

Ten Years Past Cairo
a novel by Teri Ekland



Chapter 1: Venice

Sarah Prentice, *July 26, 1972*

It's our first day in Venice. A warm ocean breeze sweeps across San Marco Square as the Bell Tower rings the noon hour. On its capstone stands Gabriel igniting Venice with magic, or so it seems to me.

At Café Quadri, I'm eating a slice of pizza at an outside table. The orchestra strikes up the Blue Danube Waltz. On the plaza before me old Italians are feeding pigeons and tourists are following tour guides who hold up colored flags so no one gets lost in the crowd.

"I doubt pigeons get lost in the swarm of pigeons," I say to my best friends Jen and Mary. They're too busy to even look at me. Jennifer, in her yellow Indian blouse with metallic discs, is reading *The Day of the Jackal* and Mary, who practically lives in her knitted poncho, is writing a series of postcards to family and friends in Chicago. She writes the same message on each card with only a different word or two. Not very original! But that's Mary.

Since freshman year at William Fremd High, we've done everything together. We took the same electives and hung out after school playing Carole King, Elvis, and John Denver

albums in my bedroom because of my stereo system and all the snacks in Mom's kitchen. My family's a lot richer than Jen and Mary's combined.

Junior year we started thinking about things to do before heading off to college. We wanted to take a break from school. Jen suggested we join the Peace Corps or VISTA or volunteer in a national park. Mary suggested we enlist in the Airforce for three years but Jen and I knocked that down—*tout suite*.

During French class one day, I came up with the brilliant idea of traveling around Europe for six months. Maybe the entire year. My best friends jumped on the band wagon. *Out the doors of Fremd and into the arms of Europe* became our motto.

At Schaumburg Mall we came across this young, hip travel agent named Matt Grubner. He suggested that all we need to know about Europe is in the guidebook *Europe on Five and Ten Dollars a Day*. It's become our travel bible. Matt arranged our direct flight from O'Hare to Heathrow and helped us get passports, Eurail passes, International Student ID Cards, and youth hostel cards.

"Why do we need youth hostel cards?" I asked while nibbling on a bag of sunflower seeds in his office.

"They have cheap dormitory rooms for young travelers such as you girls. I recommend you stay at them to stretch out your money," Matt said.

"I've never been worried about stretching out money," I said. "And I really don't want to stay in a dormitory like at some sort of Girl Scout camp."

"Well, Sarah," Jen chimed in like she always does. "Mary and I can't even afford two-star hotels. Not for six months!"

“That’s right,” Mary added. “Jen and I are working at Dairy Queen to pay for this trip while your daddy’s footing all your bills.”

“Look girls,” Matt interrupted. “At youth hostels you’ll meet other young travelers who can recommend places to see and things to avoid.”

It turns out Matt Grubner was right.

For me, our trip began a month ago when Daddy hugged me good-bye at O’Hare and we boarded the Delta DC-7 to Europe. We don’t have any set plans although we made an itinerary for our parents. Daddy insisted. “I want to know where you are and where you’re going at all times,” he said. I had to go along with this so he wouldn’t change his mind about letting me go in the first place. As I see it, itineraries are for parents and old people like the tourists who follow colored flags across plazas.

The first thing we did in London was chuck the stupid itinerary. Good riddance, I say. We go where adventure takes us and so far, none of us has lost any enthusiasm.

After a few days in London, we got bored and tired of the terrible smog. Sometimes we couldn’t even understand the British people. And they were speaking English!

We caught the boat from Dover to Calais and took a train straight to Paris. We were eager to try out our Fremd High French. Because youth hostels are closed between nine in the morning and five in the evening, and we arrived at *Gare du Nord* at ten in the morning, we stored our luggage and caught the Metro to the Louvre to see the Mona Lisa. This was top on everyone’s list. At least Jen and Mary’s.

Personally, I wanted to see the ancient Egyptian artifacts. During sophomore English, we read Shakespeare’s *Cleopatra*. After Miss Carlson showed us slides of King Tut’s treasures and

the film *Cleopatra* starring Elizabeth Taylor, I fell in love with everything Egyptian. I even asked Jen and Mary to call me Nefer-Tut. Not that they did. To them, I remain simply Sarah.

Inside the Louvre, we made a beeline to DaVinci's masterpiece. Then Jen and Mary breezed through the Egyptian exhibits while I took my time at each artifact. I was totally mystified, like a time machine had taken me back to Cleopatra on the Nile or at the great pyramids of Giza.

Jen and Mar were in such a hurry. "We want to be first in line when the hostel opens," they both kept saying.

"Why? Just to choose a dormitory bunk?" I asked sarcastically. Jen was getting on my nerves. I was standing at this funerary stela of an Old Kingdom princess named Nefertabet imagining myself sitting on a throne in a leopard skin gown wearing a choker of pure gold. It felt like Nefertabet and I were the same person although my long hair is auburn and my eyes are sapphire blue, as Daddy likes to tell me.

"Give me a minute, Jennifer," I argued. "This is Nefertabet."

"So, what. Let's go."

"Slow your horses. She's the Beautiful Lady of the East, daughter of Khufu."

"Khufu? Like Tofu Tutfu?"

"Right numskull. Didn't you learn anything from Miss Carlson? Khufu built the largest pyramid in Egypt."

Jen and Mar started tugging my arms to get me going. "I tell you what," I said. "This dignified lady impresses me way more than your stupid Mona Lisa."

Before my friends yanked me completely outside the museum, I ran into the gift shop and bought a postcard of the Nefertibet stela. I keep it in my travel bible to look at whenever I want to feel like the dignified daughter of a great king.

I bite into my pizza and look across the square at the Basilica under the midday sun. On the central gable angels flank a statue of St. Mark “the Patron of Venice,” my guidebook says. Below him is a winged lion which is everywhere in Venice. It stands on top of a column at the harbor entrance to San Marco Square.

Before this trip, I didn’t know much about saints and angels because I don’t come from a religious family like Mary. She’s Catholic and wears a St. Christopher pendant for protection on our travels. It’s not even gold or silver. Maybe it’s aluminum. Kinda tacky. Anyway, my religious upbringing involved my parents taking me to church on Easter Sunday. In fact, I don’t remember Mom or Daddy ever praying or even talking about God.

I remove the Louvre postcard from my guidebook and look at my friends. “You two can have Mona Lisa as your guardian angel but this dignified lady is mine!”

“You can’t declare who your guardian angel is going to be,” Mary says like she knows everything there is to know.

“Oh really? And why not Miss Know-it-all?”

She looks at me with her big brown eyes and touches her little aluminum pendant.

“Because only God can assign you an angel.”

Not in the mood to argue, I place my postcard against my heart, say a quiet prayer to my new guardian angel then put her back in my guidebook. Jen resumes reading her novel and Mary continues writing her postcards like she’s got no imagination.

Later in the afternoon, my friends and I enter Ostello di Venezia with a mob of young international travelers. We retrieve our duffle bags from the storage room, claim our bunks and freshen up in the women's bathroom. Matt Grubner recommended we travel with inconspicuous duffle bags.

"I was planning to use Gucci luggage," I told him in his travel agency office.

He was looking at my sapphire earrings from Daddy when he said, "You need to blend in with other travelers and leave your expensive jewelry and bags at home. You don't want pickpockets and conmen to target you."

Matt Grubner was right again. I don't need to stick out in the youth hostel crowd. They're all a little bit poor looking. Not exactly country club types like Mom and her pals.

In the hostel's large dining hall, we sit at a table and drink orange sodas before the pasta dinner starts at six. We talk about these waiters from the Café Quadri who invited us to a nightclub tonight.

"Dibs on the tall one," Jen says.

"Sure, have at it. I'll take stubby," Mary chimes in then looks at me. "We all know Sarah gets first pick anyway."

"So, what," I say. "None of us can help how we look."

Before my friends make one of their typical comebacks, this young man in jeans and a white T-shirt with five rings approaches our table. I remember his short curly brown hair, green eyes and dimples from this morning when he checked us into the hostel. *Did he wink at me?* I'm trying to remember. My friends and I are used to foreign men flirting with us. It's nonstop sometimes. As soon as we shoo one guy away, another one shows up.

“Where are you ladies from?” the man asks with an appealing accent I can’t place. It’s not British because I can clearly understand him.

“*Nous sommes française*,” I jest. It’s one of my favorite comeback lines although sometimes I get caught because the guy is French or speaks it fluently unlike our two years of high school French.

“Parlez-vous Pompidou?” The man looks at me when making his joke about the current president of France. I only recently read about Georges Pompidou in *Time Magazine*, my main source of news and information other than the travelers we meet and our travel bible. Fremd High didn’t offer courses in international politics and Daddy isn’t a reader of international news. His focus is on the flow of trucks across the interstates. I left O’Hare rather ignorant of the world beyond Palatine. In fact, Europeans act shocked when I don’t know about their leaders or monarchs. But I mean, who really cares?

“We’re from Chicago,” Jen says. Her tone is far too serious like she’s annoyed because she already knows what’s going to happen. I like this guy and he’s more interested in me than my friends. This is how it usually goes and there’s nothing I can do about it. I expect my friends to act nice while I choose to either flirt back or tell the guy to take a hike.

Mary and Jen speak to each other and ignore me.

“Where are you from?” I ask the man. He’s quite handsome, dreamy, in fact.

He straddles a chair beside me and says with pride, “I’m from Cairo. City of a Thousand Minarets.”

“Wow! I’ve never met anyone from Egypt,” I say while wondering if this is a coincidence or divine intervention. I was just thinking about my guardian angel Nefertiabet.

“I’m sure you’ve met an ancient Egyptian before.” The man grins and shows off his dimples.

“You mean Princess Nefertiabet?” I ask thinking he might tell me something about her.

“No. I mean your mummy.”

“Cute.” I politely chuckle.

He notices the *Time Magazine* on the table. “Maybe you’ve read about me in Time. I’m on the Egyptian handball team at the Olympic Games in Munich.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Really.”

“Maybe I have. What’s your name?”

“Amar Mohammed Thomas-Bartlett.” He grips my hand in a strong and lasting handshake. The kind Daddy uses when meeting business associates or anyone, really, except of course women.

“Thomas-Bartlett? That doesn’t sound Egyptian.”

“My grandfather was British.”

Jen breaks from her conversation with Mary and glares at me. “Are we going out tonight? Miss Nefer-Tut.”

“I’ve changed my mind about meeting middle-aged waiters.” I look at the gorgeous Olympian from Cairo sitting before me. “You two go ahead. I want to read Michener tonight. The drifters are in Mozambique.”

“Suit yourself.” Jen and Mary whisk off.

“Have fun you two.” Amar looks away from me for the first time. “Your friend will see Venice with me.”

He scoots his chair closer and winks like he *had* winked this morning. He asks my name then says, “Sarah Prentice. Your eyes are like the blue lily of the Nile. It has a sweet narcotic effect like the one you’re having on me.”

“You flatter me,” I say. “But go on.”

“Allow me to take you to dinner and show you the full moon on the dark canals of love.”

He touches my hand and I tingle all over. Amar Thomas-Bartlett from Cairo is beyond what I ever imagined when planning this trip at Fremd High. He’s intoxicating.

Within the hour, Amar and I are in San Marco Square. He takes my hand and leads me through the dark, narrow paths of the Rialto. As the full moon hovers over the City of Canals, romance unfolds with each step we take. Seagulls caw, boat motors hum and under nearly every streetlamp, lovers embrace.

Amar takes me to Da Mamo trattoria. Two other couples are dining at corner tables and the aroma of fresh garlic bread fills the room. A formal waiter seats us at a secluded table. On its white linen tablecloth sits a Chianti bottle burning a candle. “Very chic, very cozy,” I say as the waiter pulls out my chair. “I doubt Jen and Mar are having such luck with their dates. You have *savoir faire*.”

Amar chuckles. “I thought you’d like this place.”

Amar orders grilled tuna and linguini for both of us and asks for a large decanter of Chianti. He leans across the table, takes my hand and peers at me with his dazzling green eyes. “I must confess, Miss Sarah Prentice from Chicago, when you walked into the hostel this morning my friend wanted to meet you and I said to him *No, she’s mine*.”

“You’re such a charmer.” I look at his strong, well-manicured hand holding mine. “You seem so sophisticated and classy.”

“Now you flatter me.”

“So why are you slinging bags at a youth hostel?”

He grins and flashes his dimples. “I’m paying for courses at the University of Languages and saving up for my tuition next year.”

“Tuition?”

“I plan to study agricultural science at Cairo University. Like my father.”

“What about the Olympics? Do you have to pay to compete?”

“What?” Amar asks like I caught him off guard. “Oh yes. The Olympics. I’m saving up for the Olympics, too.”

I sip my Chianti. “I’m also playing around before college. Next fall I hope to study archaeology at the University of Chicago. Daddy wants me to major in business and work at his company. He has big plans for me.”

“What’s your father’s company, my little gazelle?” Amar’s eyes glimmer with interest.

“You’re so romantic. No one’s ever called me a gazelle. I like it.”

“And your daddy?”

“He owns SP Trucking. He named it after his mother. We’re both Sarah Prentice.”

“What’s your father’s name?”

“Stanly Alan Prentice. He’s a self-made man.”

“You mean he made himself? He must be a god, like Atum Ra.” Amar fills my wineglass.

“No, not quite. Daddy made his money from scratch. He grew up poor and learned to go after what he wants. He has a soft spot for me.”

“Ah, of course, you’re an American princess. And do you have many brothers and sisters?”

“I have one brother ten years older than me. Kenny Lee’s a lawyer at Daddy’s trucking firm.”

“What about your mummy?”

I’m about to take another bite of tuna and pesto but stop and look at Amar, hoping he’s just making another mummy joke. My mother is a topic I avoid. Sometimes I get carried away when talking about her, as Jen and Mar well know. But the wine has loosened me up.

“What’s her name?” Amar persists.

“Edith. I don’t think she cares about anything but her wine collection in the cellar and the country club where she plays golf, bridge and tennis with her rich lady friends. They all smoke and drink. When I call home, Mom talks for a minute then hands the phone to Daddy.”

“I’m sure mummy loves you.”

“No. She was happy with her son before I unexpectedly came along. You see, I’m Daddy’s baby girl. But I quit caring about all this when I left Fremd High.” I pause to see if Amar has lost interest. It seems he’s enthralled. I smile and simply say, “Mummies! Can’t live with them, can’t live without them.”

Instead of laughing at my silly joke, Amar strokes my hand like he understands me. “Fear not, American princess. For the sons fall in love with the daughters. Like the stars fall from the heavens. Like I’m falling for you.”

I look at the burning candle between us and the flame in his eyes.

“Let’s go to a movie,” Amar suggests, waking me from a trance, it seems. Or maybe I just feel woozy from the wine.

“Yes. I couldn’t possibly drink another drop of Chianti.”

Amar takes me to a small cinema on the other side of the Rialto. When we arrive, he discovers the night’s feature is *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston.

“That’s great,” I say. “I’ve seen it before and would love to see it again.”

“I don’t like this film,” Amar says.

“Why not? It’s about Egypt.”

“The movie’s about the Jews. Not Egypt. Tonight, I want to forget about the never-ending conflict. I spent two years in the Egyptian Army, you know.”

“You were a soldier?” I ask while thinking *this man couldn’t be any more amazing*. An Olympic warrior from Egypt. I’m as awestruck by Amar as I am by Nefertibet. It must be the magic of Venice.

“Yes, Sarah Prentice. Every Egyptian male serves in the military. My country can call on me anytime. But since I’m in the Olympics, I’m free to be here with you.”

“Were you in a war?”

“No. My older brother fought in the June War of ‘67.”

“In Egypt?”

“Yes. In the Sinai. Israel captured the Sinai from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria.”

“In ‘67 I was in the seventh grade and not paying attention to anything that didn’t concern me. I’m curious now. I’m learning so much about the world on this trip. This is how I persuaded my daddy to let me travel before college.”

“How’s that?”

“I told him I’d learn more about the world by traveling in Europe for a year than I would in college.”

“Stanly Alan Prentice.” Amar states Daddy’s name as if to impress me.

He takes my hand and we head back to San Marco Square. Along the way he says, “There should be no recognition of Israel but President Sadat caters to the United States.”

“What’s wrong with that? From what I’ve read in Time, Sadat’s a great leader.”

“Let’s forget about the war between religions and enjoy our evening together.”

“We can do that. I don’t want to bring up bad memories. Not for you or for me.”

On a bridge overlooking a narrow moonlit canal, Amar kisses me for the first time. It feels like Gabriel on top of the Bell Tower is ringing bells in my ears and igniting my every corpuscle. I run my hands through his thick curly hair as his green eyes sparkle from the streetlamp.

“Can we spend the night in a hotel?” he asks. “We can’t sleep together at the hostel where I live.”

Without hesitation I agree. I want Amar more than I’ve ever wanted any other guy. And lovemaking’s still new to me. My two previous lovers were far from perfect. There’s Rick during high school and then a quick tumble with Talal in Monaco. It’s so different this time, I tell myself. On my previous romances in Europe, I’ve been careful not to get pregnant or catch

anything. Now all this seems to slip away. My only thought is to tell Jennifer and Mary that while we're in Venice, I'll be with Amar.

Near the Campo di San Polo, we check into a room at Hotel Al Mondo. I sit on the bed and watch Amar carefully place his clothes over a chair. His chest is creamy and smooth. He's truly a god of Egypt. Osiris? Or is it, Atum Ra? I can't remember because my head's spinning.

He crawls into bed beside me and strokes my hair. "You make me happy, *ya Huthur*."

"Huthur?"

"That's Arabic for Hathor, goddess of making love to you," he teases.

"Huthur. I like it," I say. "How many girlfriends do you have?"

"Only you Huthur. How many boyfriends have you had? Daughter of the self-made man. Daughter of Atum Ra," he whispers in my ear.

I lightly caress his strong smooth arm and think about my first experience with Rick. It was during a camping trip in Wisconsin that my brother practically begged me to go on. Rick was the younger brother of Kenny's best friend. I was 16 and Rick was an older guy who lived and worked in Sheboygan. The night had been cold. Rick and I squeezed into a sleeping bag out of sight of my brother. That ended the mystery of making love. I broke up with Rick two months before graduation because I didn't want any ties when traveling in Europe. We weren't that close, anyway. We saw each other only when Rick came to Palatine once or twice a month and we had to keep our relationship secret from Daddy. Rick was twenty and could get in a lot of trouble for being with me. But I haven't thought about him for months and now, next to Amar, Rick seems like a clumsy oaf. "You're my first lover," I tease Amar before turning into Nefertibet falling into the arms of Omar Sharif.

For the next few nights Amar and I stay at Hotel Al Mondo. When he's not slinging bags at Ostello di Venezia, we go to the Lido. We sunbath on beach towels and laugh at fat tourists. In the small dressing rooms along the beach, we make love until we nearly pass out from the heat, then run into the surf and swim toward the distant jetty. On the race back to shore, Amar always lets me win. I love this about him. It's something Daddy would do.

While I'm with Amar, I rarely see Mary and Jen. They go out with the Italian waiters once more than with Iraqi and Algerian guys working at the hostel. When I encounter them, they barely acknowledge me.

"I can't understand why you're acting so snooty," I say one evening while Amar is working behind the counter during the onslaught of new travelers checking in. My friends and I are freshening up before the long mirror in the dormitory bathroom. "I'm in love and love is far more important than friendship. The way I see it, if you're jealous of my happiness then to hell with you."

"Sarah, you're spiraling out of control." Jen says. "Rein it in. Hold your horses. We're not mad at you."

"And it's you who's acting snooty," Mary adds as she applies her blue mascara.

"I'm just saying. I'm in love and you two aren't."

"Oh, stop it," Jen says. "Look Sar, we have a serious matter to discuss."

"What matter? As I see it, there's nothing more serious than being in love."

"We want to see the Parthenon in Athens." Mary touches her aluminum pendant like she's willing me to go along with this new plan.

I place my brush on the counter of sinks and say, “I can’t leave Amar! Maybe we should split up for a while.”

“No! We’ve got to stick together like we promised your father,” Mary insists. She’s always been a go-by-the-rules friend, unlike me. In fact, Mary’s the one who wrote the itinerary for our parents.

