at Pharaoh’s side.’

• • •

Three nights after departing Hardai and the sweltering marshes that surrounded it, Taita took his place alongside the other dignitaries in the nomarch’s feasting hall in Memphis. The palace was cool and airy, and it was as if the fear that had gripped the city had been completely forgotten amid the celebration of the nomarch’s return, and the army’s victory over the Shuyet. Dancers whirled, their gauzy dresses alternately hiding and then revealing their shapely forms as the musicians plucked their lyres and rattled their sistrums.

Seated on cushions around the low table, the wealthy and powerful of Memphis dined with the Council of Elders, enjoying the hospitality of their nomarch. The women wore black wigs, cut to accentuate their features, and dresses made of the finest Syrian silk, lavishly embroidered with jewels. The men were less flamboyantly attired, but their malachite eye shadow glittered in the lamplight, mirroring the colours of the sweet-smelling blue lotus flowers that all of the guests had been garlanded with as they stepped into the hall. It was a symbolic gesture, for the blooms represented rebirth.

At the head of the table, on one side of the Nomarch's throne, sat Hannu. The old soldier had never been one for the affairs of court, and from his expression Taita surmised that he was silently renewing his disdain for some of the guests who had gathered to celebrate the victory.

On the other side of the nomarch's throne sat Ankhu, looking as ancient as ever, but bright with a joy that refused to be dimmed. The old man had lived through the long occupation of the Hyksos. Now, for the first time since his youth, Memphis would remain free. His satisfaction bloomed on his face as he recounted for the guests the great deeds of Piay of Thebes, hero of Memphis.

Taita watched as Piay entered the room, and the feasting momentarily stopped as the gathered dignitaries stood and applauded their nomarch. He bowed and smiled as he received their gratitude and admiration, but Taita could see that something was troubling him.

'You do not look as though you just saved the city,' Taita said wryly as he approached.

Piay looked at him gravely. 'Asil has fled. He escaped while I was away.'

'Did you not expect him to? Surely you must have known that his request for a window was part of a plan, so his underlings in the Guild of Thieves might break him out.'

'I did,' Piay admitted. 'But I had hoped he would experience a change of heart. That was why I offered him the opportunity to live out the remainder of his days honestly.'

'Asil would never accept banishment,' Taita said. 'His life is here, inside these city walls.'

Piay nodded. 'He is not a good man, but he is my father.'

'Do not hang your head,' his master admonished gently. 'The Guild of

Thieves has long been a part of the fabric of Memphis. It will take longer than six new moons to rid the city of its influence.'

'Perhaps Zahra will have better success.'

Taita smiled. 'You offered your father more than he deserved. It was always going to be his choice whether or not to accept your mercy. Men who have lived their lives in the dark do not like to be called out into the light, even if that is the only thing that will save them.'

'He is an old man. He has chosen to remain in the dark, and he will die there.'

He patted his charge on the shoulder. 'He is not dead yet. There is still time.'

Taita had spent many hours worrying that Piay would never overcome his grief after Myssa's death. But his quest to save Memphis had changed him. A weight had been lifted. And now, with his task accomplished, he seemed to embody the meaning of the blue lotus flowers he wore. He was a man reborn.

'Two days hence, Zahra will join us here, and we will set sail for Thebes to present her to Pharaoh. And though she has lived in Lower Egypt all her life, I suspect that she will be hardly any more familiar with the nuances of governing Memphis than you were when you first arrived. She will need a strong advisor. Have you given that any thought, Piay?'

Piay gazed over at the long table, where Ankhu was holding court. On the other side of the nomarch's throne, Hannu was gulping wine from his cup. He waved down a servant for more, glancing irritably at Ankhu. Piay laughed.

'I have. There are few who know Memphis, or what the city needs, better than Ankhu. He is an old man, so his assistance may not be long enduring, but I feel confident that with his guidance, Zahra will finish what I have begun.'

Taita smiled. How far Piay had come, since the day he arrived from Thebes. 'And Hannu? What will you do with him?'

'Well, I had thought of taking him with us, to Thebes. But I believe he will be happier here, and Zahra will have a use for him. I have decided to appoint him Captain of the Memphis Guard.'