“Besides,” Jen adds dabbing on her Avon lipstick. “Distance makes the heart grow fonder. I’d feel terrible leaving you here.” She pats me on the shoulder. During our four years of friendship, Jen has always tried to keep me from getting into too much mischief. I love her for this. She knows I’m a bit quirky and more daring than most kids.

“I know you guys are only looking out for me. Look it. I agree to head to Greece if you promise we return to Venice before traveling anywhere else.”

Mar and Jen look at each other in the mirror as if I’m not even present. “Okay,” Jen finally says. “If you promise to stop being so snooty.”

“I guess you thought I was acting annoyed. Maybe I was a little bit. Sometimes friends can be a drag when it comes to romance. I’m sorry. I love you two. We’re best friends forever.”

“Yes, we are, Sar.”

“And we’ll have the best time of our lives in Greece,” Mary says to bolster my spirits because she knows I don’t want to leave Amar.

Later that evening, I cuddle with Amar in a gondola floating down Canale San Lorenzo. Waves are lapping against our boat and pigeons are cooing on brick window ledges along the canal. Every open window seems to have a caged canary singing a Rossini aria like our boatman.

I wanted this last night of romance with Amar before my friends hurl me off to Greece. When the boatman finishes his song, I say to Amar, "I'm leaving in the morning."

He pulls away to look at me.

"Jen and Mary want to go to Greece. And they insist we stick together like we're glued at the hip."

"I don't want you to go, *ya Huthur*." He kisses me as the shadow of an arched bridge passes over us. I wonder how I can leave such a perfect man in such a perfect setting.

"If I don't go, my friends will tell Daddy we split up and I stayed in Venice with a man."

"Then they aren't your friends."

To keep from getting emotional, which is something I always fight against doing, I change the subject. "When are you competing at the Olympics? You haven't said much about it."

"What?" Amar reacts like I just woke him from sleep.

"The Olympics," I remind him. "Maybe after my friends and I see Greece I can meet you in Munich or I'll come back here. If you're going to be in Venice."

Amar kisses me again. He tastes like the salty sea breeze and I forget what I was saying. The boatman sings another song and swishes his long oar in the peaceful canal. It smells like the mossy brick walls that confine us. I cling to Amar and to the thought of spending one more night with the Olympic soldier from Cairo who has *savoir faire*.

In the warm, crystal-clear Aegean Sea, my friends and I snorkel and swim. We collect seashells and sunbathe, gorge on Greek food and enjoy retsina pine wine and shots of licorice-tasting ouzo. At various hostels, we meet new travelers with new ideas and we get along better

than ever before. It's like we're keeping high school secrets once again. In very little time Jen and Mar convince me that Amar was nothing but a short summer fling.

"Now we can finish our travels without you being Shanghaied to Cairo," Jen likes to tease.

One morning, several weeks into our stay in Greece, we encounter a commotion in the lobby of the Athens hostel. It's the third time we've returned to the Greek capital because we keep learning about new things to see and do.

We approach the crowd of travelers. "What's going on?" I ask. "Did some king or queen die?"

"No," a young German lady frantically says. "The Black September terrorists massacred eleven Israelis at the Olympic Games."

I immediately think about Amar. "Did they kill any Egyptians?"

"Are you nuts? Only Israeli athletes," another traveler remarks.

"Sarah," Jen says. "Amar obviously lied to you about being on the Olympic handball team."

"I can't know for sure," I say. "Although, come to think of it, he never gave me any details about the games and seemed surprised whenever I brought it up."

Jen pulls me aside. "Do you think Amar is a terrorist?"

"No way. Amar's too romantic and sophisticated. He was such a gentleman to me."

"In the Olympics?"

"He was just being boastful."

"He lied, you mean."

“Doesn’t matter. I can’t believe he was in Munich when this massacre took place. I’m embarrassed I so stupidly fell for his story.”

“Come on Sarah. The past is past. Amar was probably some leech hanging out in Venice,” Mary suggests. “You can’t believe anything he ever told you.”

“Yeah,” Jen adds. “I bet he couldn’t find work in his own country.”

Over the next few days, I began spotting blood instead of having a normal period. At first, I’m not too concerned. I think the shock of the Munich massacre upset my cycle and an older woman in our dormitory tells me that traveling often disrupts a woman’s menstruation.

After nearly a week of this, my friends and I decide something’s wrong with me. I see a doctor in Athens. He tells me, “You’re nearly two months pregnant.”

Back at the hostel I retreat to my cot, hug my legs to my chest and stare at the wall.

“You’ve got to get an abortion,” Jen whispers so other girls in the dormitory can’t hear us. “What else can you do?”

“I don’t know,” I say between sobs. “I need to tell Amar. He did this to me, you know.”

“What about Talal?” Jen asks.

“That happened only one time. And it was quick. And the dates don’t match. Besides, I miss Amar and want to hear what he has to say about lying to me.”

“Do you think he had something to do with what happened at the Olympics?” Jen asks. “You said he didn’t like the Israelis. Maybe he really is a terrorist.”

“Don’t be stupid,” I protest. “He’s probably just as upset as we are. Maybe even more so since he comes from the Middle East.”

I rest my head on my knees and remember Amar's reaction to *The Ten Commandments* movie. I'd rather hide my head in the sand like an ostrich than reveal this to my friends. I don't want to start thinking that Amar is evil in some kind of way. To take my mind off troubling thoughts, I say, "Who knows? Maybe he'll marry me."

"Now who's being stupid?" Jen asks. "Your dad would disown you and you got it good, Nefer-Tut."

"I know you're trying to cheer me up by calling me this." I smile halfheartedly.

"I think England has legal abortions," Mary whispers. "Please, Sarah. For your own sake let's skip Venice and head for London. You're running out of time!"

I suddenly feel a surge of courage as if my guardian angel or maybe even Hathor is telling me what to do. "I've got to see Amar. He's as much to blame for this predicament as me." I'm trying to sound angry at Amar but I'm not. Since I learned about my condition, I've been thinking about him and all the romance we shared in Venice. I want to see him again despite what my friends think I should do.

On a cool mid-September morning we arrive at the front desk of Ostello di Venezia. I'm expecting a happy reunion with Amar but two middle-aged Italian men are behind the counter. I push my way to the front of a group of traveling hippies and ask the clerks, "Where's Amar?"

"Who's Amar?" The heavier of the two men looks up from stamping his paperwork.

"Amar worked here this summer. You must know him. Amar Mohammed Thomas-Bartlett."

"No Amar works here," the clerk replies. "Next!" A scruffy looking traveler smirks and maneuvers himself in front of me.

Jennifer suddenly grabs my arm and steers me across the room to speak with Ahmed, an Algerian man who worked with Amar this past summer. As I approach him, I recall one of Amar's silly jokes. I had asked him how to say "good morning" in Arabic. He told me to say *kess ikh-tak* to Ahmed. When I did, Ahmed explained that I was saying "your sister's vagina." This annoyed me at the time, but now I miss Amar's sense of humor. I miss everything about him. He was like a genie from Aladdin's lamp. Like a god of ancient Egypt.

"Why it's Sarah back in Venice," Ahmed says. "Or have you been avoiding me?" He stops piling bags against the wall and welcomes me with a limp handshake.

"Where's Amar?" I ask with a sense of urgency.

"I'm sorry to say." The Algerian grins and winks. "Amar has another girlfriend."

I don't believe Ahmed. Last summer he flirted with me when Amar wasn't around. They all did. Certainly, he's lying now to improve his chances with me. "Never mind!" I say and storm from the hostel to the edge of Fondamenta Zitelle. I gaze across the Giudecca Lagoon at vaporetto's bobbing up and down on the choppy water. Fumes from a nearby boat revving its motor nearly knock me off my feet. I bend over the harbor and vomit for the first time in my pregnancy.

My friends rush to my side. Mary wipes my face with the corner of her poncho. "We're going to London. Tonight!" She declares like she's my mother.

"No," I say, feeling a burst of determination from my guardian angel. "First, I'm looking for Amar. I know he's still in Venice. He's studying at the University of Languages."

"Yeah, I'm sure Sarah," Mary says. "Like he was in the Munich Olympics!"

"I believe Amar about this. He spoke perfect English and his Italian seemed good. I want to stay at least tonight. But not at the hostel. Let's stay at Hotel Al Mondo near San Marco

Square. I'll splurge for the room on Daddy's Bankamericard. From there, we can investigate the language school on the Rialto."

In less than an hour we check into a room at the Al Mondo. I collapse on one of the beds. Jennifer and Mary agree to let me rest while they look for Amar at the Venetian University of Languages.

Later in the afternoon, Jennifer wakes me from a sound sleep. I quickly remember my situation and eagerly ask, "Did you find him?"

Jennifer sits cross-legged beside me. "No one's registered under the name Amar Mohammed Thomas-Bartlett so we asked if there were any Egyptians named Mohammed and the receptionist said *Lots of Egyptians. Lots of Mohammeds*. I'm sorry, Nefer-Tut. We tried."

"I know you did. I'm just so disappointed."

"Because you killed the rabbit!" Mary remarks and sits at the side of my cot. "When my sister was pregnant, she was depressed the entire time, even months after the baby was born."

"Thanks for making me feel worse." Overwhelmed with gloom, I hug my pillow and try to fall back asleep.

The following morning, I agree to head to the Santa Lucia station to check on the train to Paris. As we cross San Marco Square, Mary grabs my arm. "Look Sarah! By the Bell Tower. It's Amar! And he's with another girl!"

"So what?" I take a deep breath, fling my hair behind my shoulders and head toward Amar.

"But the train to Paris and Calais!" Jen calls after me.

“Don’t worry,” I say twenty feet from them. “You two go check on that train. I’ll meet you back at the hotel in plenty of time.”

“Yeah, right.” I hear Jen moan.

Feeling like the Beautiful Lady of the East, I briskly walk toward the red brick obelisk with the Lion of St. Mark above its belfry and Gabriel on top spreading his magic once again.

Amar notices me and approaches with his arms outstretched. “Sarah, you’ve come back.”

I quicken my pace. When we meet, he draws me into a warm hug. “I knew you were still in Venice,” I say, nearly in tears. Being pregnant changes everything about how I’ve always tried to be. Now I’m feeling emotionally charged and practically unhinged.

Amar looks at the girl with him. She seems unsure of how to react. “This is my friend from the language school,” he says. “Sandra Larsen from Denmark.”

I look at Sandra with a stare I’ve used before under a variety of circumstances. A look of claiming my turf, of having my way, so to speak.

“Well,” Sandra says. “I’m heading back to the hotel. See you later, Amar.”

“Who is she really?” I ask after Sandra’s out of earshot. “Your new girlfriend?”

Amar laughs. “It’s not important. Huthur habibti, you’ve come back to me.”

Amar and I head straight to Hotel Al Mondo, check into our own room and fall into each other’s arms. After a passionate reunion, I sit at the edge of the bed and brush my hair. I hate to spoil the good mood by blurting out I’m pregnant, so I ask Amar, who’s standing at the room’s sink, “Why aren’t you working at the hostel? And don’t tell me you were at the Olympics in Munich!”

“No, no. That was a joke, I admit. Not so terribly funny now, after what happened. Look, habibti, I went to Cairo last month and when I returned the proprietor at the hostel refused to give me my job back. Now I work as a barman at Locanda Riva.”

I wonder if Amar’s joking again, but he seems serious, like his whole personality has changed maybe because I mentioned Munich. “You aren’t registered at the language school on the Rialto. We checked!” I wait for him to make up another story.

“I attend classes sporadically,” he explains.

“Why’d you go to Cairo? You should’ve waited for me. Seeing Egypt would be a dream come true.”

Amar sits beside me and runs his hand up and down my back like he’s trying to comfort me. And he doesn’t even know about my condition. “I’m afraid my family suffered a tragedy,” he says. “We all belong to Allah and to Allah we return.”

I don’t say anything. His religious words make me uncomfortable. I’ll be furious if this is another joke. But he’s never teased me about his family or religion. “What tragedy?” I finally ask leery of his answer. Maybe he *is* a terrorist and had to make a run for it.

“My sister’s husband and son died in a car crash. I returned to Cairo to help my brother arrange their burials according to our custom. It’s a sad time for my family. My sister believes she failed her husband.”

“Why?” I rub his shoulder to comfort him. His news is terrible.

“She has no other child to carry on her dead husband’s legacy. She’s very traditional, almost twenty years older than me. Her son, my precious nephew Kamal, was only fifteen.”

“Kamal?” I ask.

“Yes. He was named after his father.”

“Can’t your sister remarry. Have other kids? I’m sure my question sounds a bit crass, but I don’t know what else to ask or say.”

Amar takes my hand. “Of course. But she feels desperate. I worry she may take her own life. Such an act is forbidden in my religion.”

“I’m so sorry. Why’d you return to Venice?”

“To see you!” Amar suddenly smothers me with kisses and practically rips off my panties.

“Amar,” I say, concerned his behavior might affect my pregnancy. Then I realize, or rationalize, that I’m somehow offering him comfort.

After making love, Amar puts his hands behind his head and stares at the ceiling. I rest on his chest, listen to his breath and heartbeat and wonder about his family. I’ve never faced a personal tragedy. My last living grandparent died when I was three and I hardly remember that. I decide to believe Amar and hope that my news will make him happy. “Amar.” I sit and lean against the bed board. “I came back to tell you something important.”

“That you’ll love me forever,” he teases and climbs from bed to dress.

“No, I mean, yes.” I pause a moment and finally say, “I’m pregnant.”

Amar stops buttoning his shirt and stares at me. “Are you certain?”

“A doctor checked me out.”

“This is a problem. Do you think it’s my baby?”

“Thanks a lot!” I throw a pillow at him.

“Don’t be angry.” Amar sits on the bed and hugs me. “I know it must be mine. Why didn’t you tell me immediately? I thought you gained weight, but pregnant? Inshalla, I hope it’s not too late.”

“Too late for what?” I don’t want to hear the word my friends have been tossing around, not from the man I deeply love which is how I’m now feeling about Amar. “I’m supposed to go to a doctor in London. Tonight.”

“You can’t leave tonight. And why go to England?”

“For an abortion. What else?!” I state, hoping he’ll beg me to marry him. Then I can choose what I really want to do.

Suddenly, someone pounds on the door. “Sarah! Damn you! We got a train to catch!” Jennifer yells.

I look at Amar and wonder what he’ll do. He touches my cheek and says to my friends, “Sarah’s staying with me!”

I rise and Amar grabs my hand. His firmness reassures me. I’m almost hoping he’ll shoo away my friends. But then they’d tell my parents about the mess I’m in. “I’ve got to talk to them. Daddy will kill me if he finds out about this.”

“It’s all right.” Amar stands and places his hands on my shoulders. “I’ll speak with your father.”

“Are you kidding? He’ll kill you, too. After Munich, he probably thinks all Arabs are terrorists.” I wiggle free, step into the hallway and quickly shut the door to keep my friends from confronting Amar.

We walk down to the lobby and sit in the lounge. I try to persuade them to travel to Scandinavia and not worry about me. “Go find a couple of Vikings in the land of the midnight sun!”

“Sarah!” Mary exclaims. “Are you out of your mind? We can’t leave you stranded here. And besides, who is this guy you’re with? Do you really know him? We know he’s a liar and maybe even some kind of terrorist.”

“He’s not a terrorist,” I protest. “I know this in my heart. He’s not evil.”

“You don’t know for sure. And we aren’t leaving you to go look for Vikings,” Jen practically shouts. She doesn’t even care if someone in the lobby hears her.

I sit back on the Queen Anne chair to figure out what I’m going to do. It’s obvious my best friends are too loyal to just take off and leave me behind. We did promise our parents we’d stick together. Jen and Mary won’t accept that I stay with Amar, my baby’s father. They don’t like him and don’t know him like I do. “Okay,” I say while still coming up with a plan. “I’ll go to London with you guys and do what needs to be done. And I love you two for sticking with me through thick and thin. But I want to spend at least tonight with Amar. I need time to tell him good-bye. You guys take tonight’s train to London. I’ll join you no later than tomorrow or the next day.”

“No, Sarah!” Mary touches her St Christopher pendant. “I don’t believe you. Your hormones are confusing you. We must go together.”

“I promise to meet you in London. Stay at the Kingston Hostel like we did when we first arrived. Find me a doctor and arrange for my, you know what, and when I arrive in a day or two, I’ll get right to it.”

My friends are reluctant and we argue back and forth for about ten minutes. I even offer to splurge on a five-star hotel and steak dinners after the deed is done.

In the end they agree to my plan and I walk them down a narrow alleyway toward San Marco Square. “I promise to meet you at the Kingston Hostel,” I say and we give one another

good-bye hugs. Then I watch my best friends walk away and leave me truly on my own, a woman of the world floating on air.

When I return to the hotel lobby, I find Amar sitting at a desk talking on a black rotary phone. He waves me over and offers his chair. I sit quietly as he speaks lively Arabic. The uncertainty of what he's saying and his serious expression bother me. I wonder if his sister committed suicide and her spirit is somehow drawing Amar away from me.

As soon as he hangs up, I anxiously stand and ask, "Is your sister, okay?"

"Yes! She's all right, inshalla." He places his arm around me.

"What about our baby?" I remind Amar that my situation comes before everything else.

"Don't worry about that. I'm taking you to Cairo with me. There you can do anything you like."

"Cairo? Cairo," I repeat like a magical chant. I feel like Nefertiabet is christening my boat and launching me onto the Nile.

"Yes, Huthur habibti. Cairo is the largest and oldest city in Africa. The ancients called it MenNefer—the beautiful and established city. The Arabs dubbed it Al-Qāhirah, the victorious Mars."

"Why?"

"Because Mars was rising when they conquered the valley."

"That's beautiful." I rest my head on his shoulder. He strokes my hair while I imagine myself in a papyrus boat gently floating down the river.

"Cairo is beautiful, habibti. She's Mother of the World and much beloved. Like you, my beautiful American princess." He holds up my face and kisses my forehead which feels like something Daddy would do.

Back in our room, Amar suggests I rest while he places a call to his brother. “You’re weary because of your friends,” he says as I collapse on the bed. “Don’t let them trouble you anymore. You have a baby to think about.”

I crawl under the covers feeling exhausted after scheming so hard just to do what I really want to do. And that is to stay with Amar and let him help me decide how I’m going to handle this situation.

Amar kisses me and says, “I won’t be long.”

After he’s gone, I turn on my side, curl up with the pillow and ask Nefertiabet to help me make the right decision. About the baby. About my life. The idea of becoming a mother at eighteen is frightening but marrying Amar and living in Cairo near the pyramids and Sphinx makes me dizzy with anticipation.

As I drift asleep, images from *Cleopatra* reel through my mind, in vivid technicolor. Elizabeth Taylor becomes my Nefertiabet. She steps down from her stone slab to tell me the story of her dignified life.



Chapter 2: *Seshet Akeru* – Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra

Young mother, beautiful spirit of Isis, Nefer Ba’ast, I see your shimmering face in my relic mirror of Queen Khentkawes, daughter of Menkaure, wife of two kings and Seer of Horus and Set. Through this mirror, Young Mother, I enter your dreams.

I am your avatar Seshet Akeru, daughter of King Pepi Neferkara and priestess of Hathor, protector of mothers. I share with you my story to give you my sekhmet powers. May you and the child you carry prosper in life with health, beauty and joy and live eternally among the stars that never set.

Three hundred and fifty years before my father's reign, during the time of King Khufu, father of Nefertiabet, Sekhmet shot a flaming arrow into the Great Green Sea. At the site of impact, goatherders from Alashiya Island found a stone the size of a human head and shape of a human eye. Under the clear blue waters, the stone cast a purple hue. When the herders removed it from the seabed, the stone turned black as night.

On the island's western cliffs above a port city, the Alashiyans built a temple dedicated to the stone. Over many generations, Alashiyan kings and priests called on their gods to make the stone glow again. It remained black as night until the sister of a king dared to touch it. When she did, the stone glowed a purple hue that surrounded her in an aura. In days to follow, the king's sister showed powers to heal and bring about good fortune. Other Alashiyan women touched the stone and each of them caused it to glow and each of them received its healing powers. When priests touched the stone, however, it remained black as night.