Taita laughed. 'He will not be happy about that. He'll complain that you are demoting him – he is a general, after all.'

Piay grinned. But his smile dissolved as he considered their impending departure for Thebes, and the great responsibility that awaited him there.

‘Does something else trouble you, Piay?’

‘I don’t know how Pharaoh will receive the news – that I am to take your place, at his side.’

‘You need not concern yourself with that,’ Taita replied. ‘Pharaoh will listen to what I tell him.’ He chuckled. ‘Unlike someone else I know.’

‘I listen when it matters,’ Piay retorted.

Taita nodded. ‘You belong at Pharaoh’s side, and he will be glad of your presence. Egypt will be remade at last, and the grandeur of antiquity will return. One Egypt, from the cataracts to the Great Green. The days yet to come beckon. A new kingdom awaits us all.’

• • •

Taita stood in the prow of the galley that would bear him back to Thebes, as the sailors bent their backs over their oars and urged the great ship out of the harbour at Peru-nefer. He gazed up at the white walls of Memphis as the river breeze swept across his face, gleaming in the light of Ra’s great orb.

‘When I first set eyes on Memphis, Myssa was with me,’ Piay said as he stepped to his master’s side.

Taita smiled as he glanced at his former student. How much he reminded him of Tanus, standing there in the sun. Tanus who also had once been Taita’s student, and with whom he had traversed the mighty black Nile, a lifetime before.

‘Now, as I leave it, I am filled with the feeling that I am once more as I was when I arrived. Myssa is with me again.’

Piay glanced back at the hold, where the body of his beloved rested in the sarcophagus that would protect it on the long voyage ahead, as the galley bore it first to Thebes, and then beyond – taking Myssa back to her homeland of Kush.

‘You are so much more than the man who sailed into Peru-nefer so many moons ago,’ Taita said gently. ‘You uncovered and unlocked the tomb of the Great Architect after one thousand years of mystery. You are the nomarch who saved Memphis, who saved all Lower Egypt from being

plunged into darkness once more.’

Piay nodded as he absorbed his master’s words.

‘What will you do with her?’ Taita asked.

A gusting breeze hit master and pupil as the galley moved out into the main channel of the river, and Piay stared south, looking far beyond the horizon, to the land of Myssa’s ancestors.

‘She belongs with her people. I will take her back to her land. To the home she was stolen from, before I met her in Mycenae. To the land of her gods and the village of her ancestors.’ He smiled, and his eyes grew misty as he remembered their journey there, together. ‘There is a hill there, overlooking the place where her village once stood. She will want to watch while children play there again. As life returns to the place she loved.’

Taita absorbed Piay’s words solemnly, and rested his hand on his shoulder.

Together they stood, in comfortable silence, as the galley’s sail was unfurled, billowing as it caught the wind. The blue Eye of Horus gazed out on master and pupil, the wide Nile, and the great land of Egypt that stretched out before them.

• • •

Beneath the blue victory banners that still hung from the walls of Thebes, the citizens had gathered, ready to welcome their Lord High Chancellor, the great mage Taita, back to the capital.

Zahra could see the love and admiration they had for Taita, these Upper Kingdom Egyptians who spoke so differently from the people she had grown up with in Avaris, and he returned their adoration, beaming back at them as he walked ahead of her and Piay, the Blue Crocodile Guard at their sides, escorting them through the streets of the capital.

The God-Pharaoh Rameses waited to receive them at the top of the palace steps, his arms opened wide. ‘Welcome back, Taita,’ he greeted his most trusted advisor magnanimously. ‘You have been missed, but we are grateful for the good news you bring.’

So, this was the one that her brother had called ‘the pretender’, Zahra thought to herself, as she assessed the man who stood before her. He was muscular, and his head was perfectly hairless under his elaborate, golden

pschent. His malachite eye makeup accentuated his features, and he gave off the aura of one who was both man, and not.

Taita bowed before the handsome pharaoh, and from his smile, Zahra could see how much he cared for this god-king, just as he did for Piay. ‘Memphis is secured by the efforts of your nomarch,’ he announced proudly, indicating for Piay to step forward.

Piay bowed deeply before his pharaoh.

‘Rise, Piay,’ Rameses said. ‘You have done all that I asked, and more. The ancient jewel of this land is once more restored, and shines anew in its glorious crown. We owe you a great debt.’ He smiled benevolently. ‘How would you have me repay it?’

Piay bowed again. ‘I would ask only for permission to depart your presence, to bury my beloved in her homeland of Kush, Your Majesty. When this is accomplished, I will return swiftly to your court.’

‘You have my blessing.’ Pharaoh’s gaze alighted on Zahra, and she could tell that he was momentarily struck by her aura. ‘And who is this?’ he asked Taita.

Piay stepped aside, and Taita smiled encouragingly as he gestured for Zahra to step forward and introduce herself. ‘I am Zahra, Your Majesty. Daughter of Nimlot, priest of Anubis at the temple of Avaris.’

‘You are a member of the priestly class of the Lower Kingdom,’ Pharaoh said respectfully. ‘For your intellect to exceed your beauty, as I believe it must if Taita has brought you here, then the gods have blessed you with gifts sufficient to make Thoth himself jealous. I welcome you to Thebes.’

As Zahra bowed, Taita smiled at the Pharaoh. ‘I would strongly advise you to consider her as the next Nomarch of Memphis, Your Majesty.’

Rameses studied Zahra, holding her firmly in his powerful gaze. She looked down at her feet, prompting a smile from the Pharaoh. ‘What is your reasoning?’

‘Zahra is as remarkable an intellect as I have encountered. In so many ways, she reminds me of your own great ancestor, Queen Lostris. Our adversary in the north, the Shuyet, admired her abilities just as much, exploiting the power of her mind to match the strength of my own. In the great game that played out between us, I became certain of her worthiness, to serve as your representative in Memphis, and to restore Lower Egypt to

its former greatness in the days to come.'

Rameses nodded as he mulled over his trusted advisor's argument. 'How, then, would you suggest I employ your valiant assistant, my dear Lord High Chancellor? When he returns from Kush?'

Taita paused before he answered, his eyes gleaming proudly. 'Piay has uncovered the long-lost tomb of Imhotep. The spells it contains have the power not only to reunify the great land of Egypt, but to protect it against future enemies.' He shifted his gaze to Zahra, and his face became grave. 'From her home in the delta, Zahra has learned of a new threat lurking beyond the Great Green. A mysterious invader more powerful even than the Hyksos – the Sardi.' Finally, he turned back to face Pharaoh. 'Egypt must be ready. It must be unified. But once Imhotep's tomb is open, the spells will begin to disappear. Only by unravelling and preserving them can I fulfil my duty and equip this great land with the means to defend itself. It is to the great monuments, and to the tomb of the Great Architect, that I will go to accomplish this.' He bowed. 'With your permission, Your Majesty.'

'No one will ever replace you,' Rameses replied.

Taita smiled. 'Perhaps not, Your Majesty. But what I have seen from Piay during the trials he has endured, I have seen only once in my long life before. When measured against the long line of heroes that this great land has seen, only Tanus stands as his equal in courage, and selflessness.'

As Piay bowed in blushing appreciation of his master's words, Taita smiled and nodded approvingly. 'A man cannot learn who he truly is unless he has suffered,' he continued. 'Piay has suffered much, and faced many challenges. But he has come through his suffering, and a more capable advisor you will never find, not if you scoured the whole of the known world.'

Pharaoh considered Taita for a long moment, his face as inscrutable as the Sphinx. Finally, he turned his gaze on Piay and Zahra. 'Step forward, Piay. Step forward, Zahra.'

Piay and Zahra complied, bowing again before the sovereign of Egypt.

'You would have me take these, together – one to stand in for the other, who, in turn, will stand in your stead?' Pharaoh asked Taita, without removing his heavy gaze from the man and woman before him.

'I am certain they both will serve you well,' the mage replied calmly.

The God-Pharaoh Rameses considered his most respected advisor. 'Very

well,’ he assented. ‘On one condition. When you have unlocked, deciphered and committed the ancient spells of Imhotep to memory, as I am sure you will, you will return to Thebes, and my service, to stand once more at my side as Lord High Chancellor.’