Now, beautiful spirit of Isis, Nefer Ba'ast, I speak of my father King Pepi Neferkare. He was the fifth king of the sixth dynasty in the kingdom Fierce Stinging Catfish established along the Great River between the red and black lands. Pepi was born when the lion star Sekhmet appeared at the rising of the Falcon Sun. Sekhmet was his patron goddess. She possessed the forces of her father Atum Ra. With the ferocity and strength of a mother lion, Sekhmet protected my father and gave him his many victories during his 90-year reign.

My father had three fleets of ships to maintain his vast kingdom. Wadjet the cobra goddess protected his river fleet that sailed from the delta to the southern border. Serqet the scorpion goddess of summer nights protected my father's Red Sea fleet that traveled on trade expeditions to the Land of Punt. Duamutef, jackal son of the Falcon, protected the fleet that sailed the Great Green Sea on trade expeditions and engagements of war.

In the forty-fifth year of his reign, my father set sailed on his Duamutef fleet to seize the legendary sky stone of Alashiya. Since he was a boy king and first learned about the stone, Pepi knew it belonged to him and his kingdom along the Great River.

When the Duamutef fleet arrived at the western shores of Alashiya, my father and his army captured the port city and the temple that hugged the sea cliffs. The chapel containing the stone was cold, dank and with droppings from sparrows that entered a window above the vestibule door. Niches in the stone walls burned geranium oil. In the center of the chamber stood a limestone altar covered with a tapestry of mouflon wool.

My father flung aside the altar's cloth and found the black stone on a golden pallet. "This stone is from my patron Sekhmet, lion star of summer," he declared. "It belongs to me. I will take it to Sekhmet's main temple in my kingdom."

The Alashiyan king freed himself from Pepi's men and said to my father, "If you remove the stone, you'll anger the sky and sea gods and bad fortune will befall your kingship."

My father then declared Alashiya as part of his kingdom and named the black stone Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra.

Over the days to come, Pepi's masons chiseled the names of Sekhmet on the walls inside and outside the temple. On the stone's altar, they chiseled the words *Hotep di nesu, King Pepi Neferkare gives offerings to Sekhmet, the divine force who gives Pepi his victory in Alashiya.*

After establishing his rule on the island, my father sailed half his fleet to the city of Anu at the base of the delta. On the west bank of the Great River stood the main temple compound of Sekhmet. Inside its fortified walls was an academy of medicine, a Djehuti library and scriptorium and the Orphanage of Tefnut, lion sister of Sekhmet and mother of Earth's first children. The orphanage in Anu was the largest of its kind in Pepi's kingdom. People called the orphans Waifs of Tefnut.

My father made endowments to the temple and gathered priests and priestesses to establish a Sekhmet priesthood on Alashiya. He visited the orphanage specifically to meet me. I was five years old at the time and renown throughout the kingdom as the temple's icon. Pilgrims traveled to the Tefnut Orphanage to receive my blessings. They believed I possessed double sekhem powers from the lion sisters Sekhmet and Tefnut.

I never learned my true parentage. Priestesses claimed my birth mother came from Pe Tep in the NW delta near the Temple of Sunrise and Sunset, Per Ra-Horakhty. They claimed my mother was a destitute woman who needed blessings from the lion sisters. She had no husband to help with a child. The only thing I have from this woman is the name she left me—Seshen. It means Lily of the Great River.

King Pepi met me in the orphanage gardens which were brimming with yellow chrysanthemums and scarlet flamboyant trees as fragrant as spiced honey wine. The king sat on a throne wearing his atef crown. Sekhmet priests flanked him and the Waifs of Tefnut, barefoot and dressed in hemp tunics, stood before him listening to his every word.

I sat on the king's lap holding a kitten and a wooden ankh as symbols of Sekhmet and Tefnut. The priestesses had lined my eyes with kohl, reddened my lips with ochre, perfumed me with frankincense and painted a blue lotus on my cheek.

“Are you Lily of the River?” the king asked. “They say you can heal the spirit of a suffering man.”

I recited what priests had prepared for me. *My king, only you can tame Sekhmet and use her ferocity to ward off the evil of Set. You give your ka to the rational people of your kingdom. May you live eternally in your divine splendor.*

Pepi then said to me, “Your poise, beauty and clarity of words warm my heart.” He took me back to Alashiya with the priests and priestesses of Sekhmet. He believed when I touched Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra, I’d possess triple sekhem powers and bring him and his kingdom triple good fortune.

On the day I touched the stone, Pepi’s priests and priestesses stood around the altar to witness the event. No one knew if I, Pepi’s orphaned child, would absorb the powers of the stone. Until this time only women of Alashiya had received its power.

During the ceremony an old Alashiyan priest in a floor-length woolen robe upheld a torch as a priestess unveiled the stone on its golden platter. Sekhmet priests were singing *Lion goddess, daughter of Atum Ra and the Great Green Sea, give us your sekhem powers and open the Eye of Ra.*

Pepi took my hand to touch the stone and my many gold bangles rattled and sparkled in the torchlight. I tiptoed at the altar and placed my hands firmly on Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra.

The stone grew warm and started to vibrate. It turned a purple hue. Steam rolled from its surface. The odor of fire powder overwhelmed the burning geranium oil. Sparrows flocked outside through the vestibule window and murmurs arose from the sea beyond the cliffs. My tiny hands and the veins of my arms turned the same purple hue. *Hotep di nesu* I recited *I make offerings from King Pepi to Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra.*

Through the vestibule window, a chilling gust of wind extinguished all light in the chapel except the luminous stone and the green and orange aura surrounding me. Priests started humming with the murmuring sea and the purple hue in my veins recoiled into the stone. In that moment, I received power from Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra.

On the return voyage across the Great Green Sea, Pepi's Duamutef fleet encountered no storm, no enemy or pirate ship, nor any sea monster. Pepi knew I had brought him triple good fortune because of my triple sekhem powers.

When our ship entered the eastern delta to moor on the lake, I stood at the bow with the king to view the circling spoonbills. "Are you returning me to the orphanage of Tefnut?" I asked the king.

"Look into the gleaming blue waters below the hull," Pepi said.

I placed my tiny hands on the rail and tiptoed to peer into the choppy waters.

"Do you see the Eye of the Falcon reflected in the sea?"

"I see the Falcon Eye of Ra."

"You're much too distinguished to live as a temple icon, Little Seshen. I'm taking you to my palace. I'll protect you like the Eye of the Falcon protects my ships. Like Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra protects me and my kingdom. You will become my daughter and live the life of a great queen like my mother, Ankhnespepi."

Nefer Ba'ast, beautiful spirit of Isis, this is the beginning of my life as a dignified lady. Mine is the story of a temple orphan who becomes the favorite daughter of a great king. I am Seshet Akeru, priestess of Hathor in her many forms. I am your avatar spirit. I give you my sekhem powers to live with the enduring bond of Isis and her son Horus. Your child will rise as the falcon Ra-Horakhty and live beyond and above the sight of all rational beings on Earth.



Chapter 3: Al-Qāhirah

Early in the morning, I awake from a vivid dream. It slips away except for glimpses of a dignified lady wearing a gold vulture crown.

Later, while Amar is arranging our passage on the Adriatic Line to Alexandria, I send a telegram to my friends, care of Kingston Hostel in London.

You're the best friends anyone could ever have. I love you both dearly. But I love Amar and he's taking me to a doctor. Please, please continue your travels and don't tell my daddy about this situation. I'll figure out what to tell him. I'm letting you guys off the hook. Love you always and forever Nefer-Tut. I mean Sarah.

I'm sure my friends won't let me down. They know how to keep a secret. I hope. I then phone Daddy. The call doesn't go well. He's angry at me for not calling home more often.

"I want to travel for the rest of the year," I say while trying to come up with something on the spot.

"What!" he roars. "I thought you'd have this travel business out of your system by now."

"Oh, Daddy. I have a chance to see Egypt, maybe even the Holy Land. Please let me. Then I'll come home and work at your firm and go to law school. I'm your baby girl."

My tactics fail to calm him.

“Why’d you leave your friends?” he asks. “Are you traveling alone? If not, then who are you with?”

I explain that Jen and Mary went to Sweden and that I’m traveling to Egypt with a group of Yale students. “They’re girls, Daddy. Why should I wait for college in Palatine when I’m here learning about the world?”

“That’s the same argument you used to go to Europe in the first place.”

“I know. But it’s true. And what’s six more months?”

After a little more persistence, Daddy relents like he did when I was little. It was easy to get my way with Daddy when Mom wasn’t around.

On September 20th we set sail for Alexandria. By mid-afternoon on the second day of our voyage, our ship approaches the port of Alexandria west of the Nile Delta. Amar and I stand at the starboard rail. He charms me with stories about the approaching city.

“I’m so excited, Amar,” I can’t help but say. “I’m actually in Egypt.”

He kisses my hand. “Welcome to Alexandria, habibti. The city founded by Alexander the Great.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Really. The Greek Pharaohs built a library here. It contained all the knowledge of the time.”

“I love listening to you talk about Egypt.” I hold the rail and scan the wonder before me. “Alexandria is more gorgeous than any city I’ve seen so far. Including all the little white villages hugging the cliffs on Greek islands.”

Amar stands beside me at the rail and places his hand on mine. He looks of at the city and seems to absorb the cooling breeze on his face. I close my eyes to feel the breeze myself and taste the salty air. As my hair flutters around me, I quietly listen to the cawing seagulls at the bow and think about what lies ahead. It's kind of frightening. A bit like when me and my friends took off for the unknown at O'Hare. Except then, I was mostly excited about the adventures ahead. Now I'm as excited but weighed down with a serious situation. It makes me feel a little insecure. I've been feeling leery about meeting Amar's grieving sister. What will I say to her? Amar claims she's traditional. Perhaps an unwed, pregnant American girlfriend will offend her. I don't feel right about sharing my negative feelings with Amar. I might offend him or make him feel bad. So, I try to stay focused on all the excitement of going to Cairo and all the romance between us. Sometimes things are best left unsaid. It's something I learned as a child with an alcoholic mom who liked to punish me when Daddy was away.

As I gaze at the harbor I wonder if I'll love Cairo as much as my unborn child. I haven't told Amar my thoughts about keeping the baby, in case I change my mind. But I'm increasingly thinking I'll give up the career Daddy's outlined for me and everything else in America. I'll embrace being a mom and surrender myself to the handsome and romantic father of my child. Amar will fill my life with love in the land of the Nile. He's now in charge and soon I'll be the wife of a Muslim Arab. It's funny. Back at Fremd I supported the Equal Rights Amendment. I don't know where I stand on that issue right now. All I really know is that I'm swept away by Dr. Zhivago and Lawrence of Arabia, two of my favorite movies that feature Omar Shariff.

"See that large castle in the harbor?" Amar wakes me from my thoughts. "Over there, on that island in the bright clear sunshine."

"I see it."

“It’s called Qaitbay Citadel. The Greeks built an enormous lighthouse on that island. It’s called Pharos Island. For the Pharos Lighthouse.”

“Where’s the lighthouse now?”

“Six hundred years ago, an earthquake toppled it into the sea. The Mameluke Caliphate built the citadel on top of the ruins. By the end of the Ottoman empire, Alexandria was a small fishing village. Now it’s an international port of commerce.”

“What happened to the library?”

“Caesar’s troops burned it down,” Amar replies; his gaze remains on the citadel.

“I read Julius Caesar in high school,” I say. “*When beggars die, there are no comets seen; the heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.* I memorized this verse for my English class.”

“Beautiful.” Amar claps. “She recites Shakespeare.”

“You flatter me.” I continue scanning the spectacular city. “I wonder what the ancients saw when they entered the harbor. The Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, Napoleon and the ancient Egyptians like Nefertibet.”

“Nefertibet? Don’t you mean Cesar and Cleopatra?”

“Maybe.” I glance down at the Mediterranean and see my reflection. For a moment, I look at the Mameluke fort on Pharos Island then look back down at the sea. My reflection starts changing like a caterpillar into a butterfly. I see the face of a woman with dark lined eyes, black hair hanging in many tiny braids and a vulture crown of gold. The details are clear in my mind, although the distant vision wavers in the sea. I believe I’m seeing an apparition of Nefertibet.

Back at the hostel in Paris, a traveler from Haiti saw Mary’s St Christopher charm and they got to talking about Catholic things. The Haitian lady started talking about

apparitions. She mentioned Our Lady of Lourdes in France, Our Lady of Guadeloupe in Mexico and Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal. Mary was all in on the conversation, being catholic and all. I found the discussion fascinating though rather incredible. I simply wasn't brought up believing in apparitions. Now I'm mystified as I stare at the vision below.

"Nefertiabet," I say aloud and silently ask her to help me make the right decision about what I doing with my life and that of the baby.

"Are you alright? Ya Huthur habibti." Amar nudges me from my deep thoughts.

I look at him then back at the sea. The afternoon sun is casting my own image onto the waves below. The magnificent apparition is gone.

I fall into Amar's embrace and listen to the engines rumble as the harbor pilot maneuvers our ship into port.

"I just saw Nefertiabet from my postcard. My guardian angel," I say to myself and to Amar.

Amar snickers. "Ancient wisdom comes from women, too. You probably saw a Coptic saint. Or perhaps the spirit is Cleopatra, lover of Caesar." He kisses me and adds, "You're my Cleopatra and we're now lovers of the Nile."

I pull from him. "I didn't imagine what I just saw. Nefertiabet's image was on the sea."

Amar says nothing. He's suddenly absorbed with watching the ship pull into the dock.

He doesn't take me seriously, I think to myself. Maybe he never has. I showed him my postcard the other day and asked if he knew about this dignified lady from the Old Kingdom. He recognized the picture but didn't remember her name. I hesitated to mention

that she was my guardian angel because I didn't want Amar to joke about it. And I didn't want to offend his religion which I know very little about.

I decide to keep quiet about what I just saw and not mention Nefertiabet again.

We spend the night in Alexandria and take the train to Cairo. At four in the afternoon our taxi enters the wrought iron gates at 16 Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street in **Zamalek, a district in Cairo on an island in the Nile**. Tall flamboyant trees with scarlet flowers shade the front yard of a two-story whitewashed house with green shutters.

"Here we are," Amar announces as he helps me from the car. A middle-aged woman in a floral dress appears on the front porch. Her black hair is fashionably short. She approaches the taxi and a man in a red fez and blue galabia follows her. The man takes my bag from the trunk of the taxi.

"He's Farouq, our house man and chauffeur," Amar tells me. "And this is my sister, Zenna."

The woman warmly kisses each side of my face. Her eyes are rimmed in black kohl and she smells of rose water perfume. She's nothing like what I was expecting.

"I'm happy to meet you, my dear little sister." Zenna takes my hand. "Come inside your new home. Our mother eagerly awaits your arrival."

Beyond the front door are sitting rooms on each side of the hall. This strikes me as unusual. Even my family's large house has only one living room. Both of these rooms have long marble coffee tables surrounded by colorful Bedouin cushions and ottomans, Persian carpets on parquet floors and tapestries of mosques and ancient Egyptian art on the walls.

"This is like a palace," I say. Zenna and Amar politely chuckle.

As we pass through the left sitting room, I notice a portrait on the wall of Zenna with a man and a teenage boy, presumably her dead husband and son. I remember Amar saying they both were named Kamal. The boy looks about fourteen and is very handsome with thick dark hair, bright brown eyes and a distinctive chin and nose. He's dressed in slacks and a white dress shirt, like his father, and is holding Zenna's hand like I am now as she leads me through the room. I try not to gaze at the portrait; it's haunting because I know the boy in the picture will soon die and I don't want to stir up any sadness so soon after my arrival. I must get to know my new situation.

While Amar fetches his mother from the back kitchen, Zenna escorts me upstairs to a spacious bedroom down the hall from three other bedrooms.

"This is your room, little sister. It's our guestroom. But you're not a guest. You're family. Make yourself at home."

"Wow. I'm sure I'll be comfortable. A queen canopied bed, armoire, a chest of drawers."

"And a vanity by a window overlooking the backyard."

Farouq places my bag on the bed

"Now I'll leave you to freshen up in the bathroom. It's just down the hall."

As soon as Zenna leaves, I sit on the soft bed and wonder if Amar will be sleeping with me. After all, he's the father of my unborn child. But this is a house of tradition, I remind myself. We'll probably have to marry first. It'll be a small wedding because my own family won't be present. I have no intention of telling Daddy about the baby. If I did, he'd be on the first plane to Cairo to take me back to Palatine. He loves me that much.

I begin unpacking and start wondering if the room once belonged to Zenna's dead son Kamal. Perhaps they quickly converted it into a guestroom specifically for me. Of course, I'd

never ask Zenna about this but the notion bothers me. I can't get the boy's image out of my head. What if his spirit is lingering in this room? What if he starts haunting me, the foreign intruder taking over what was once his? I consider asking Amar but decide I don't want to know. I pull out my postcard and call on my guardian angel and ask her to keep me safe during my stay in this house. After the baby arrives, I then tell myself, Amar and I will live elsewhere. It's only natural we have our own family home.

"Here she is." Amar appears at the bedroom door with an old woman dressed in a long black abaya. "This is my dear Mama," he says. "In Arabic we say she is my 'umm." The old woman grins but says nothing. "She doesn't speak English. you'll have to teach her." Amar translates and the old woman chuckles, amused by me, the strange foreign woman in her house, no doubt.

I stand by the bed feeling insecure about greeting the woman who'll be my mother-in-law. "*Kayf halika?* How are you?" I ask. Amar had prepared me with a few Arabic phrases and I don't think he's tricking me with obscene words. He's put those days behind him now that he's about to take care of a new a wife and child.

The old woman seems pleased with my attempt to speak her language. Amar translates her response. "She says peace be with you.

"Should I kiss her cheek?" I turn to Zenna who's quietly observing from the threshold.

Zenna nods, encouraging me. I kiss the woman's soft wrinkled face. The old woman firmly rubs my belly and speaks to her son.

"She says you carry a boy," Zenna tells me as she takes hold of her mother's narrow shoulders. "Let's leave our daughter Sarah to rest before the doctor arrives to examine her."

"Doctor? I'm relieved to hear this news."

“*Aywa*,” Zenna assures me. “We must be sure you’re in excellent health. I don’t want anything harmful to happen to the baby or to you.” Amar and his mother leave the room. Zenna follows and closes the door behind her.

I finish unpacking and lie on the bed to rest. Within minutes, I fall asleep until I hear someone calling my name. From the bedside, Zenna and a small, middle-aged Arab woman with a stethoscope around her neck, are gazing at me.

Disoriented, I sit up and ask, “Where’s Amar?” Until I’m feeling more accustomed to my new life, I want Amar to be with me all the time. And I still don’t know where he’ll be sleeping or if I’m sleeping in the room of a dead boy.

“My brother is preparing for his matriculation at Cairo University,” Zenna says at my bedside. “That’s where I studied English literature before I married. I never graduated because of my pregnancy but I enjoyed reading Mann, Dickens, Hardy, even D. H. Lawrence. Amar will be a great minister one day like our father.” She takes a glass from the other woman and hands it to me. “This is mughrat. It’s made from sugar and cream, cardamom, cinnamon and almonds. We give it to expectant mothers for strength.”

I sip the sweet, creamy drink, feeling reassured by the warm gesture.

“You need to drink lots of mughrat both now and after the baby comes.” Zenna gestures to the other woman. “This is Doctor Aziza. She’ll take care of you. Please allow her to check that you’re healthy and sound.”

I set the glass on the nightstand and look at the scrawny doctor. “I hope I’m all right,” I say, suddenly worried about my health and that of my unborn child.

The doctor looks quizzically at me.

“I’m afraid Dr. Aziza speaks only Arabic,” Zenna tells me. “But you needn’t worry. I’ll always be with you. Dr. Aziza was the doctor for my child.”

How can Zenna even talk about her dead son? I wonder. Despite Amar’s warnings that Zenna’s suicidal, she doesn’t seem sad and filled with self-pity.