Taita bowed. ‘I will, Your Majesty. However long it takes me, when the task is accomplished, I will return.’

• • •

The setting sun hung red over the horizon as Piay climbed the rocky hill, with Myssa’s body in his arms. She was so light, he felt that she might take flight in the wind that whipped across the plain where her village had once stood.

Piay’s beloved had been mummified after he had retrieved her body from beneath Imhotep’s tomb. He had found Shabaka, a Kushite from Kerma – soothsayer, witch doctor and embalmer – in one of the poorer quarters of Memphis. Myssa had had her own religion, and Shabaka had helped Piay to appease her gods. And now, in returning her to Kush, he was bringing her back to them.

At the top of the hill, he approached the grave that he and the small group of guards he had brought south with him had dug in the sun-baked earth earlier in the day. Carefully, he stepped into it with his precious burden in his arms, and gently laid her down in the cool earth.

Standing, he looked down at the form he knew so well, his eyes filling with tears.

As he looked up, away from the natural tomb that would house his beloved from this moment on, he saw a small herd of elephants begin to move across the plain. He smiled as he watched the giant beasts – the cows swaying as they walked, the calves falling behind and then gambolling after their mothers, before falling behind again. These were the animals that he had come in search of on his first journey to Kush, and Myssa’s face as she had been then, smiling and beautiful, filled his imagination.

As Piay watched, a cow separated from the herd and turned her head to face him. As his eyes met hers, he thought he recognised the way his beloved would look at him, in those earliest of days. A part of him knew then that somehow, somewhere, Myssa was smiling on him, and Piay was

filled with a peace as great as any he had ever known.

• • •

The night air blasted across the desert wastes, the cold reaching deep into Taita's bones. In the distance, the jackals still howled, but they no longer sounded as threatening as they had done the last time he had stood in the shadow of the Great Pyramid.

Taita shivered and pulled his cloak tighter around him, then turned to where Hannu was squatting on the sand. A gang of soldiers crouched together nearby, talking in whispers while passing a water-hide between themselves.

Hannu hauled himself to his feet as Taita neared. 'You may go,' the mage announced.

'Are you sure?' Hannu asked sceptically. 'I wouldn't want to be left alone in this place.'

Taita smiled. 'I am sure. The task before me is not a short one, and I do not know when I shall emerge.'

'If you change your mind –'

'My mind is settled.'

'Aye. Right, then.'

Taita smiled, and Hannu glanced at him quizzically. 'Will I see you again?'

'Only the gods know that, Hannu. The mysteries of the spells contained in that tomb are great, and I do not know how I will be transformed as I unwind them. When I emerge, it may be as if only moments have passed. It may also be many lifetimes in the future.'

Hannu's face fell.

'But that is not for you to concern yourself with. You have been a loyal friend to Piay, and now that he stands in my place at Pharaoh's side, he will have need of your counsel many more times in the seasons to come. When your duty to Zahra is fulfilled, and you have found another to relieve you as Captain of the Memphis Guard, return to him. Tell him that he has done well. That he has made me proud.'

Hannu grinned. 'You have given me a difficult final task, my lord.'

Taita smiled again. 'A fitting last request, then. You have earned it.'

Hannu bowed, and turned away. As he began to walk back towards the waiting soldiers, Taita felt compelled to call out one last instruction.

‘Take care of him.’

Hannu paused, turned and bowed again. ‘I will.’

Taita nodded a final parting and then strode around the edge of the monument, to the entrance to the tunnel that led to the tomb of Imhotep.

Every other time he had visited this place he had been in turmoil, but now, as Taita stood on the brink, he felt a deep peace.

Lowering himself into the hole, Taita took out his flint and fire-striker, to light one of the remaining brands. The bitter smell of pitch filled his nose as the flames licked up from the torch and the shadows raced away along the limestone walls of the tunnel.

Reaching above him, Taita muttered the words of the *medu neter* – the spell of the closed mouth. The torch sputtered and hissed as the rock closed above his head, the darkness that surrounded him growing deeper as the moonlit sky disappeared from view.