On the train to Cairo, **Amar had warned me his sister was in her mourning period. “Her ‘Iddah lasts four months and 10 days.” I remember him saying. “During Iddah she can’t wear perfume or jewelry and she can only leave the house to visit friends and family.”**

Zenna is nothing like a traditional grieving widow. She’s cheerful and seems happy I’m her guest. And she’s wearing rose perfume. Maybe it’s just toilet water and that doesn’t count. I find her to be more like a modern Egyptian woman, like Jehan Sadat. Perhaps it’s the Egyptian way to accept one’s fate and quickly overcome grief.

After Aziza quickly examines me with her stethoscope, Zenna hands me the glass of mughrat and says, “I advise you remain in bed until tomorrow. Rest is the most important thing for a mother-to-be, along with eating a healthy diet. Our Egyptian cuisine will keep you fit and happy.”

I take few sips of the drink. “Wow. This even better than Greek ouzo.”

Zenna smiles and touches my hand. “I’ll leave you now. Be sure to finish the mughrat.”

When I’m alone, I try to sleep but can’t. There’s too much on my mind. I keep expecting Amar to show up then I start thinking about the picture of Zenna’s dead son and begin wondering why this doctor doesn’t speak English. All educated Egyptians speak English. Even Zenna does and she’s just a housewife.

I finally tire of waiting for Amar and throw back the covers, crawl from bed and wander down the stairs toward a light coming from under what I assume is the kitchen door. I peek in

and see Zenna, Amar and their ‘umm sitting around a table drinking tea and eating hardboiled eggs and dates.

“Hello,” I say leaning against the threshold. I’m trying to hold back my anger toward Amar for returning home without speaking to me. It seems he’s left me out of everything and I’m the one who’s pregnant.

Amar looks surprised. He sets down his tea cup. “Why are you up? Didn’t the doctor tell you to rest?”

“Doctor?” I ask. “You call that scrawny lady a doctor? She hardly even examined me. Shouldn’t I be going to a hospital? Or don’t you people have hospitals?”

The old woman looks concerned. I pause to reign in my emotions, something I learned to do as a child. Being pregnant is making this much harder. “Amar,” I say. “Why didn’t you come see me when you came home?” I rest my head against the door jamb and tears roll down my cheeks. I can’t stop them. My emotions defeat me as they so often did when Mom said I was misbehaving when she was the one acting bad.

“My little moon.” Amar comes over and holds me. He speaks to Zenna who remains seated with the old ‘umm.

“You need a glass of sweet goat milk,” Zenna suggests. “It’ll help you sleep. I’ll go fetch it from an icebox on the back verandah. I know exactly how you feel. Hormones wreak havoc on an expectant mother.”

I force a smile but feel imprisoned by my emotions and the strangeness of my new situation. As Amar wipes my tears I whisper, “I need to talk to you, alone.”

“Come, *ya Huthur*.” Amar takes the milk from Zenna and escorts me back to the guest bedroom. He tucks me into bed, like Daddy did when I was small, and helps me drink the cool, sweet milk. “What’s troubling you, Sarah?” He strokes my hair but I detect his slight impatience.

“Since we left Alexandria, you’ve been treating me more like a child than your girlfriend and mother of your baby. You no longer joke with me.”

Amar takes my hand and pats it. “I’m sure this is true. I’ll do anything for you and my son. My abni. I have responsibilities now, as a father. I must take care of your passport registration, apply for a fiancé permit and set up an internship at Cairo University so I can support my beautiful family.”

I look in his eyes hoping to rekindle the feelings I had not long ago on the Lido of Venice. Amar wore his European spandex and I wore a bikini, looking very sexy—or so I thought. Maybe I’ve been kidding myself. Now I feel fat. Not sexy at all. “Amar. I know you’ll work hard to take care of me and the child. One day Daddy will meet you and like you because you’re responsible and serious. But this doctor who came to my room.”

“Dr. Aziza? What about her?”

“Who is she? I don’t like her. She doesn’t speak English. I don’t believe she’s even a doctor. In fact, it’s absurd!”

Amar chuckles, which frustrates me.

“You’re not taking me seriously.”

“No, my gazelle. Dr. Aziza is the best doctor I could find. And as far as having a full examination. I completely trust her judgment. Remember, women have been having babies without going to the hospital ever since Eve. You sleep now. Ana bahebak.” He kisses my forehead and touches my round belly. “I love you too, abni.”

“Will you sleep with me?” I ask.

He pulls away. “We can’t sleep together in my mother’s house. Please understand. It’s our custom. I’ll stay with you until you fall asleep.” He kisses me gently on the lips and turns off the night light. I snuggle under the covers, reassured by Amar’s presence. Maybe Aziza is a midwife, I reason. *Ancient wisdom comes from women, too* I remember Amar saying during our romantic voyage on the Adriatic line. I just need to get used to my new home.

As the weeks pass, I increasingly feel more comfortable with my new situation. This makes me think I’ve made the right decision to be a mother. Whenever I have any negative thoughts, a glass of mughrat and a hot mineral bath in the upstairs clawfoot tub puts me at ease. I remind myself that my condition is just a stage I must go through before becoming a loving mother and wife living on an island in the Nile. Living in Egypt. Living like Nefertiabet!

Every morning Zenna brings me a glass of mughrat with a breakfast of ful mudammas, a fried egg and fresh aish baladi that Farouq buys from vendors who bake the unleavened bread in wood burning ovens set up on the streets, Zenna tells me. I spend much of the day in bed with the window open to allow-in fresh air.

Because there’s no TV in the room, Zenna gives me a transistor radio. I listen to Cairo stations that frequently play the songs of ‘Umm Kulthum. “She’s the matriarch of Arabic singers,” Zenna says. She translates some of her songs for me, at least the titles. “Amal Hayati means you’re the hope of my life and Hadith al Rouh means I talk to my soul. Some of her songs are verses of the Rubaiyat.”

Before long ‘Umm Kulthum becomes as much a part of my new life in Cairo as the Egyptian cuisine and hospitality of my new family. When I listen to her love songs, I imagine

myself singing to my little unborn child *You are the hope of my new life. You are my little spirit soul.*

During early evening meals I sit at the kitchen table and eat the food Zenna and her mother cook. They make grape leaves, pigeons stuffed with rice, ‘Molokheyya--an okra dish with garlic and coriander sauce, Koshari--a mixture of lentils, rice, macaroni and chick peas and lamb kebabs that fill the house with a greasy smell that doesn’t always agree with me. I love the honey-dipped baklava and crème caramel pudding they make. Too much, in fact. In a matter of weeks, I gain weight beyond my advancing pregnancy. Instead of my own clothes I begin wearing loose fitting full-length kaftans that Zenna provides.

I regret Amar’s gone much of the day, every day. It’s always late in the evenings when he comes to my room often bearing gifts to make up for his absence. One evening he brings me a pair of 18-karat gold cartouche earrings of my name. “It says, Sah Ra,” he tells me. “It means, ‘the immortal spirit who travels among the stars.’”

“I love them.” I give him a hug and kiss until he pulls away. He doesn’t like being lovey dovey in case his sister or ‘umm enter the room.

The earrings become my good luck charms and basically replace my postcard of Nefertiabet. I’m leery about looking at my guardian angel in front of Zenna or Amar because of an incident soon after I arrived. While sitting in bed, I was holding the postcard and saying *Nefertiabet, Nefertiabet, spirit of Egypt. See me through this pregnancy.* I hadn’t realized Zenna was standing at the threshold peering in at me like she sometimes does if I don’t close the door. I had forgotten on this occasion. Not that this matters anyway. Zenna, ‘Umm and Aziza barge into my room whether the door’s opened or closed. Nobody seems to knock. In Palatine, even my parents knocked before entering my bedroom. At least Daddy did. Mom, it depended on her

mood and condition. It seems to be part of their culture and I'm not comfortable telling them to knock. I feel like this would be rude on my part.

"What are you doing?" Zenna had asked. "Are you praying to an idol?"

I said nothing because I felt ashamed, like I was being a blasphemous heathen and I'm not even religious.

"The Koran teaches that believers must put their trust in Allah alone as protector and mediator," Zenna continued. "Idolatry is a sin against your God and mine. The God of Abraham."

"No, sister, I was only singing a song to my baby, like 'Umm Kulthum.'"

"As I've told you many times, you must turn to God in times of trouble as well as times of great joy. You must raise this child as a Muslim. It cannot be any other way."

I had nodded, unwilling to argue or make any religious commitment. I find it easier to go along with Zenna while under her roof. I always reassure myself that the matter of my child's upbringing concerns only me and Amar and not Zenna or her old wrinkled 'umm.

On several occasions I ask Amar to take me to the pyramids and the Cairo Museum but he insists I stay in the house to avoid complications with my pregnancy. I go along with his wishes, like Zenna's, and begin to spend time in the backyard. It's a beautiful setting and the temperature is pleasant, about 70 degrees. I like to sit on a stone bench under the jacaranda tree before a koi pond with a three-tiered fountain that gurgles. At the edge of the pond are blue water lilies that bloom only during the day. Jasmine vines grow on the stone walls surrounding the yard. Their fragrance fills the air.

One afternoon, while I'm enjoying myself at the pond and listening to 'Umm Kulthum, I hear a loud meow. I turn in time to see a sleek orange tabby jump over the wall. The cat

approaches me. I pet her and hold her on my lap. My unborn child responds to her purrs with little kicks, as if ‘Umm Kulthum herself is stirring my child from its sleep with a lullaby. I grew up without pets because of Mom’s allergies but now, in my new home, I want the cat as my pet.

Over the next few days, I coax my tabby cat to live in the backyard by feeding her leftover kababs. I name her Isis-Huthur and she becomes another good luck charm for me, like the postcard and my cartouche earrings. Several times each day I go to the backyard to hold my affectionate cat against my child.

One morning, when no one seems to be around, I sneak my orange tabby into my bedroom. I suspect Zenna would disapprove because she doesn’t have any pets in her very clean and tidy house.

For over an hour I sit on my bed holding Isis-Huthur while the radio plays ‘Umm Kulthum. I’m feeling so secure and content that I drift to sleep with the tabby nestled beside me.

Before I know what’s happening, Zenna bursts through the door, screeches something in Arabic, and nearly drops the glass of mughrat she’s holding. Then, as if catching herself in anger like Mom used to do, Zenna sets the mughrat on my nightstand and walks away leaving the door wide open.

I get the hint. Zenna doesn’t like the “dirty alley cat” in her house. I take Isis-Huthur outside and watch her jump over the stone wall as if knowing she’s not wanted.

Later that afternoon I return to the garden to look for Isis-Huthur. But she’s not in the yard. I sit on the stone bench and stare at the blue lilies closing for the day. I feel sad and lonely like I had when seven and my best friend moved away.

Zenna suddenly appears in the yard bringing me a glass of cold mughrat and a plate of crumbly cookies covered with powdered sugar. “We usually serve kahk at Eid al-Fatr,” she

explains about the cookies and sits beside me. “But it’s festive enough to have your company, little sister.”

For a moment Zenna stares at the koi pond. I think she’s going to say something about the cat but instead she says, “The lotus symbolizes the rebirth of Atum Ra. It blossoms every sunrise then closes when the sun enters the night sky.” She picks a flower at the edge of the pond, smells it and hands it to me. “It contains a narcotic drug that I’ve been mixing in your mughrat to keep you from feeling anxious.”

“You’ve been drugging me!?” I’m rattled by Zenna’s revelation. No wonder I always take a nap after drinking the mughrat, I think to myself. Until now I assumed my guardian angel had been casting her magic over me to help me sleep and relax.

“La,” Zenna takes my hand. “This is how we make mughrat. It’s a remedy to relax expectant mothers. It’s what I drank when pregnant with my son. You were so ill at ease when you first arrived. You’re feeling more at peace now, aren’t you?”

I remain quiet and stare at the lilies in the dimming light. I find it interesting that Zenna trusts me enough to admit to drugging me. I watch a koi nibble on a lily pad and wonder if the fish will succumb to the drug. I decide to forgive Zenna because I really have no choice but to trust her. My life is completely in the hands of my new Egyptian family and so is the life of my little unborn child.

I notice a silver filigree charm on Zenna’s necklace. It’s a stylized hand with a blue stone on the palm. “What’s your charm? Is it an ancient Egyptian amulet, like my earrings? At least they’re amulets for me.” **I smile at her feeling a little uneasy about my situation like I’m a big fat lady trying to type rope. I’m so dependent on Zenna’s hospitality and if I make the wrong move, say the wrong thing, I’ll tumble into who knows what. It’s almost how I felt**

when Mom was in one of her alcoholic moods. I was careful about what I said or didn't say. I never knew how she'd react because I didn't understand her way of thinking.

"It's a Hamsa, the hand of Fatima."

"I've heard of the apparition. Our lady of Fatima," I say enthusiastically, hoping Zenna will appreciate that I know a little something about religion. Although, I'd never tell her about the apparition I saw in the sea when arriving in Alexandria. Zenna didn't like my postcard of Nefertibet so I doubt she'd appreciate what I know I saw in the waves.

"No," Zenna says. "It's the hand of Fatima the beloved daughter of the Prophet. The charm protects me from the evil eye. Ayin Ha'ra."

"Evil eye?" I ask **feeling a bit embarrassed that I jumped to conclusions.**

"As Muslims, we place our lives in the hands of Allah. But we use the Hamsa to repel evil. Little sister, people have the power to stare with an envious eye that causes harm. If someone pays me a compliment, I say, 'Masha Allah,' God has willed it. Blessings of God ward off the evil eye."

"Oh, I see," is all I can think of to say on my tight rope walk.

Zenna touches my hair. "Such vivid color and softness," she says as if she's said enough about the Hamsa and evil eye. "Sarah, you're very beautiful. I'm sure your baby will be just as lovely."

"Masha Allah," I say, feeling I got it right this time.

Zenna winks.

I finish the mughrat and set the glass on the stone bench beside me, now feeling grateful Zenna's remedy softens my hormonal moods. "I've never had a sister before," I admit. "My

mother never really cared about me. I feel like you're my family even though I'm foreign to your religion and traditions."

"You are my family, little sister." She touches my face. "We love you. And the child." She hesitates a moment. "Do you think your family in America will come see you?"

"I hope so. At least, I hope my father will."

"But after the baby is born?" Zenna asks. I nod. "It's better that way. Then you'll have plenty of time to show your father around the City of Minarets. I'll always be here to be amah, the baby's nanny."

"You know, sister," I say, feeling encouraged by Zenna's kind words. "I would really love to see the pyramids of Giza. Tomorrow, if we can, before I get any fatter. I mean, further along. I need to get out. I feel fit. The mughrat makes me strong and puts me at ease. I already asked Amar to take me but he's too concerned about my health. You understand, don't you? You'd be with me."

Zenna looks at me, takes my hand and says in an upbeat voice, "It's settled. I'll have the car ready tomorrow morning and we'll see the pyramids. And if ever you become faint during our outing, it'll be no matter. Dr. Aziza will join us."

"No," I plead. "Not Aziza. I want Amar to come."

"I'm afraid my brother is much too busy. But I'll see. And the doctor must come along. We wouldn't want any harm to come to the child. Or to you."

I beam at my new sister feeling perked up about tomorrow's outing. I'm glad I didn't have to beg Zenna to take me on this outing and admit I'm feeling cooped-up like a fat pregnant harem girl.

That night, while trying to fall asleep, images of the great Sphinx and the three massive pyramids flash through my head. I feel the kind of excitement I had when Amar first said he was taking me to Cairo.

Because Zenna already gave me my nightly mughrat and tucked me into bed, I doubt she'll suddenly burst into my room so I take out the postcard of Nefertiabet. As a daughter of Khufu, I figure this dignified princess was present during the construction of her father's pyramid. I quietly call *Nefertiabet* and ask her to visit my dreams and reveal her spirit.



Chapter 4: *Seshet Akeru* -- Life in Pepi's Great Palace

Beautiful spirit of Isis-Hathor, Nefer Ba'ast, I see your shimmering face in my relic mirror of Khentkawes. I hear your call.

In her knotted dress, winged Isis-Hathor upholds the universe and makes the land fertile with her tears. I call on her magic to protect you and your unborn child. I give you my heart through my life's story.

After the Alashiya stone of Hathor-Sekhmet blessed me with sekhem powers, I lived in the harem of my father's Great Palace. Pepi's queens and daughters, sisters and cousins, and sons under age ten lived in the harem as well. Our patron goddess was the Ipet. Like the fierce mother hippo in the river delta protects her calves, Ipet watched over the harem. The stout and hale soldiers who guarded our quarters held shields painted with Ipet's "sa" amulet of protection.

My father's Great Wife was Queen Nit. His primary wives were queens Iput, Wedjebten and the two Ankhnespepi sisters who were Pepi's sisters as well. The queens were direct descendants of Queen MeryNit, the Great Queen of King Djed, fourth king of the 1st dynasty. After Djed died, Queen MeryNit ruled the north and south kingdoms with her son Den.

Queen MeryNit was just and beneficent and brought prosperity to the kingdom along the Great River. She was great-granddaughter of Fierce Stinging Catfish, the unifier of our kingdom eight hundred years before my father's reign.

On the rooftop observatory of his Great Palace, Pepi formally adopted me. The rite began when the sun set behind our most sacred burial grounds--Sokar Ra Amentet--where the falcon and Hathor as Lady of the West welcome the dead to the afterlife. In the southern part of Sokar Ra Amentet, stands Pepi's pyramid *Pepi is Established and Lives for Eternity*.

When the sky darkened the king showed me the constellation Seshat high in the sky. "I give you the title Favorite Daughter of the King's Body," he said. "And the name Seshet Akeru for your triple sekhem powers. Seshat is goddess of stars. Akeru Ruti are the lions of yesterday and tomorrow who guard the gates to the afterworld that opens at sunrise and sunset."

"Sire. I'm humbled you choose me as your favorite daughter," I told the king.

"It's an easy choice. You are true of voice, your word flow freely and you possess sekhem powers of Tefnut and Sekhmet. As my favorite daughter, you'll marry my chosen son NeferMa'at. His name means Beautiful Truth. He's my only son who possesses the 14 ka's of Ra and was born true of voice with double sekhem powers."

"Sire, my father," I said as I gazed at the Mansion of Seshat. "I can't marry your chosen son. I have no parentage. I'm not descended from Queen MeryNit. And the noble daughters of your Great Queen, Hetepheres and Nedjeftet, dislike me,"

“Why do you say this?”

“They don’t believe I have triple sekhem powers. They call me Waif of Tefnut.”

“Hetepheres and Nedjeftet will be my chosen son’s first wives,” my father then said.

“That I have arranged this. They are privileged and prone to jealousy because they lack your powers of mediation and voice. Although you aren’t descended from Queen MeryNit, you are born of Hathor, daughter of Atum Ra. This is your lineage. You will be my chosen son’s third and lesser wife and the sekhem force behind his throne.”

Soon after I became the king’s daughter, I encountered Pepi’s chosen son Prince NeferMa’at. It was a day of Perfect Festivals in the Waters when many things to celebrate occur at once. It was the name-day for Ipet, it was a night when three traveling stars appeared with the moon and the day marked the birth of Queen Wedjebten, mother of NeferMa’at.

Jasmine and myrrh scented the harem. Jugglers, dancing troops and storytellers kept us entertained. The king’s daughters and cousins played lutes and sang *Queen Wedjebten. You are beloved of Nebty and Hathor. You are a seer of Horus and Set.*

During the celebrations I sat beside Lady Henutsen, a priestess of Hathor and lesser wife of my father. We were watching agile Libyan dancers in the central courtyard when, beyond the dancers, Great Queen Nit welcomed my father to the harem. With Pepi were his five heir-apparent sons each old enough to live in the king’s quarters and attend the Princes’ Academy. They were Merenre, Rahotep and Neferkare II, sons of the Great Queen and Menka son of Iput. The most remarkable among them was the king’s chosen son. I had not yet seen twelve-year-old NeferMa’at but knew him by reputation. He was a favorite topic of harem gossip because of his striking appearance and manners. In his blue kilt and gold wesekh broad-collar, he appeared as regal as the king himself.

When Prince NeferMa'at noticed me from across the hall, I turned away, embarrassed by my nonroyal birth. A moment later, he appeared from behind a nearby pillar. Dark green kohl lined his brown eyes and his complexion was as honey smooth as his mother's. He was holding a baboon doll. "Is this the precious Seshet Akeru, my father's youngest scribe?" the doll asked.

I hid behind Lady Henutsen.

"Don't be afraid, little princess. I am Lord Djehuti speaking words of wisdom." The prince showed me how to move the puppet's mouth with a stick and make the doll's legs and arms dance. I had never seen such magic. At the orphanage, pilgrims presented me with amulets to kiss and bless, never toys. The baboon puppet made me laugh.

NeferMa'at gave me the doll but before I could properly thank him, fourteen-year-old Prince Menka appeared like a jackal from the red desert sands. He wore a yellow shendyt and had a dagger at his waist and a gold pendant at his chest with his insignia *the king's eldest son*.

"You're violating the women's side of the plaza, brother NeferMa'at." Menka spoke with the venom of an asp. His words confused me. He too was on the women's side of the harem.

It was the first time I had seen Menka up close. I immediately disliked him for disrupting my good feelings with NeferMa'at. And I had heard many rumors claiming Menka drank in excess and caroused with women of ill repute. His name means "Established Spirit" but he lacked any virtue.

Lady Henutsen asked the royal brothers to leave the women's side of the courtyard. They politely acknowledged their step-mother. Before leaving, NeferMa'at reached down and kissed my brow. It was uncourtly for a prince to touch his sister in such a manner, unless she became his wife, so his kiss was quick and furtive. But it filled me with his sekhem powers as if Atum Ra himself breathed life into my heart spirit.

From that day forward, I anticipated the king's arrival in the harem with young NeferMa'at. The chosen son always greeted me as his young sister. **Harem priests had taught me to recite the wisdom texts of Imhotep, Ptahhotep and Kagemni and use mathematics to draw the Eye of the Falcon with precision.**

Like my father, NeferMa'at praised my wisdom text recitals of **Imhotep, Ptahhotep and Kagemni that Harem priests had taught me. And he admired** my flawless picture words. "You understand **mathematics when you draw the Eye of the Falcon with precision,**" he **would say.** The chosen prince inspired me to help other children and made me forget that I wasn't descended from Queen MeryNit. I began dreaming about the day I would fulfill my father's wishes and NeferMa'at would take me as his third and lesser wife.

At the same time, I dreaded the arrival of Prince Menka. The king's eldest son possessed the opposite character of NeferMa'at. Whenever Menka entered the harem, he was sure to call me "lily of the delta swamps" and make lewd suggestions. "I would taste your treasures," he'd say. For me, Menka was like a carob bean spoiled by worms and mold. If I couldn't avoid him, I had to reply with the impeccable manners priests in the harem taught me.

One bright afternoon, I observed just how different the two brothers were, like Osiris and Set. I was standing on the harem terrace watching them spar in a garden courtyard. In the middle of their game a yellow tabby entered their arena. This wasn't unusual. Cats freely wandered the palace just as they wandered the cities and temples of my father's kingdom. Rational people adore cats and believe them to be the "ba" spirit of Isis-Hathor and of Ra. Cats travel between this world and the next protecting both the living and the dead. Any person who kills or harms a cat loses his soul. Those who hate or fear cats have no soul at all.

When the tabby wandered into the game, NeferMa'at stopped sparring so he wouldn't injure or frighten the ba of Hathor. Menka, however, nearly dropped his wa's scepter cringing in fear as if the tabby were Ammit, the beast who tears the heart and soul from the misguided who attempt to enter the Afterworld. It was then I realized Menka was as flawed as the evil god Set.

When I turned fourteen, I became a priestess of Hathor, goddess of many forms. Hathor is daughter of Atum Ra and Mother of all gods and beings. She dwells in the night sky mansions of the falcon. As Sekhmet, Hathor is the Eye of Ra, as Isis she is mother of Horus. Hathor is the Eternal Circle of the universe, the force of existence and time. When Hathor takes the form of the goddess Nit, she weaves the world together each day and upholds the universe with Serqet, Isis and Nebet Het.

In the Palace Temple of Hathor, Great Queen Nit initiated me into the king's priesthood. We sat before an altar and the Great Queen Nit handed me the bronze relic mirror of Khentkawes and said, "View the face of your primary avatar."

As the queen chanted the names of dignified ladies, I looked into the polished bronze mirror not knowing who might appear. I saw my youthful image waver and fade until the face of a mature beautiful woman appeared. "I am Nefertiabet," the image said. "The Beautiful Princess from the East, wife of Wepemnofret and mother of seven daughters." I recognized her face from the stela in her tomb's chapel.

"Who do you see in the mirror?" the Great Queen asked.

"Khufu's daughter, Princess Nefertiabet," I said.

"She comes to you from 350 years before. You are like her in dignity and poise. She's a powerful avatar to help you become a dignified lady of standing. Tell me what she says."

I looked back in the mirror but saw only a smoky vision of my own face. Then I heard the voice of my avatar whisper *In the darkness of the womb, we come to life. In death we travel into the womb of Nut. We have no sight and hear no sound except the heartbeat of our mother the sky. You are a drop of blood from her heart. Uncorrupted. True of voice. I am your avatar in the priesthood of Hathor. You are a gift from the king to the rational people of his kingdom.*

That same year, my father assigned me to study astronomy at the House of Stars in the outskirts of Anu. He wanted me to use my triple sekhem powers to interpret the stars and appease the gods in the Mansions of Horus. For two years, astronomy priests gave me nightly lessons on the roof observatory *Pa Ka Aa Ra-Horakhty*--where the spirit takes flight at sunrise and sunset.

During my absence, my father formerly appointed his chosen son as crown prince and named him the Golden Falcon. Not even Menka the eldest son challenged my father's decision. Menka had no standing against my father's wishes and the rational people of the kingdom adored Prince NeferMa'at because he possessed the 14 ka's of Ra.

A few months later, I learned the Golden Falcon wedded his half-sisters Hetepheres V and Nedjeftet, daughters of Great Queen Nit. The news distressed me. For ten years I dreamed of becoming wife to the chosen prince and fulfilling my father's promise.

I called upon Nefertiabet asking for her magic powers to intervene so the crown prince would take me as his third and lesser wife when I returned to the Great Palace.

What I prayed for didn't occur. Back at the Great Palace, I resumed my duties as a parttime priestess and became a court advisor to my father. In his receiving room, I listened to Pepi and offered counsel in the form of a prophecy according to the stars so my father would never think I challenged his authority.

On occasion, I stood before his throne with the Golden Falcon, the king's closest advisor. These were the only times I was near the crown prince. He was beautiful as he stood by his father wearing his gold falcon pendant inlaid with precious stones. His speech was always flawless, logical and befitting his high station in life. I sensed he loved me but only as a sister of the court and not as a prospective wife. He never summoned me to his chambers for a clandestine meeting.

I began to reason the Golden Falcon had no time for me because of his many duties. I believed his two pedigree wives required all his attentions. I was certain they argued against my becoming his third and lesser wife or his mother Queen Wedjebten forbade our marriage because I lacked pedigree and parentage.

After Hetepheres V gave birth to a daughter, I concluded the Golden Falcon would never marry me. I chose to dedicate my life to the priesthood and take a vow of chastity. If I didn't marry the crown prince, I didn't want to marry anyone, especially Prince Menka whose privileges were almost as far-reaching as the king's chosen son. Prince Menka lusted for me. As a fulltime priestess of the king, he could never force a union upon me.

One day, when the Golden Falcon was not with us in the receiving room, I told my father my wish to be a fulltime priestess.

He abruptly stood from his throne, upholding his flail and crook. "I forbid this!" he said. "Only those with infirmities join my priesthood fulltime." He looked directly at me. I gazed downward. My father commanded his page to summon the crown prince and his high priests to perform the marriage in his receiving room.

"Father," I said. "I beg you to wait and hear me. You're now older than three generations and the stars tell me your life is merely half over. As a fulltime priestess, I'll dedicate my life

entirely to you, the heart of my spirit. When I was a waif of Tefnut you took me to touch the stone from Sekhmet to the sea. Because of you, I gained her sekhem power. You brought me to your Great Palace and made me your daughter to live a life of splendor under your protection. You spared me the fate of a tarnished temple priestess. Your son the Golden Falcon has not shown me any playful intent and I can't marry a man who doesn't share my love for him. My love for the Golden Falcon is the breath of Atum Ra, the perfume of Hathor and the stars of night that never fade."

"Your words sway me," my father said. "I agree to your wise decision. You are indeed true of voice with triple sekhem powers."

Before high waters appeared, I made my fulltime commitment to the king's priesthood. It was on the night my father initiated me as a Prophet of Seshat. I officially became one of his astronomy priests like my avatar Nefertiabet was for her father Khufu.

During the same year, the king appointed me Overseer of the Queens' Pyramids in Sokar Ra Amentet. On papyrus paper I drew sacred verses and magic spells for the stone masons to engrave on the tomb walls.

One day, in the pyramid chapel of Queen Wedjebten, I was holding a scroll describing her journey into the Afterworld. *Queen Wedjebten is the brightest star among the mansions of night* the transcript read. *She flies through the horizon gates and becomes imperishable in the Field of Reeds.*

In the orange light of lanterns beneath a ceiling of stars, I was thinking how the crown prince filled me with his sekhem power when we first met. *The son of Pepi and Wedjebten is a falcon with the sekhem of a king*, my mind was singing. I couldn't dwell on my love for him, I

knew, because of my priesthood vows. I tried not to dream about him, but I did. Just as I hoped that one day, somehow, he would take me as his third and lesser wife. On that day, I would renounce my vows because my love for him was stronger than all the sekhem powers I possessed.

As I stood in the chapel of *Wedjebten* on that day, I believed the crown prince was in our father's mortuary temple. The masons suddenly stopped their chiseling and the tomb became eerily silent except for the crackling lamps. From behind I felt the parting of my wig and a warm breath upon the nape of my neck. A man softly whispered, "This is the pyramid of my mother. May her spirit flourish forever."

I wondered if a spirit was toying with me but in my heart, I knew the crown prince himself was making me shiver and unable to speak. I wondered what he had in mind. It should have been obvious but it wasn't. He was the Golden Falcon and he needed to tell me his intentions.

"I'm here to meet with my young sister, Seshet Akeru," he whispered as he turned my face to his and held up my chin. "You have taken vows to the priesthood and my royal wives need not know of the love I now give you."

I then realized the engravers had left the chamber. They would not witness the crown prince in his dalliance.

Against the granite wall the orange lamplight cast my shadow with that of the Golden Falcon. I could scarcely breathe. I was alone with the man who had always been a distant unobtainable dream. His unexpected visit took me to the heights of the imperishable stars. I knew he loved me beyond the love for a younger sister of court.

For two years we kept our love secret. The crown prince **didn't** marry me and I continued my priestly duties. Although our love for each other deepened, I never ask him to take me as his third and lesser wife because the words needed to flow freely from him.

One day, I knew, new life would stir in my womb and then we could no longer keep our love hidden. And on that day, I would live within the enduring bond of Isis and her son.

Beautiful spirit of Isis, I see your glowing face in my relic mirror. I give you my story with the soothing breath of Atum Ra. Your journey into motherhood is the journey of life.



Chapter 5: Fleeing Cairo

In the first light of morning, I awake from a powerful dream that I can't fully remember. I know it involved my guardian angel the Dignified Lady of the East. She revealed to me the most sacred places of her time.

As promised, Zenna takes me to Giza. Farouq drives the blue Audi Sedan. Zenna sits in the front passenger seat dressed conservatively in a long kaftan with a scarf covering her hair. Aziza is sitting in the backseat beside me, watching my every move, or so it seems.

During the hour's drive through the bustling traffic, I lean against the door and watch the streets zoom by. I catch glimpses of concrete apartment buildings, wrought iron balconies, cardboard shanties and donkeys attached to old carts loaded with watermelons that vendors are selling on the street. Finally, the Sphinx and pyramids loom from the brown desert sands like a mirage.

"In Arabic we call the Sphinx Abū al-Haul. It means Father of Terror," Zenna explains as we near the tombs of Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure.

Farouq parks the Audi in the dust bowl before Khufu's pyramid. Zenna holds one of my elbow and Aziza takes the other as we stroll past souvenir stands and kiosks along the dirt road between the ruins. Along the road camel masters dressed in weathered galabias and keffiyeh turbans offer rides on their donkey drawn buggies or horses and camels saddled in red Bedouin blankets with blue tassels.

"The early morning sun is warm. Are you all right, little sister?" Zenna asks. Aziza seems to be looking me up and down.

"The breeze is keeping me comfortable," I say and pull from Aziza as nonchalantly as I can.

"Not many tourists are here these days," Zenna says.

"Why's that? Because of the massacre in Munich?"

"I imagine so, sister."

Zenna stops at a kiosk and buys me a filigree Hamsa keychain with a blue cabochon eye.

"This will protect you and the child from the evil eye," she says.

"I need all the good-luck I can get." I attach it to my bag,

After we reach shade at the bottom of Khufu's pyramid, I gaze up at the massive structure piercing the sky. "One day I'll be an Egyptologist and climb to the top of this pyramid," I tell Zenna. She smiles but says nothing while she enjoys the view herself.

I take pictures with my Pocket Instamatic and think about my guardian angel, Nefertiabet. She lived when Khufu's pyramid was built. I want to chant her name aloud but I'll never forget Zenna's reaction when I was chanting to the postcard. So, I silently say *Nefertiabet, Beautiful Lady of the East, make me an Egyptologist one day so I can unlock the secrets of your dignified life.*

Zenna takes my hand and says, good naturedly, "We don't want to tire you, Madam Amelia Edwards."

Zenna's remark can't be mere coincidence, I think to myself. I'm sure Nefertiabet is speaking to me through her. Why else would Zenna mention the famous Egyptologist right when I was asking my guardian angel to make me an Egyptologist? Just last night Zenna told me about the nineteenth century Egyptologist and her book *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* when she and I were sitting at the kitchen table eating dates and drinking tea.

On our way back to the Audi, I'm feeling positive and hopeful until the heat, the dust, the smell of livestock and the endless hawkers calling at us make me dizzy.

Zenna and Aziza quickly usher me back into the car and Farouq speeds home. "The outing was a terrible mistake," Zenna exclaims along the way. "Your Nefertiabet has cast the evil eye upon us. That's what happens when you pray to a postcard idol."

I say nothing as I anxiously wait to get back to my bed so I can collapse into sleep, hopefully undisturbed by Aziza, Zenna or the spirit of her dead son and this evil eye that seems to be lurking everywhere I go. I don't know how Zenna knew I was thinking about Khufu's

daughter but I don't need another lecture concerning my guardian angel. I only want to have positive dreams about my ancient Egyptian princess who spoke to me today at the Giza plateau.

Toward the end of my third trimester, afternoon temperatures in Cairo soar above 80 degrees. It becomes too uncomfortable to relax in the backyard. Sometimes I remain in bed all day under the ceiling fan feeling bloated and unprepared to be mother.

Occasionally, I don't drink Zenna's mughrat. Although I have no choice but to trust my new family, something bothers me about taking the drug. Unfortunately, when I don't, negative thoughts clutter my mind. I think about how Amar is rarely around and when I see him, he no longer brings me gifts or speaks romantically to me. I feel like he's neglecting me because I've become unattractive. At times he seems to care only about the wellbeing of our unborn child, his abni, and not about me. And the fact that I don't feel sexual anymore merely adds to my disgust about myself. I feel old at eighteen. How will I raise this child? When will I get my figure back and return to being a beautiful American woman? During my worst moments, I wonder if I've made a big mistake, like someone's pushed me into a dark corner. Like Mom used to do when her drunken anger grew out of control.

One afternoon, while I'm feeling unusually depressed, Zenna enters my room with a sugar cane drink called Qasab. "I've noticed you aren't always drinking the mughrat and thought you might like a change," she tells me.

I sip the sweet drink, wondering if Zenna made it especially sweet to hide the taste of the lily narcotic. But I'm not too concerned. I'm feeling so distraught that I'm hoping the drug will help me overcome my dark mood. When I set aside the drink, I say to Zenna, in the most delicate

manner I can, “I keep thinking about what’s in store for me. I don’t think I’m cut out to be a mother. My mother wasn’t.”

Zenna looks displeased. I immediately recognize I’ve made a big mistake revealing my feelings. She sits on the bed beside me and sternly says, “Sarah, I understand what you’re going through but you must not dwell on such unholy thoughts or the evil eye will curse you. Of course, you love this child. Just as I do. What you’re experiencing is a phase all expectant mothers go through. I remember my own pregnancy.” As if trying to ease the pain of losing her child, Zenna gazes out the window across the room at the purple Jacaranda flowers shimmering in the sun. She smiles and continues, “Really, Sarah, I hated myself. But life turned out wonderful for me. I couldn’t have loved my little son more.”

I smile to reassure Zenna then wonder if I’m in the room of her dead son and if his spirit is what’s haunting me with the evil eye. I never look at his picture when I pass through the left sitting room but the boy’s image is lodged on my brain. To clear my head of concerns, I say, “Tell me about your son. I mean, what was he like?”

Zenna stares at me as if questioning whether it’s wise to burden me with her sorrow. “I do remember him as he was,” she says. “Alive. Just as I think about my poor husband. God have mercy on his soul. But so often when I recall pleasant memories of Kamal’s first birthday or the day he entered school, I suddenly remember the moment I learned of the accident. Then it’s all I can do to summon courage and pray.”

“I’m so sorry about the tragedy. Life can be so difficult.”

Zenna touches my belly. “How the child grows day by day, *hamdulila*. Oh Sarah, you can’t know the pain the death of a child brings. You must receive this child as a gift from the Almighty.” She takes both of my hands in hers. “Let’s no longer dwell on sorrows. You have

nothing to fear, little sister. Amar will always stand by you. I'm here to see you never suffer the unnecessary torments of life. Do you believe me?"

She gently squeezes my hands and I feel like her presence, her good aura, is somehow pacifying the spirit of her dead son if Kamal is in fact lurking in my bedroom. I warmly smile. "Zenna, you're like the mother I've always wanted but never had."

"Here now." Zenna hands me the drink. "Finish your qasab and rest until Amar comes home."

The next evening, Amar, Zenna, and the old mother go to the Gezira Club where they dine at least twice a week. I never go with them because I feel too fat and uncomfortable leaving the house. They always bring me back an enormous dinner anyway.

As soon as they're gone, I decide to call home. I feel uplifted after my conversation with Zenna and want to hear Daddy's voice. I haven't talked to him since arriving in Zamalek. In my most recent letter, I claimed to be studying Arabic at the American University in Cairo. Amar mails and retrieves my letters at the American Express. **He always wants to know what I write.**

"Don't you trust me?" I've asked more than once.

"That's not the point Sarah," he told me. "You're in an emotional state and I don't want you to reveal our address on Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street. Not until after the baby comes and we're married."

I go along with this because I think it's for the best. I don't want my dad popping up in Cairo to see what I'm really doing. **In his letters, Daddy voices his disapproval but says I can travel so long as I return home for fall semester at the University of Chicago.**

The only phone in the house is in the left sitting room with the picture of Zenna's dead son and husband hanging prominently on the wall. The picture haunts me. I don't even like being near it. But I need to make this call now that everyone's away. Before placing the collect call, I fetch Isis-Huthur from the backyard. I need her comfort when facing Daddy and maybe I need her protection from the evil eye I'm feeling in the room. The eyes of two dead people staring at me.

I sit on the cushions of the sofa with Isis-Huthur snuggled on my lap. I rub my cartouche earrings and call on Nefertiabet to give me courage. Then I dial the international operator. I stroke my cat and nervously wait for the call to go through. When it finally does, Daddy's furious.

"Jennifer told me about your Egyptian man."

How could she betray me like this I'm thinking as I listen to my father.

"And so, is your little apartment in Cairo a love nest with Amar?"

Stunned by Daddy's words and my best friend's betrayal--she even told him Amar's name--I tightly hug my cat and try to think of what to say. Nothing comes to mind. Deep inside I still have conflicting feelings about being a mother and am tempted to admit my entire ordeal. It's a comforting thought. Daddy can figure things out for me as he's done many times before.