The slap of Taita’s leather soles echoed off the walls as he strode down the incline. The air grew colder still as he stepped into the confines of the tomb. In the quivering light thrown by his torch, the gods’ words, painted in brilliant colours across the walls, seemed to move with a life of their own.

Taita gazed on those inscriptions as he had done before. Now, it was his task to preserve them.

So much power had been stored here: the ability to summon the gods, and with their help, to reshape the world. Which was why Imhotep had buried them here, why he had hidden them away for a thousand years. Only someone of great wisdom could even attempt to use them without catastrophic consequences.

Taita exhaled and closed his eyes, feeling with his long fingers along the wall, feeling the power that radiated from it. Imhotep had left these spells for him. The Great Architect had looked across the millennium and seen his successor. And now, finally, Taita was going to unravel their secrets.

Taita sat down, with his back against Imhotep’s sarcophagus, and closed his eyes, allowing the *medu neter* to dance in his head. His heart flooded with emotion, and his mind filled with certainty that, at last, this was the moment when everything would change for the better.

A new age was about to dawn.

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About the Author

Wilbur Smith was born in Central Africa in 1933. He became a full-time writer in 1964, following the success of *When the Lion Feeds*, his first published novel. An international phenomenon, his readership built up over fifty-five years of writing, his works include the Courtney Series, the Ballantyne Series, the Egyptian Series, the Hector Cross Series and many successful standalone novels, all meticulously researched on his numerous expeditions worldwide.

The establishment of the Wilbur & Niso Smith Foundation, in 2015, was driven by Wilbur's passion for empowering writers, promoting literacy and advancing adventure writing as a genre. The foundation's flagship programme is the Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize.

Wilbur Smith passed away peacefully at home in 2021 with his wife, Niso, by his side, leaving behind a treasure-trove of novels and stories that will delight readers for years to come.

For all the latest information on Wilbur Smith's writing visit www.wilbursmithbooks.com or facebook.com/WilburSmith.

Mark Chadbourn is a *Sunday Times* best-selling author. A two-time winner of the prestigious British Fantasy Award, he is best known for his *Hereward* series of Anglo-Saxon historical fiction novels, published under his pseudonym James Wilde, and his Age of Misrule series of modern fantasy novels.

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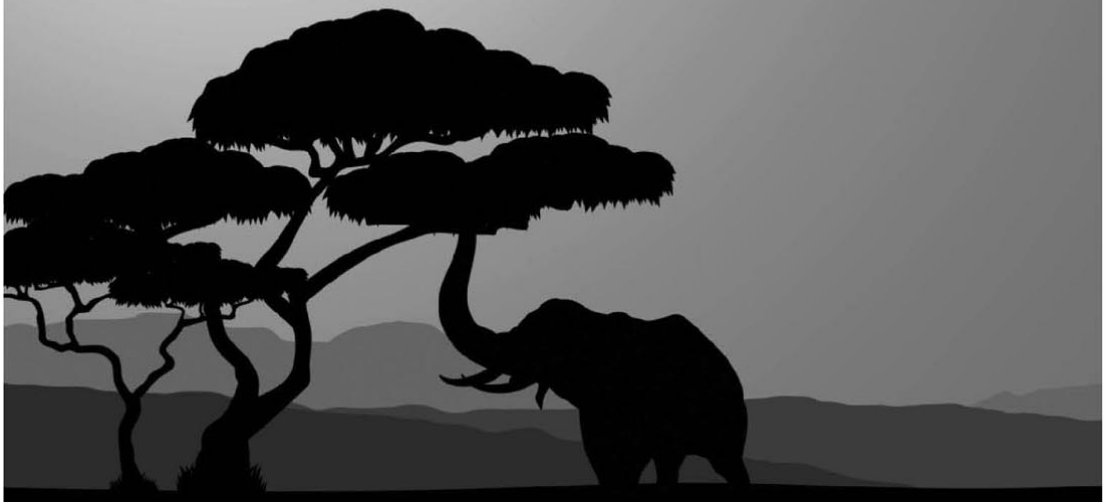