Like when he straightened out my suspension for truancy and forgery at Fremd High. Senior year I had spent a week skipping classes and hanging out with Rick while he was in town. Then I gave the school secretary a handwritten note stating I'd been ill. The signature evidently didn't look like my mother's and the principle called her. I got caught but told Daddy I took a break and spent the week at the mall. It was a lame explanation

but I couldn't tell him the truth. Daddy never would have approved of Rick, for one thing, and the truth would've landed me in deeper trouble.

"Daddy," I say at last, ready to reveal my situation and leave the consequences to him. But as usual, the connection is poor and static rings in my ear. "Daddy, can you hear me?"

"Yes, but not very well. Listen," he says. "I don't care what you've been up to. You've spent enough time galivanting about like characters from a novel. Be on the next flight home or I'm coming after you. Do you hear me, little girl?"

"No Daddy!" I yell, squeezing the cat. She meows. "You can't come after me." The thought makes me queasy. Daddy has the money to do whatever he wants. Tears well in my eyes and I suddenly hate being pregnant.

"Give me another month," I plead, desperately needing the few remaining weeks of my pregnancy to devise a way to break the news. Now's not the time, I caution myself. I'm too upset and emotionally insecure. Amar was right about this and I need his support. He'll ease my fears because he cares about my welfare and that of our baby. I need an influential man in my life. It used to be Daddy, now it's Amar.

"Really, Daddy." I clear my throat and bravely say, "I need to finish my Arabic classes at AUC. Please, I promise to arrange my flight home."

"No young lady! I don't know what kind of trouble you're in but get the hell out of it and come home!" Through an onslaught of tears, I lose my nerve and meekly agree to my father's demand.

"Daddy," I think to say. "I am in trouble. Nothing bad. It's just that my visa expired a month ago. I've got to bribe officials to leave here without getting into a bureaucratic ordeal."

“What nonsense are you concocting now?!” he hollers over the static line. “Have you been taking pills?”

“Please, Daddy. You need to send money to the AE and pay off my BankAmericard so I can arrange to leave.”

“No more money. I’ll arrange for your air ticket through the embassy. I’ll let you know.” He hangs up and I put down the receiver and curl up on the pillows with Isis-Huthur. At least my poor unborn child is hearing her purr and not the angry words of my father.

I breathe deeply a moment or two while wondering what to do. I decide to call my father back and tell him the truth, after all. *I’m about to have your first grandchild* I’ll holler as soon as he picks up the phone. In a way I feel relieved making this decision. Once he knows the truth, there’ll be no more secrets. He’ll take charge of matters. Meet my baby’s father and make agreements with firm handshakes. *Yes, of course*, I’m thinking as I pick up the receiver. *I need to tell Daddy the truth.*

While reconnecting with the international operator, I hear Farouq pull up to the house. I quickly put down the phone and hide the cat under the cushions just as Amar enters the room carrying takeout food from the Gezira Club. He places the food on the marble coffee table and sits beside me. “Who were you calling?” he asks.

“I was just relaxing. I get tired of always being in bed, you know.”

“No, you weren’t. I never see you in this room. And why is the phone off the hook?”

I have no choice but to admit I was phoning my father. “He hung up on me,” I say. “He wants me to come home. Immediately! I’ve got to tell him the truth, Amar. It’ll be okay. Everyone will be happy.”

“No, habibti,” Amar tries to comfort me in his arms.

“There’s no other way. Daddy’s coming for me. And he knows about you. That bitch Jennifer told him everything. Except about the baby.”

All at once the cat crawls from behind the cushion. My eyes widen. Instead of growing angry, Amar pats Isis-Huthur as if there’s nothing unusual about her being in the house. “I see,” he says, looking deeply concerned as he continues to pet my cat. I pray Zenna won’t appear and bombard my life with more confusion. I know she detests the cat.

“All right,” Amar says at last. “Explain to your father you’re on your way home in a few weeks after tying-up loose ends, as you Americans say. The baby is due soon and you mustn’t upset yourself with pressures from your family in America. I’m your family now.”

I rest my head on his firm shoulder and take hold of Isis-Huthur. “My father’s a smart man. He’ll believe only the truth. I feel conflicted like I’m in a bench vise between you and Daddy.”

I reach for the phone and Amar grabs my wrist, hurting me. His force is stunning. He’s never shown any physical force toward me except in Venice when he vigorously made love. Otherwise, he’s always been gentle, caring and in command of himself. For a moment I don’t know what to make of Amar’s aggression. My father never showed any force toward my mother, only a certain amount of frustration. In fact, it feels like something Mom used to do, in her worst states when she grabbed my wrist to punish me.

“I forbid you tell your father about the child.” Amar yanks the phone from its cord and throws it across the room near the picture of Zenna and her dead husband and son. The picture falls to the floor shattering the protective glass, but the boy’s haunting image leers at me. I feel his presence growing with Amar’s anger. As if the boy’s spirit is stepping from the picture and possessing Amar, making his face redden with fury.

I start calling Amar hateful names, the Arabic insults he taught me during our romance in Venice when he was joking around. Not only am I angry at Amar, the father of my child, I'm trying to chase away the haunting presence of the dead boy.

Kamal's face suddenly appears on Amar's as he swings his arm back and slaps my cheek. He then grabs the cat from my arms and throws it out an open window. Isis-Huthur screeches on her way out.

"I hate you," I scream.

Amar takes hold of my wrists to keep me still. To calm me down, or to stifle me. Like Mom used to do. I yank free from his grip, from the dead boy's hold on me. I tumbling onto the cushions. The change in Amar frightens me more than his slap or the haunting spirit of Kamal. My life's in peril. I'm afraid of losing the baby. And I see no way to escape.

Zenna enters the room. "The baby, the baby!" she screams at her brother. "What are you doing?" She runs to me, helps me off the cushions and escorts me to my bedroom.

"My brother suffers from the stress of becoming a new father and husband so early in his life," she says and tucks me into bed while singing my favorite 'Umm Kulthum song, *Enta Omri*, "You are my life." She affectionately strokes my brow.

At first, I feel like she's singing to my unborn baby then I realize she's really singing to Kamal. He's haunting the room. His shattered image is lodged my head.

"You are my morning light, ya habibti," Zenna sings while touching my hair.

I want to say Masha 'Allah to ward off the evil eye and the ghost of her son. But I'm so exhausted I begin drifting asleep hearing her sing, "Oh, my heart's life, you are more precious than my life."

Later that evening Amar awakens me, sits at my bedside and places my cat on the pillow. He probably fetched her from the yard although maybe Isis-Huthur jumped back in the window. The cat wants to be with me now. Nefertiabet has sent her.

“Please forgive me,” Amar pleads. “I promise to never again become angry. I was afraid you’d fly away like a butterfly and never return.” He softly kisses my brow.

I sit up and take my meowing cat. Amar’s apology touches me. His slap hadn’t been that bad, I tell myself, and my visions of Kamal had merely been my mind playing tricks because I’ve been under tremendous stress and confusion. In the vanity mirror across the room, I see only a slight pinkish hue on my face.

“I understand you must be anxious, too,” I tell Amar as my mind scrambles to think about a romantic Nile voyage. But instead, I think about life with an uncontrollably angry man. A man who’s no longer like my father. “Amar,” I say and hug Isis-Huthur against my chest. “I don’t know what to do.”

Amar lies beside me and rests his head against my shoulder like a small boy with his mother. He touches the cat, but she screeches, scratches his hand, jumps from the bed and leaps out the open window onto the branches of the Jacaranda tree.

“Kitty, Kitty,” I call out, although I’m glad she’s escaped the haunted room. I no longer trust what Amar might do. Now that I’ve seen his angry side.

“Forget that cat. It needs to be outside,” Amar says, his sorrowful eyes change to self-assurance. “After the baby comes, you’ll regain your strength and life will bring you nothing but happiness as my wife.”

“And we’ll be moving from this house? In fact, I wouldn’t mind if we move before the baby comes. I really don’t want to stay in this bedroom anymore.”

“Why? This is a very comfortable room and it’s too close to your due date for us to move. After the baby comes, we’ll buy a houseboat in Garden City. How does that sound? And one day you’ll be a famous Egyptologist like Amelia Edwards.”

I stroke Amar’s face with the back of my hand. I don’t want to mention that I’m feeling haunted by his nephew. I know he’d dismiss me and my concerns. Really, I just want Amar to be tender and caring. Can I ever forgive him for slapping me? *Maybe*, I think, and decide my condition is creating all these problems. Not a dead boy or Amar’s outrage or even my father’s wrath.

“Now, my gazelle.” Amar strokes my hair like I’m the cat. “Are you going to tell your father about the baby or are we going to decide together what to do as husband and wife, *zawj w zawja*?”

I look at Amar realizing I must now and forever choose between my father and my future husband. A choice that needs lots of consideration. It doesn’t take me long to say, “Ok. I’ll write Daddy and explain that my return home will be delayed. I’m an adult. Not his little girl. He must learn boundaries. Let’s just hope he doesn’t fly here and nab me. If he does, well, that’s kidnapping.”

“My heart’s mended.” Amar kisses my hand and nestles beside me. All the while I’m wondering if I really can keep lying to my father.

It’s early morning a few weeks later when I jolt awake to a damp bed and a piercing lower backache. I scream for help. Zenna appears at my bedside with Aziza and the old mother. The throbbing pain and tremendous pressure are more than I can bear. My thoughts are of horror,

not love. The window and curtains are closed. “The room has no air. I’m suffocating,” I whimper while sweating in pain.

“Open the window,” Zenna yells at Aziza.

My thoughts are about the “evil eye.” Someone or something has cursed me. Perhaps it’s the dead boy’s spirit or Zenna herself. I’m also sad about Isis-Huthur. My cat disappeared after scratching Amar and fleeing my room. She was my only real friend in Cairo. Now she’s gone forever. Maybe my guardian angel Nefertiabet fled with her. Maybe the boy’s ghost chased them away.

“I want my cat,” I say but nobody speaks to me. Don’t they hear me? No. They don’t care about me. I’m hated in this house on Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street. I’m their prisoner. “Amar,” I mumble.

“Amar’s not around.” I hear someone say.

The pain intensifies. I try calling for Amar again but “Daddy, Daddy” comes out and my mind reels back to my room in Palatine. **I want my father. I want to go home to America where I was safe until Mom gets drunk and wants to punish me. I’m not safe. Here. There. Anywhere.**

Zenna gives me a glass of mughrat. I can taste the blue lily extract; smell its acrid scent. I drink it anyway. To stop my anguish. To stop Mom from punishing me.

As the drug takes effect, I picture my guardian angel, the dignified priestess of ancient Egypt. In my mind or maybe even aloud I call her name. “Nefertiabet. See me through the birth of my child. Make the pain go away.”

Deep in my mind I hear a voice. It becomes so piercing everyone else in the room should hear it. I know that they don’t.

*In my relic mirror of Khentkawes, I see your young beautiful face, Nefer Ba 'ast. I call upon Lord Djehuti to witness the birth of your child. He already writes your child's biography among the stars. I call for Ipet with her sa amulet to protect you and the child at the instant of birth. Ipet will breathe ka into your child's mouth. I invoke Isis-Hathor to spread her protective wings over you. She will welcome your newborn to the world just as she welcomes Atum Ra on his morning **Mandjet** boat.*

I awake. The pressure's gone. I feel like I've journeyed across the Sahara without water. My throat is dry. My mind is a dust storm. No one's in the dark room. Did I dream about my ancient Egyptian spirit of the Nile? Did Nefertiabet take me to another place? I recall the worst pain of my life and want to yell for help but can't speak. My strength is gone.

I've just given birth. Was it a boy or a girl? Did it even survive? My breasts are sore. Shouldn't I be feeding the baby? How long ago did all this happen?

"Amar," I feebly call out. Nobody comes. No one can hear me. My voice is too weak. I remember Zenna recommended a wet nurse. What about the milk bursting in my breasts? How will I ease this throbbing? I need my baby; my baby needs me. "Nefertiabet," I call but no one comes. Not even the haunting spirit of a dead boy or the whispers in my head.

My muddled thoughts drift to Chicago, to friends I haven't seen for months. It's as if I've been locked away in a harem. Amar's harem. The thought makes me smile. I'm so young and college is just around the corner. I'll major in archaeology, I promise myself. I'll earn a Ph.D. in Egyptology like my idol Barbara Mertz. I picture Daddy's face when I insist on this major. I miss his sternness, his caring strength. He really loves me. He'd do anything for me. Anything to protect me. In my last letter I said I'd be home in a month. He cabled back claiming he was on

his way to Cairo. *He'll be here any day.* After the trauma I've suffered, I find comfort in the thought of a happy reunion with Daddy.

But what about my baby? I remind myself. I struggle to sit and nearly faint from blood rushing to my head. I'm sticky and filmy and feel like someone else lives in my body.

On the night table I see a piece of aysh baladi and sugar cane juice. I take a bite of the bread and drink half of the juice. I gain some strength. I swing my feet to the floor. Throbbing pain nearly knocks me unconscious. "Isis-Huthur," I call out. "Nefertiabet, I want my baby. I need my child."

I grasp the canopy post. The small feat is a triumph. I'll make it! The vanity mirror across the room catches my sight. The woman in the reflection isn't me. She's fat in a wrinkled galabia.

Then I see him, the boy. Zenna's dead son is standing behind my reflection in shattered glass. He's staring at me with hatred. He believes my child is taking his place.

"No. Kamal." My heart is racing as I speak to the boy in the shattered mirror. "Go where you need to go. I'm not here to harm you. I only want to take my baby and leave you in peace."

His young face continues to stare at me. Then he steps from the vanity mirror, from the shattered glass of his framed picture.

"Kamal. You didn't deserve to die at such a young age."

He speaks but I can't understand his words. I think he wants to possess me.

He begins laughing at me with anger.

With all my strength, I clamber for the door across the room nearly tripping in the process.

From behind I hear the voice of a boy, a young man. He speaks in a language that sounds ancient, maybe it's Arabic, or Old Kingdom Egyptian. I'm not sure but I understand what he says. "I want your baby!"

I grasp the handle and fling open the door. I hear a baby crying. My baby. I'm terrified. Maybe Zenna's dead son is one step behind me. I feel his presence as I brace myself at the stairway banister.

I turn to see but no one is present in the dark hallway. The baby's cry comes from a bedroom down the hall. On a Persian throw rug, I walk step by step toward the crying. My hands hold the wall for support. It feels like I'm on the sinking Titanic or back on that fat lady's tightrope. How can I flee for my life with my baby? If I can't, Daddy and I will return with the police. I won't leave Egypt without my baby.

From behind someone touches my shoulder. I jump. Kamal has reached me. When I turn, I see Aziza wearing a servant's galabia and not a white smock with a stethoscope.

"What going on?" I scream with what little voice I have. "Where is my baby? You bitch! All you people in this house are sick. Crazy. Or dead."

Aziza grabs my arm and tries to steer me back to the bedroom, away from the crying baby. As I struggle to pull free, the hallway lights come on. Zenna appears from the bedroom where the baby's crying. She's neatly dressed and her hair is stylishly coiffed as if she's ready to go on an errand.

"What do you want?" Zenna's face is stern. There's no cheer, no sisterly love. Only anger and hatred. The same expression of her dead son.

“Why are you acting this way? What are you doing? It’s my baby. Your son is dead. He’s a ghost now. You can’t steal my baby.” I gasp as I frantically yank my arm from Aziza’s hold. I step toward the room where the baby is crying.

“You have no baby, Sarah Prentice,” Zenna shouts. “Go. Your bags are already packed. And don’t even speak of my son. Ever. Be gone from my house.” Zenna gestures down the stairwell. My duffle bag is sitting at the bottom step.

“This entire ordeal has been to steal my baby. Amar had no intention of marrying me. You never loved me as a sister. The truth is horrible but I won’t leave without my baby! You f...ing bitch,” I yell as if someone’s just clobbered the back of the head and struggle to pass Zenna. She knocks me down. Pain bursts through my body.

“You didn’t want to be a mother!” Zenna screams back. The dead boy creeps out from behind her like a shadow. In a blink, he vaporizes as if an illusion. But I know Kamal is real. The dead boy, Zenna’s son, has been after my baby since I arrived. He intends to possess my child.

Before I can think further, Aziza grabs my arm again and tries to force me down the stairs. I free myself but Zenna takes hold of my other arm. She and Aziza wrestle me down the stairs, out the front door and onto the porch. Aziza sets my bag beside me and closes the door.

I didn’t even know the time of day until I now see the morning light.

On the cold brick steps, I sit sobbing uncontrollably feeling more afraid than brave and more in need of Daddy’s help than to fight for my child. My spirit is wounded. I have nothing left in me. No strength. No will power. No hope. Only fear and exhaustion. The dead boy has defeated me and so has his mother.

A Russian Lada black taxi drives through the front gate. The driver helps me onto the backseat and Zenna pays him to take me to the Hilton Hotel.

I helplessly slump down on the squeaky vinyl seat and think about calling Daddy as soon as I can. Then I'll clean up and decide what to do. It's for the best that I never see my poor Egyptian baby. That Daddy never learns about my child and the evil eye of Cairo.

I feel my cartouche earrings and am thankful no one took them from me. I rub them for protection and force my mind to focus on nothing but the beautiful distinguished lady on the funerary stela. I don't ever want to think about Zenna and the haunting spirit of her dead son. "Nefertiabet," I say aloud and see the Arab driver peering at me in the rearview mirror. The traffic noise begins to fade. I hear a woman's wispy voice echo in my mind.

Young mother, beautiful spirit of Isis, Nefertiabet is my avatar. I am yours. I am Seshet Akeru, Prophet of Isis-Hathor and of the stars. It is I who appears in your dreams. It was I who helped ease the birth of your child. I will help you reclaim your child. Life revolves in time and place, in the shen circle of eternity. The vulture spreads her wings over you now and holds the shen circle in her talons.

The voice softly fades and the traffic noise returns. My taxi approaches the lions and obelisks at the Qasr El Nil bridge. I close my eyes and say, "Seshet Akeru. Take me to a better place. Teach me the lessons of your life so I can learn to live mine."



Chapter 6: Ten Years Past Cairo

September 1983

At the revolving restaurant “360 on the Cairo Tower,” two floors below the observation deck, I eat a pricy meal of falafel, grape leaves, and tabbouleh. I take in the seventy-minute panoramic view of landmark hotels, mosques, the Giza pyramids looming in the haze, the October 6th Bridge under construction, moored cruise ships and feluccas sailing on the glimmering Nile.

Ten years have passed since I fled Cairo. I doubt anyone will recognize me now. My hair is short and dyed black. I’m slim again. My nails are polished red to match my Oscar de la Renta silk blouse.

When I found the Hamsa keychain in my duffle bag ten years ago, I knew Zenna had maliciously placed it there. My so-called sister had tainted the charm with her own evil eye of betrayal. I tossed it into Lake Michigan. I valued my gold cartouche earrings too much to discard them. In fact, I rarely took them off during my years back in Palatine. Now they’re at my parent’s house along with all my valuable jewelry. I haven’t forgotten the advice from Matt Grubner the hip travel agent at Schaumburg Mall.

My life dramatically changed back in Palatine. It wasn’t the same adventure I’d been having in Europe and I couldn’t dwell on anything that happened in Cairo. I never called on my Old Kingdom spirit Seshet Akeru. I assumed she only existed in Egypt. Although she may have seen me through childbirth, her magic didn’t help me leave Cairo with my child. In Palatine, Seshet Akeru and Nefertiabet became part of my past. I packed away my postcard of Nefertiabet inside my guidebook on Europe. Chicago took over, until now.

As I’m reflecting on the rotating Cairo Tower, I realize I’ve been living in a stupor for ten years.

I returned to Palatine with conflicting emotions. Part of me was glad to be unburdened. At the same time, my heart grieved as if my baby had died. I was furious that Amar and his family had virtually held me captive just to replace a dead boy. Kamal's spirit had won. I can only imagine what my child looks like. I never even learned if it's a boy or girl, alive or dead, healthy, or disabled. My child's not dead; I always tell myself. I heard a healthy baby crying in the room down the hall.