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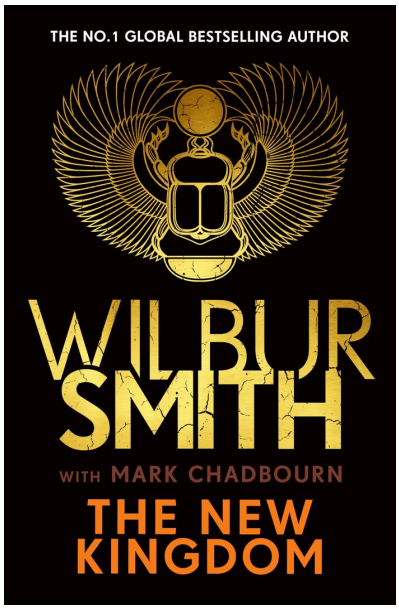

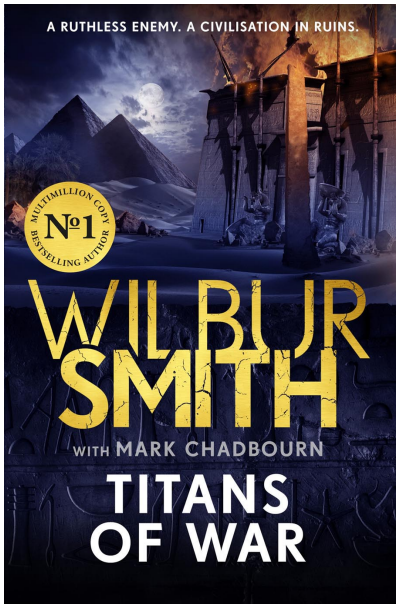

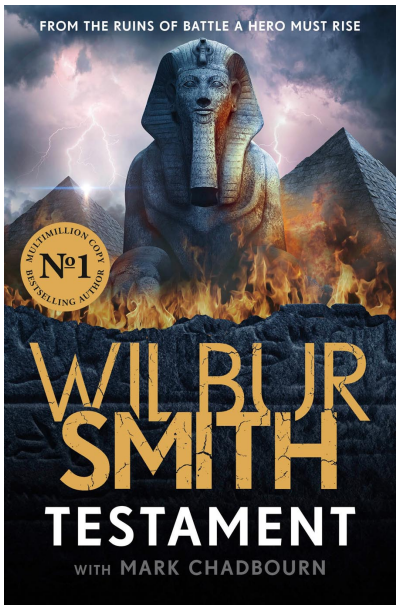

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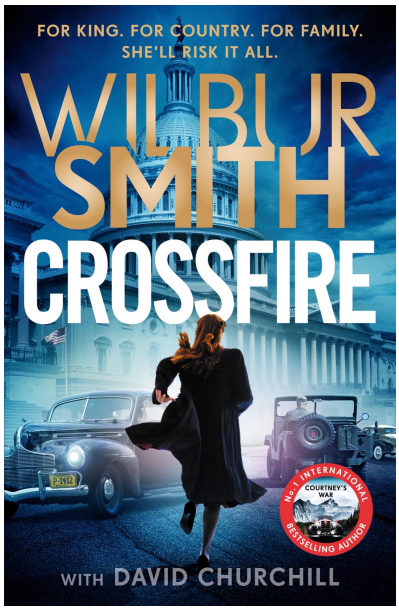

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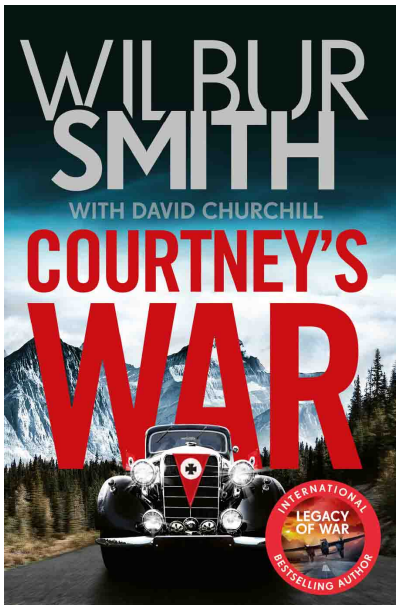