From time to time, I considered telling Daddy everything so he could help me retrieve my child. But after he greeted me **at O'Hare, I found myself desperately wanting the ordeal of Cairo over. I wanted to carry on with my life. For these past ten years, I've been using my childhood strategy of suppressing and controlling my emotions.**

During my first few months in the comfort of my parent's home, I easily slipped back into a clean and lavish life. There were no smells of greasy lamb and garlic, no trucks belching exhaust, no wailing alley cats and traffic, and the clean, proper housekeeper who came to our Palatine home, Mrs. Johnson, was not the shifty conniving so-called Dr. Aziza.

For the first time in my life, I felt a connection with my mother. Edith Prentice seemed much more accepting of me as if she viewed me more as a peer than a daughter. Those terrible punishment sessions of hers seemed locked up in the past and forgotten, by both her and me. I was willing to spend more time getting to know the woman I once thought of as cruel and mean.

It didn't matter anymore that my mother loved her wine and her life at the Hillcrest Country Club. Edith Prentice was my mother and not some old wrinkled 'umm. Our relationship was casual but I was satisfied. I understood her as a person with her own difficulties. She didn't owe me everything. Not even an explanation. Maybe I was a terribly spoiled little girl. Daddy's spoiled baby girl. Perhaps I felt solace from my real mother. In Cairo, I had completely trusted

Zenna as a mother-older-sister figure. Then the bitch turned on me and stole the newborn from my womb.

My parents never asked about my stay in Cairo or why I had gained so much weight. It seemed a forbidden topic also locked in the past. Daddy just wanted me to get on with my studies. “I’ve indulged you enough, little girl,” he’d say. “Let you do your own thing. Now you’re back under my supervision.” His structure and control made me feel safe. I wanted him to guide me once again. He was right. I had my little folly galivanting around Europe and ending in Cairo. In a disaster.

Only Jennifer and Mary asked about my time in Cairo. They admitted they had slipped up and told Daddy about Amar.

“We were showing him pictures from our travels,” Jen explained.

“Yeah,” chimed in Mary. “And one included you and Amar at a table in the hostel dining hall.”

“But I promise,” Jen insisted. “We kept your pregnancy a secret.”

I believed them, forgave them and claimed I had an abortion in Cairo.

They knew nothing about Egyptian laws and religion. I just didn’t want to admit to anyone, not even my best pals, that I left my baby behind. I didn’t want to rehash my ordeal.

Fortunately, my friends left my time in Cairo alone. I was free to enjoy my college years as if nothing traumatic had ever happened.

On October 6, 1973, the year I returned to Palatine, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel during Ramadan and Yom Kippur. I closely watched the news and wondered if Amar was drafted to fight in this war and if he used his Army Barretta 92. When I was pregnant in Cairo, he often showed me his Army gun and even brandished it with pride. “It’s a symbol of honor for

serving my country under Anwar Sadat,” I remember him saying. He even let me hold his prized gun. I felt safe under his protection. But as I now know, everything that happened in Cairo was a pretense, a ruse to steal my baby.

I postponed enrollment at the University of Chicago until fall 1974. I spent my first year back in Palatine working at Daddy’s firm while recovering and regaining my figure. Daddy was happy to use my Fremd High skills at his business--typing mostly, some brief hand, filing, answering the phone and updating his Rolodex. By the end of the year, I couldn’t wait to start college.

Daddy argued against my studying archeology, as I knew he would. Even my mother suggested a major in archaeology was frivolous.

“I want you to get a law degree and help me at the firm like your brother,” Daddy said more than once.

“Studying ancient cultures and civilizations is my passion,” I insisted.

“What will you do with such a degree?” my parents persistently asked.

I never had a good response. In time Daddy gave in to my wishes. He knew I wasn’t overjoyed working at SP Trucking and had no interest in his fleet of trucks travelling across the interstates.

At the University of Chicago, I pursued my degree like an anthropologist digging up the past. **I felt among good company when studying Margaret Mead in Samoa, Louis Leaky in Olduvai Gorge, Jane Goodall and her chimpanzees and Lucy the Australopithecus.** Because I spoke a certain amount of Arabic, I earned a certificate in Middle Eastern studies and took three years of Arabic and courses on the history of the caliphates and Sharia Law.

In 1975, I was saddened to learn that ‘Umm Kulthum died. Although, I hadn’t played her music since Zenna sat on my bed and sang an ‘Umm Kulthum song to the spirit of Kamal while pretending to sing to me.

Something marvelous happened during my senior year at UC. “The Treasures of Tutankhamun” came to the Field Museum of Natural History. I felt like my ancient Egyptian avatar, as I now called Seshet Akeru, had returned. Maybe she somehow enchanted Nixon to personally go to Egypt and ask Anwar Sadat for the “King Tut Tour” to come to the United States. I believe her magic is that powerful and far reaching.

I was inspired once again to become an Egyptologist.

I went to the exhibit several times and took every course the university offered for the event. I studied the dynasties of the pharaohs and the religion of ancient Egypt and mastered hieroglyphics well enough to draw the names of my friends in cartouches like my gold Sah Ra earrings which everyone admired. Mary has an easy name to transliterate. Mer Re, the Light of God, was a common ancient Egyptian name. I collected books and souvenirs from the Tut tour and memorized nearly every artifact Howard Carter discovered in 1922 -- the golden burial mask, a winged scarab pectoral, and a sarcophagus shrine protected by Isis, Nephthys, Neith, and Serqet,

My favorite artifact is an Eye of the Falcon pendant with the vulture and cobra goddesses Wadjet and Nekhbet. The Nebty sisters, as I like to call them. I knew they protected and inspired my dignified ladies Nefertiabet and Seshet Akeru.

During the year of Tut Mania I met Jake Anderson, a real estate lawyer and friend of my brother Kenny Lee. We met over dinner at my parent’s house, a meeting my parents had

obviously arranged. I didn't mind because it worked out. Jake is tall, blond, blue-eyed, and very good looking. "He's a great compliment to you," my friends would say.

Yes, Jake was all that, or so I thought, at first. He was smart and determined, like Daddy, and serious about his profession. This appealed to me. I wanted to be with a man who challenged me and made suggestions about the best course of action concerning an issue. *And that was Jake*. I was grateful when he started suggesting which classes to take and what to do with a degree in anthropology. After my ordeal with Amar who feigned to love me with a silly thing called romance, I couldn't tolerate a man who pandered to my every whim.

Before meeting Jake, I had gone out a few times but never slept with any of my dates. The fear of getting pregnant always loomed over me. With Jake it was different. For one thing, he was not a student. He was ten years older than me. I liked this as well. But most of all, I liked the way he spoke in an elegant and articulate manner like the trial lawyer he was.

After a month of dating, I began sleeping at Jake's condo on Lakeview Avenue. At the time, I had been living with my parents and felt more than ready to move out on my own. Jake's condo was a palace. It had floor to ceiling windows that wrapped around the living room with a beautiful view of Lincoln Park and Lake Michigan. I fell in love with the condo and with Jake. He aroused such passion in me I wondered how I stayed chaste for so long. Fear had held me prisoner but when I freed my passion, I enjoyed having a great sex life.

Sometimes Jake and I spent all day in bed and got up only for Champaign, a snack, and a joint. "You look radiant," he'd tell me and never mentioned the stretch marks left by my first pregnancy. He knew I had gained weight in Cairo. Everyone did. "I couldn't resist baklava, halva, cream caramel, and 'Umm Ali bread pudding,'" I would joke. If nothing else, I often told myself, I was well fed in Cairo.

As soon as we slipped into a sexual relationship, I started using a diaphragm. It didn't work. I wondered if I was the most fertile woman in the world. I considered having an abortion and not telling Jake but he kept claiming he loved me and I finally confessed I was pregnant. "Sweetheart, this is beautiful," he exclaimed. "Let's get married right away!"

"Are you sure?" His enthusiasm captivated me. Perhaps this time my having a child would turn out all right. My parents adored Jake, especially Daddy who pushed for the relationship. He thought Jake was exactly what his baby girl needed. He had successfully arranged the marriage and got his wayward daughter on the right track,

To avoid the blood test requirements and quickly marry, Jake and I flew to Las Vegas. No one seemed disappointed we didn't have a spectacular wedding. It's the era of the Equal Rights Amendment and I was happy to forgo all the symbolic hoopla. And I doubted Mom had always dreamed of her only daughter's big wedding. Mom and I hadn't grown that close. But Daddy, I suspect, was disappointed. He had probably envisioned walking me down the aisle and giving "his baby girl" away to the right man. To Jake.

As Ms. Sarah Prentice-Anderson, I moved into my husband's luxury condo. For a while, I was happy with my life. Then everything fell apart when I went to my doctor for a routine exam.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Ms. Anderson," the doctor said in his office. "It seems your body absorbed the embryo."

"How's that possible?" I couldn't believe it.

The doctor probed and I eventually admitted to giving birth before. It was probably medically obvious to him anyway.

“You’ve miscarried,” the doctor said. “Because you’re Rh negative and your husband’s Rh positive. That’s why a blood test is required before marriage. During your first pregnancy, your body developed antibodies that attacked the Rh-positive fetus of this pregnancy.”

I felt overwhelmed with guilt and wondered if my fear of being pregnant had nudged along the Rh incompatibility factor that caused the spontaneous abortion. I felt the evil eye of Cairo had returned to curse me once more.

Jake was disappointed. He was nearly 40 and set on having a family. But he kept positive. “We’ll have another child, a planned one,” he said almost flippantly considering we had just lost our baby.

I quickly fell back on my studies and tried not to dwell on the loss. I was planning to pursue a MA in Anthropology at the University of Chicago then a Ph.D. in Egyptology, but Jake convinced me to enroll in a MA TESOL program at Concordia University.

“With your interest in world cultures,” Jake said. “Why don’t you teach English to students from around the world and have a practical career to fall back on? You don’t need a well-paying job anyway. I earned a six-figure income from the many Cook County real estate cases I disputed.”

Despite Jake’s encouragement and support, I grew distant from him after the miscarriage. Our great sexual life waned. I kept worrying about losing another baby. The doctor gave me an injection of Rh immune globulins to counteract the Rh factor, but I couldn’t shake my fear.

In time, Jake began to annoy me with his interruptions. I’d be studying at my desk or reading a novel on the sectional sofa and he’d approach and say, “Come on baby,” his hands reaching for my breasts. At first, he caused me to want him, no matter how much I resisted. But

in time he failed to arouse me. I began refusing him. He'd storm from the condo and drive his Porsche along Michigan Shore.

In my heart, I knew my marriage was over and I may never have another child. Kenny Lee arranged my quick divorce, I moved into my own apartment on Lakeview Avenue and the settlement left me well-off for many years to come. I earned my Masters at Concordia while volunteering at a local church to teach ESL to students from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. They were SE Asian refugees from the Fall of Saigon which had happened two years after I fled Cairo. I must give Jake credit for my new career because I *did* experience cultural anthropology first-hand.

My first paid job was at the College of Chicago where I taught preparation classes for TOFEL, the English language proficiency test required for non-native English speakers at American universities. Many of my students were men from the Middle East. I astonished them when I spoke Arabic and talked about their culture, politics, and religion.

Eight years after I fled Cairo something happened that was as shocking to me as the Olympic massacre in Munich. On October 6, 1981, Islamic fundamentalists assassinated Anwar Sadat during a military parade commemorating the '73 Arab-Israeli War. Even more disturbing was how most of my Arab students celebrated the event. To them, Sadat was a blight on the Arab World because of his visit to Israel and his signing of the Camp David Peace Accords with Menachem Begin. Sadat's Egypt was the first Arab state to officially recognize Israel. Personally, I thought he was a brave man killed for waging peace.

Shortly after Sadat's assassination, I dreamt I was sending my first baby adrift on the Nile like baby Moses. I began to feel tormented about having left Cairo without my child. *I had no*

choice; I kept telling myself. Amar, Zenna and her dead son conspired against me. Still, I had abandoned my baby unlike Jochebed who cast Moses adrift so he'd have a chance at life.

After the dream I couldn't stop thinking about what had happened in Cairo. I started wondering whether Amar had married and if his wife were the step-mother of my child. Then I decided that Zenna must be acting like my child's mother. But if so, how did Amar fit in? Maybe Zenna wasn't his real sister, I'd think. She was his sister-in-law, the wife of Amar's eldest brother who had died in that car crash. This could be true. What's one more lie? And if this is the case then maybe Amar married Zenna for the sake of his older brother like a Levirate marriage of ancient times. Was this the ploy all along, from the night in Venice when Amar called his family? But such a custom is an old tradition and Amar was too modern to marry a much older woman. The entire matter is a puzzle I can't piece together.

Whatever the case, the secrets of Cairo tormented me. I avoided friends and family and grew increasingly obsessed with the only child I may ever have. My agony went on and on until I finally decided to return to Cairo. At least to see him or her. A ten-year-old boy, perhaps, now running through the parks of Zamalek flying kites. *What's his name? How does he look?* The questions haunted me as I began my quest to learn the identity of my child.

My first course of action was to call upon Seshet Akeru and Nefertiabet. I retrieved the postcard of the funeral stela packed away in my parent's attic and made copies to carry around and hang in my room. I never heard the whispers of Seshet Akeru, like I had in Egypt, but each morning and night I began to ask both dignified ladies to use their magical connections with Isis-Hathor to reunite me with my lost child.

Then I took a drastic measure. I wrote Zenna half a dozen sympathetic letters hoping she merely misunderstood that I didn't want the child. Maybe my mind had played tricks on me,

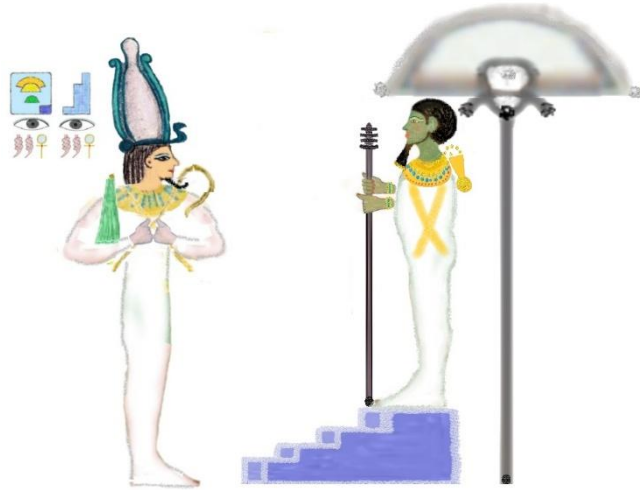
scared me into thinking Kamal wanted to possess my child. Perhaps the whole ordeal had simply been culture shock. After all, I confessed to Zenna I was uncertain about being a mother. But that was hormones speaking. Zenna even said this herself. Of course, I doubted Zenna would write back. She was so hateful when I left the house. *Time has passed*; I kept thinking. Perhaps she's realized the importance of a child meeting his real mother.

I never received a reply from Zenna but a letter arrived from Alexandria. It was from Amar and his scathing hateful words are etched in my mind.

Sarah Prentice. My family remembers you as a pampered American princess. Now you distress my sister with stories about a child. You have no child in my sister's house. I don't believe you're well. Stop harassing my family. Stop wasting money on your letters. I warn you, if you ever come to Cairo and disturb my family, I'll have you jailed and deported from Egypt. You are not welcome here.

As soon as I set Amar's letter aside, I knew I'd never mend the past without turmoil. And turmoil wasn't going to stop me. I began planning my return to Cairo. My first idea was to merely travel there but a tourist visa wouldn't give me enough time. Applying for a job teaching English at universities in Egypt was my best option. Before finding my child, I needed to learn about the city and the people. I needed the security of a job. Again, I had to hand it to Jake.

I applied for teaching positions in Cairo and throughout Egypt and received several replies. My best offer came from the English Language Institute at the American University in Cairo. I immediately phoned the director to accept a perfect situation. It seemed my Old Kingdom dignified ladies had interceded after all. And to top everything off, Daddy was proud of me for landing such a prestigious job. He felt this time my venturing forth into the world, to Egypt again, was based on a mature decision and not an adolescent fancy-free whim.



Chapter 7: Finding Jamal

At the iron-grill gates off Tahrir Square, I enter the AUC campus and fall in love with the setting. It's an oasis of fountains, plazas, well-manicured gardens, date palms, flamboyant shrubs, and flowering vines on the Khairy Pasha Palace, the university's first building. The students scurrying across campus are mostly Arab men with a few women, Africans, Europeans, and Americans. Some women are wearing abayas and the hijab but most are dressed in stylish European clothes. Everyone I encounter speaks perfect English and willingly directs me to the Ewart Memorial Hall. I'm both thrilled and nervous to begin teaching in the department of English and Comparative Literature although I never lose sight of my primary objective for returning to Cairo. To find my child.

It's ten-fifteen in the morning when I arrive at the EMH and walk down a long corridor to meet Dr. Asim Greis, the director of the English Department who offered me the job. My footsteps echo in the empty hallway as I pass a wall with portraits of university presidents since 1919 when AUC opened in the Khairy Pasha Palace. All of them are white men, I notice. Some are Rhodes Scholars from Princeton; others are from Stanford and Oxford.

At one portrait, I stop short in my tracks and take a second look at the nameplate. *Thomas Alva Bartlett* it reads *Born August 20, 1930 in Oregon, president of AUC 1963–1969.*

This isn't possible, I think. Amar can't be related to this man. In an instant I realize that ten years ago, in Venice, Amar was joking when he claimed his last name was Thomas-Bartlett. All these years I believed Thomas-Bartlett was Amar's last name. I even addressed my letters to *Zenna care of Amar Mohammed Thomas-Bartlett.*

"How naive I've been," I say aloud. Unfortunately, Amar's harmless little joke is now a cruel reality. I don't know Amar's real last name. And I don't know Zenna's last name either. I only remember that "Kamal" was the name of her son and husband. *How will I find my child if they've moved from the house in Zamalek?* I ask myself as I stare at the balding Thomas Alva Bartlett. I think of the Arabic insult *You're bald with ringworm.* This is how I'm feeling as I continue down the hall. My task may not be as easy as I had hoped but I'm more determined than ever to locate my child. I'll learn the heartbeat of Cairo while working at my new job then begin my search. For now, this Dr. Asim Greis mustn't think I have ulterior motives for coming to Cairo.

The university provides me with an apartment in Garden City a few blocks from campus. During my free time, over the next several weeks, I revisit the pyramids of Giza and frequent the places I never got to see during my first stay. Everywhere I go I think about my child. At the Egyptian Museum, I see him, or her, in the masks of kings and faces of the children passing by. *How will I find him or her?* I'm constantly wondering. Even the mischievous street boys who pull at my clothes, remind me of my predicament.

My short walks from Garden City to campus are pleasant. I enjoy the four classes I'm teaching—English Conversation, TOFEL Preparation, Vocabulary Building, and Reading Comprehension. The students are smart and serious and in little time I feel comfortable with the city and accustomed to my routine. In fact, I relish my new situation so much that occasionally my obsession to find my child fades into the background. But I never completely lose sight of why I'm in the City of Victorious Mars.

Early one morning on my day off, I begin my search. I dress in a long-sleeved floral blouse and blue skirt then flag down a checkered black and white Toyota Crown taxi near my apartment building. The driver is an old Arab man dressed in a galabia and fez. I offer him two Egyptian Pounds to take me to Zamalek.

The driver spins through the chaotic traffic to the Qasr El Nil Bridge. Along the way he introduces himself as Abdul Hakim. "I'm at your service, *ya Aanesa*, young miss," he tells me. "I drive a taxi in Cairo for twenty years and learned English to speak to tourists."

When Abdul's taxi passes the brass lion sentries and obelisks at the base of the bridge, I think about the day I left Zamalek. What did the lions mean then? What now? I make a silent call to my dignified ladies and ask for my success. Perhaps that's the meaning of the lions. Perhaps they are Akeru Ruti, the lions of the east and west horizons who welcome the deceased into the next world. Perhaps this is what's happening to me now. The lions are welcoming me to the next chapter of my life. It can't be a coincidence that my avatar Seshet Akeru has their name.

Not far from Zenna's house on Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street, I tell Abdul Hakim to park under a flame tree. In the backseat of the idling taxi, I consider my next move. There was a time I thought my firstborn was buried forever. That I had moved on with my life, a life that didn't work out. Now it seems vital that I see my child. But how? I can't just show up at the house and

make demands. Amar clearly stated I wasn't welcome. And with the hatred Zenna showed me ten years ago, she'll hardly embrace me with open arms.