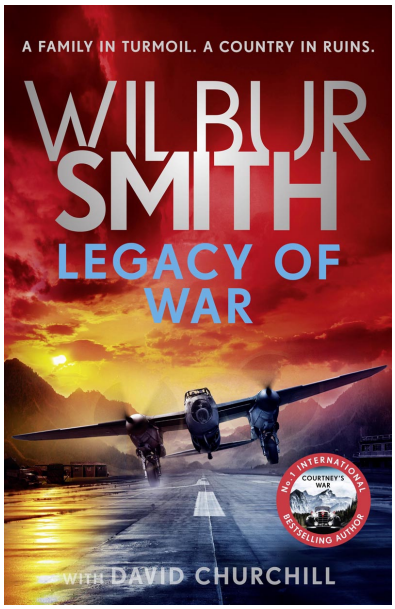

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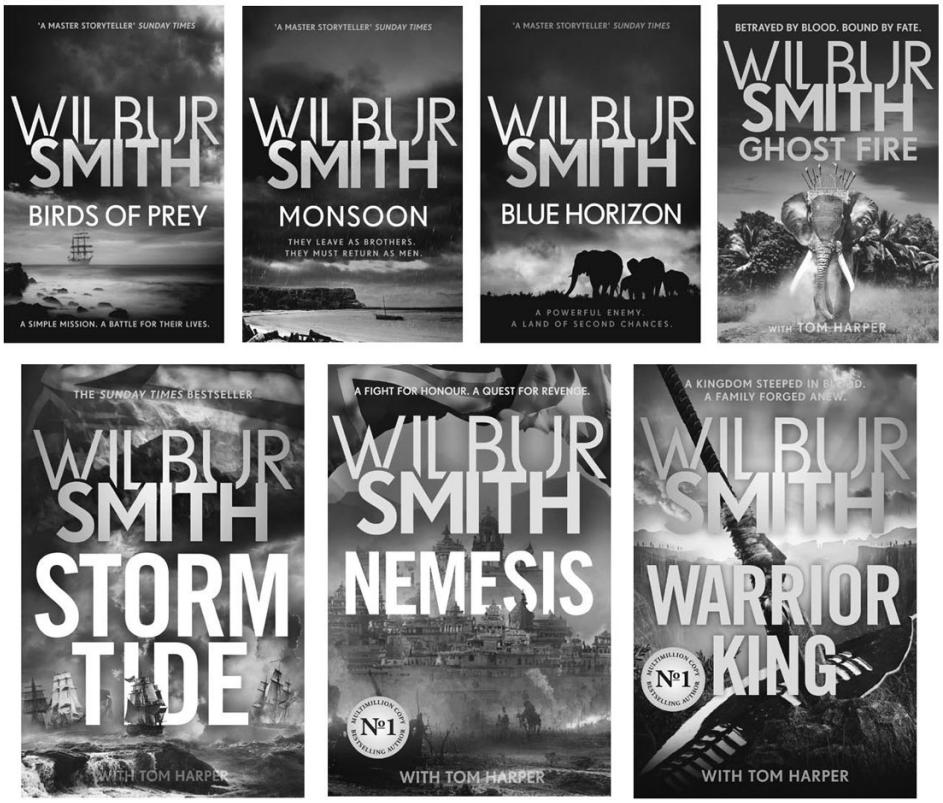

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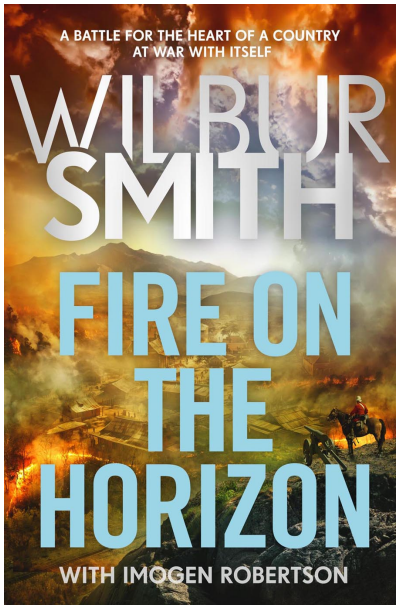

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