What if Zenna hadn't turned against me and chased me away? If I had left Cairo with my baby maybe my life would have turned out all right. Daddy wouldn't have minded. Possibly, I wouldn't have married Jake and had the miscarriage. *God, my life has been in turmoil since I left the doors of Fremd High.*

My thoughts suddenly turn to the cruel way Zenna tossed me from her house. I become furious. *Calm down Sarah, I tell myself. Revengeful thoughts are destructive.* My only recourse is to see what my child looks like. I think my avatar is telling me this. Maybe not in a clear voice but she's guiding my thoughts toward what I must do. How I must behave.

"You like Cairo? *Aanesa,*" Abdul Hakim interrupts my thoughts.

I take a deep breath and put on sunglasses. "Wait for my return," I say and step from the taxi. I'm not sure what I'm going to do except walk toward the house and let my avatars lead me while hoping Zenna won't recognize me if she happens to be outside.

As I approach the iron gates, I hear Jackdaws clamoring in the flame trees and see laughing doves courting one another along the verge. My heart pounds in anticipation of seeing my child; when he'll no longer be a mere image.

A breeze rustling the trees eases my anxiety. I look up at the barred gate with the Arabic numeral 16. In the front yard are the same trees and gardens. Ten years is not a long time. I grasp the bars of the gate as if imprisoned and ask my avatars *How will I discover who lives inside?*

An idea occurs to me as I notice a boy down the street delivering the *Egyptian Gazette*. Perhaps Seshet Akeru is suggesting I have Abdul go to Zenna's front door and claim he's

searching for his cousins--an old woman and a child. He can say neighbors told him a child of about ten lives at this address. The more information Abdul gathers, the more baksheesh I'll reward him.

I hurry back to the taxi and explain my idea to Abdul. He laughs but agrees to the plan. After he leaves, I impatiently wait in the backseat and try to keep hidden. All the windows are open because of the heat. I start growing concerned. What if the taxi driver tells Zenna an American woman sent him seeking information? Then asks for baksheesh. How can I trust this Abdul Hakim? I've only just hired him. Zenna will guess I've returned because of the letters I sent. I picture her running out the gate and down the street to the idling taxi, screaming all the way like the mad woman she is. And following behind her I see the ghostly pale face of Kamal her dead son. The image is unbearable. I close my eyes and ask my avatars *help me have nothing but positive thoughts*.

"Missie Missie, *Aanesa*." The driver appears at my window with his large soiled hands on the door. He's grinning with stained and broken teeth.

My heart leaps. I look around but see only Abdul's face. "Well," I impatiently ask. "What did you learn?"

"I spoke with an old servant woman. She scolds me for invading the privacy of her home."

"What did you say?"

"I insist I come from up country. I look for my cousins, I say. They live in the area."

"And. What did the old woman say?"

"That ugly hag told me a ten-year old boy lives in her house but he's no relation to a back-water fellahin like me." Abdul bursts into a hefty guffaw.

“A boy?!” I’m ecstatic and guess the ugly hag is my nemeses, the so-called Dr. Aziza, Zenna’s personal servant.

“Did you see the boy? Did you learn his name?”

Abdul looks at me rather sternly. “I may be an old taxi driver but I’m a clever man. I have learned much without arousing suspicion. Do you think I can ask everything about this wealthy family? Their names, jobs, and so on?”

“No, of course not.” I smile at my driver and hand him ten Egyptian Pounds. He grins with pride. Ten Egyptian pounds, I suspect, is like giving a two-hundred-dollar tip to a Chicago cabbie. I can only wonder what he may spend it on. Certainly not a new galabia.

That night I lie awake listening to the air-conditioner rattle above the horns and clamor outside my apartment window. Cairo, like myself, won’t fall asleep. Tears come to my eyes when I picture my handsome son playing in a Chicago schoolyard with his new American friends. *My son*, I keep thinking. *I wanted a boy.* ‘*Umm Amar predicted a boy!*’ I’ve never felt happier in my life. But I can’t build up dreams. I have no claim to my son, no legal papers. Zenna and Amar planned their caper well. I was so naïve ten years ago, fresh out the doors of Fremd High. Perhaps I deserve to live without my son. Maybe if I learn his name, I’ll return to Cairo when he’s full-grown and tell him the truth. Zenna won’t be able to stop me. My son will accept me. I gave him life. Suffered through his birth! Yes, I can wait. My son is now my life’s purpose.

Wednesday, the day before the Islamic weekend, I arrange to meet Hakim at six in morning. The taxi driver had given me his address in Islamic Cairo. “You need only send a street boy to fetch me,” he said. “If you ever need anything. I know every inch of Cairo, its every peril,

hamdulilla.” **The old man seems to be my first true friend in Cairo. Except for my cat Isis-Huthur.**

By six thirty Hakim’s taxi parks near Zenna’s house. Today I chose to wear a conservative ankle length gown and hijab. If anyone sees me, they’ll assume I’m Egyptian.

We wait for about an hour while Hakim smokes several pungent Cleopatra cigarettes. I smoke one as well, to calm my nerves. A few cars exit their driveways and another taxi stops for a paunchy Egyptian businessman wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase.

It’s seven-thirty when Hakim exclaims, “*Hatha! Aanesa!*”

I look down the street at Zenna’s house and see a small man in a galabia swinging open the iron gates. It’s Farouq, the chauffer I remember from long ago. He was also a conniving man, I reflect. He must have known about Zenna’s ploy to outwit god and gain back her dead son.

Farouq backs a gray BMW onto the street. Three figures are sitting in the backseat, a child in the center.

“*Yalla, yalla!* Let’s go,” I say while tapping Hakim’s shoulder. My fears resurface. Hakim will lose sight of the car. I’ve been careless. Hakim will betray me. My heart palpitates as my driver carefully keeps a block behind the gray BMW. All the while I keep thinking that I’ve seen the back of my son’s head. That’s all. The sight overwhelms me. “*Yalla, yalla!*” I keep yelling.

“We must be careful or the police will stop us,” he tells me. “Now we need only learn where the boy attends school. Then you are free to do what your heart sings. *Hamdulila.*”

I haven’t told Hakim my story. I had started to, yearning to unburden a long-kept secret to someone with a sympathetic ear. Hakim stopped me and said he didn’t want to know why I

sought the boy. “A secret is like a dove,” he said. “When it leaves your hand, it takes wing.” I sense Hakim holds much wisdom behind his simple manner and dress.

“*Hatha*,” Hakim says as he weaves through the traffic, passing a truck loaded with camels and buses with men hanging from the side doors.

About a mile from Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street, Hakim parks near metal drums burning garbage in a neighborhood busy with traffic and middle-class pedestrians. A block away, Farouq stops the BMW before a schoolyard surrounded by a six-foot wrought iron fence. The playground has volleyball and basketball courts, a swing-set and a soccer field.

“Kalifa Bin Oman Primary School,” Hakim announces. “Very good school for rich boys. No girls.”

From the back seat of the taxi, I watch a woman in a hajib help the boy from the BMW. He wears khaki shorts, a white long-sleeved shirt and a blue sweater vest. The woman takes his hand and leads him to the school building where men in Western clothes stand at the sidelines watching their pupils.

I can hardly breathe at the sight of my son although I can’t make out his face. He looks like the other boys exiting cars or walking on the sidewalk with a parent. I’m certain the woman is Zenna. She’s now a fifty-year-old grandmotherly figure toting along a ten-year old boy. The boy pulls away and slaps her hand. She does nothing. *He’s spoiled rotten* I think. Zenna’s pampered my son beyond reason. She must treasure the child she stole from me to keep alive the name of her dead husband. The bitch.

I exit the taxi to get a closer look at the school and stand at the fence. One of the men in the schoolyard blows a whistle. The shouting pupils run to the building and file inside like neat

little soldiers. They're gleeful and without a care in the world. Such a contrast to the urchins on the street.

In the days to follow, when I don't have classes at AUC, I take a random cab to my son's primary school. The hours vary from day to day; sometimes I observe the schoolyard early in the morning, sometimes at noon or in the afternoon. Within two weeks, I know when morning recess starts and ends, when lunch occurs, and when the boys go home.

To keep from being obvious and recognizable, I vary my appearance. Sometimes I wear casual American clothes, other times I dress like an Egyptian woman in a hijab. My worst fear is that Zenna or Amar will somehow discover I'm in Cairo and they'll send the police after me for harassing them. Amar and Zenna's father was a government minister and Mubarak rules Egypt with an iron fist. Maybe Amar has some connection to AUC because he told me his last name was Thomas-Bartlett for some reason. At the very least, Zenna will keep the boy away from me and I'll have no recourse.

One morning, while I'm standing at the fence watching the boys play, an orange tabby appears from nowhere and starts rubbing against my legs. I pet the purring cat. It's identical to Isis-Huthur, my cat at Zenna's house, except this cat is young and ten years have passed. I doubt it's the same cat.

I'm thrilled the cat's come around and consider taking her home with me when suddenly I feel an aura of magic, the sense of my avatars surrounding me. I listen to the breeze rustle the flamboyant trees along the berm then hear *Nefer, netchem, ankh Sweet, beautiful, life*. This time I know my avatar whispers to me. It's not just wishful-thinking.

“Isis-Huthur?” I say to the cat. She smells as sweet as the flamboyant flowers. Of course, the cat isn’t speaking to me, she only purrs and meows.

I hear the whisper again *I am Seshet Akeru, Prophet of Hathor-Ba’ast. I see the future penetrate the past, young mother, Nefer Ba’ast. I hear your plea and call on the Sky Goddess who fills the universe with beauty. Hathor-Ba’ast takes the form of a cat. She protects you and gives you her sekhem powers. She creates for you weapons and armor to fend off the blows of Set. She will heal your heart from the scorpion sting that took your son when the solar boat stopped in the land of yesterday. Life is taken from the living until Horus recovers for his mother.*

The whisper stops with the breeze through the scarlet flowers. I try to pick up Isis-Huthur but she squeezes through the iron bars and saunters towards the soccer game. It’s a street cat, I decide, obviously unfamiliar with attention.

Some of the boys throw stones at the cat until one boy yells at his mischievous classmates. He picks up the cat, glances toward me standing at the wrought iron fence, walks to the gate and put the stray outside the compound.

I watch the tabby disappear into a neighborhood like a lithe spirit then look back at the boy who helped the cat. I know he’s my son. I noticed him before among the many boys. He’s the liveliest pupil, fair complexioned and he excels at all the games. When he scores on the soccer field, he raises both hands in a victory cheer. *He is a prince among boys.*

A pupil suddenly kicks the ball straight to where I’m standing. My boy, the most popular student on the team, races after the ball, stops at the fence and gazes at me with a bright charming grin. Up close I see his eyes are blue like my own. He’s beautiful. His full lips and dimples are like Amar’s. My heart nearly pounds from my chest.

The boy snickers. “*Bonjour Madam,*” he says.

I'm speechless, dumbfounded. He thinks I'm French. I nod and am about to ask his name when he asks, "*Parlez-vous Pompidou?*" He then roars with laughter, kicks the ball back into the game and scurries away.

It's done. Without a doubt the boy is my son. Of course, Amar makes the same jokes with his son that he made with me in Venice. I picture Amar and the boy together. It's a warm image. Amar is good to my son and so is Zenna. Except every day of the boy's life they cruelly lie to him by keeping his maternity a secret. He doesn't know the woman who brought him into the world. This angers me and I leave the schoolyard unable to watch the boy anymore that day. Now that I've seen him up close, and he's seen me, the truth can't remain hidden in the past. Ten years past. And merely watching my son, day in and day out, is no longer enough.

Over the following days my mind never clears of my son's beautiful face and charming boyish wit. The words *parlez-vous Pompidou* ring through my head as I ponder my next move. How can I bear to keep this secret? I long to grab my son and scream, "I'm your mother! You're my child! I was forced to leave you and now I'm back to gather the pieces of my heart." *If only I could tell a friend my secret* I keep thinking *I wouldn't feel so alone in the world.*

At the university my colleagues, the expatriated community of French, British and American teachers, often get together for parties, trips to Giza or to Alexandria's beaches, even to Aswan. ESL teachers are world travelers who've found a way to pay for their passion. But I never attend the expat socials around the city. I'm too preoccupied with my son, the only reason I'm in Cairo. None of my colleagues know this. They think of me as standoffish. It amuses me that my only friend in Cairo is an old *fellahin* taxicab driver.

Early one morning I call in sick at the university and take a random taxi to Kalifa Bin Oman Primary School. I plan to spend the day watching my son. Perhaps by day's end I'll even follow him to his house on Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street. Who knows? Maybe I'll make a surprise appearance in the life of my so called "big sister." Anything's possible.

From a safe distance, under a sycamore tree with a white painted trunk, I observe my son at play during morning, lunch, and afternoon recess. **I'm wearing American clothes so he recognizes me.**

At four o'clock school lets out and the chaos begins. The boys are no longer orderly little soldiers as they flock out the school doors onto the playground.

While I'm watching my son run to the idling BMW at the other end of the block, I feel a gentle tap on my shoulder. "May I help you?" comes a man's voice. I'm so deep in thought I jump, certain I've been caught doing something wrong or that Zenna has found me. My heart flutters as I turn and see a clean-shaven man in slacks, a white long-sleeved shirt and the same blue school vest the students wear. I recognize him as one of the men who stands in the schoolyard during recess. I feel myself flushing when he repeats his question and adds, "I've seen you here often. I must say, I'm wondering the reason."

"Yes," I stutter. "I love to watch the boys playing, that's all."

The man looks at me. I know my explanation isn't enough. "You're American, aren't you?"

I nod.

"I am Mohammed Ibn El-Sharif, head teacher of our school." He speaks with a sense of pride and his voice is non-threatening, quite friendly in fact. He's a few inches shorter than me and has a warm smile, smooth brows, and the hook nose of many Arab men. He offers a soft

handshake. I'm surprised. I expected him to be angry because I've been loitering but he's only trying to meet me, an American woman watching his boys at play.

Feeling more at ease, I tell him, "I am Sarah Anderson, from the English Language Institute at AUC."

"I know it well, *ya aanesa* Sarah. We have many teachers here who graduated from the ELI."

"You see, professor Sharif, I'm observing your school for a Ph.D. in Anthropology, which I hope to earn when I return to Chicago. *Inshalla*." My explanation sounds clumsy but the words simply fall from my tongue.

"How very interesting," Mohammed cheerfully remarks. "Are you also a volunteer from AUC? To teach English to the children of Cairo."

"What?" I ask then realize what he's talking about. A few teachers in my department and the graduate students in English, both expat and Egyptian, are involved in an outreach program to teach English to children in villages and the poorer sections Cairo, much poorer than Kalifa Bin Oman Primary School in Zamalek. I haven't considered joining this program because all my free time is devoted to watching my son. Or at least contemplating my predicament.

Mohammed repeats the program's name.

"Yes. I know what you're talking about," I say with a smile. "You just caught me by surprise and my mind went blank."

"The American University in Cairo," Mohammed repeats with a grin. "*Ya aanesa* Sarah. Won't you come to my office and join me for tea. I'd love to hear about Chicago."

How could I possibly refuse such an auspicious invitation? I know my Old Kingdom dignified ladies are working things out for me. The coincidence is simply too magical. I follow

Mohammed through the playground and into an office that's packed with textbooks and manila files. The stuffy room smells of used ashtrays and dust.

"Have a seat," he points to a metal chair before his broad wooden desk. "Excuse me a moment while I fetch *shai*. Feel free to browse around," he adds with pride as if I might notice his several impressive books.

I take a seat under the tweaking ceiling fan and look around. On the bookshelves are mostly Arabic books. One shelf contains French novels and grammars, two shelves hold volumes of beginning English texts from the AUC press, most notably *English Step by Step* which is a text I'm quite familiar with. In one corner of the room stands a listing file-cabinet. The idea of a file about my son grabs my attention and I get up to peek inside. But before I can open the top drawer, Mohammed returns.

"The shai boy will be here shortly." He sits behind his desk. "I hope you like mint tea. If not, I can ask for coffee."

"Shai is fine." I relax a bit and wait for Mohammed to begin the conversation. What does he want? I wonder. Is he suspicious of my intent and trying to figure me out? As farfetched as it seems, I have a tinge of fear that he knows my secret. That Zenna has seen me in Cairo and is working in conspiracy with this Mr. Mohammed. That I'm being set up. I don't trust this man. I don't trust anyone in Cairo. Not even myself.

"What a delight to meet an American English teacher from the AUC." Mohammed grins at me from behind his desk. He must be about forty, I'm thinking. And his ring says he's married, although there aren't any pictures on his desk. Only an ashtray full of cigarette butts and stacks of papers held down by pyramid paperweights. "I seldom have the opportunity to speak with an American," he continues.

“Do you teach English, *ya ustaaza* Mohammed?” I lean back in the hard metal chair. It creaks.

“I teach English, French, and mathematics.”

A boy in a galabia enters the office carrying a tray of steaming mint tea in small glass cups. “How do you like Cairo?” Mohammed asks while adding sugar to his glass of tea.

“The pyramids alone make your city one of the most spectacular in the world. Then you have the Nile. I don’t think any other river is more beautiful or more enchanting. Just saying the name makes me feel the magic of ancient Egypt, of the priestesses who sailed up and down the river.”

“Very poetic,” Mohammed says. “And so well put. I’m glad you find Cairo to your liking.”

As I watch Mohammed sit back and smile like a man pleased to be in the presence of a beautiful young woman, an idea suddenly occurs to me. Or, more likely, my avatars are prompting my mind. “You know Mr. Sharif, maybe I could teach English at your school. It would benefit both me and the children. But we don’t have to go through the AUC program. They’d probably assign me to another school. And I like your primary school. I come here often on my way to the market.”

His index finger touches the corner of his mouth as he remarks, “I in fact had that very same idea, Miss Sarah. But I’m afraid our meager budget won’t allow much of a stipend. This is a private boys academy, government operated. And that involves bureaucracy. Egyptian style.”

“I’d be happy to volunteer.” I sip my sweet mint tea while anxiously awaiting Mohammed’s reply. The idea is perfect. A blessing from my avatars. Then I begin to worry that Mohammed won’t assign me to my son’s class, so I quickly add, “I think I’m best suited to work

with boys in grade five. I've had experience with this age group. Back in Chicago. During graduate school."

"Pre-adolescents?" Mohammed chuckles. "Yes, these boys are already quite proficient in English. But they could use grammar lessons and help with proper diction. They're quite imaginative at this age. I tell you what, Miss Sarah. Tomorrow, or at your convenience, bring me a copy of your curriculum vitae and I'll call your department and check with Dr. Asim Greis."

"You know Dr. Greis?" I ask while thinking *this is not good. Nobody needs to know my whereabouts or what I'm up to. Especially Dr. Greis.*

"He's a well-known man in the academic community," Mohammed says.

"Like Thomas A. Bartlett?"

"Why yes. Like Dr. Thomas Bartlett. A very famous American educator in Cairo. And if everything works out, we'll arrange your schedule, at your convenience of course. And you can work with the older boys. I agree. This age group is the most suitable for your kind participation. *Inshallah*, we will soon be working closely together, *ya aanesa* Sarah."

"It's Mrs. Anderson," I correct my new colleague while watching the gleam in his eyes only slightly fade.

The very next Wednesday I begin teaching my first class at Kalifa Bin Oman Primary School. I'm feeling like a mother first holding her newborn after the long struggle through labor. The magic moment of knowing that the baby is healthy and alive. I possess this joy after spotting the handsome face of my son among his thirty classmates sitting at their wooden desks.

The boys clap and cheer when Mr. Sharif introduces me as their new English teacher, an American woman, not a formal, regimented Egyptian man.

I sit behind a desk before my class and read through the roster while looking at my son with each name I call. “Amar Bin Amar,” I say and another boy answers. “Idris Hazem.” He is not my son. “Tarfug Suliman. . . Badr. . . Mansour. . . Kazem. . .” I call out but none of them are my son. When I call out, “Jamal Marzouk,” my son raises his arms in glee like he’s scoring a victory on the soccer field. He beams so brightly the entire room seems to burst with electricity. For a moment I forget myself and fail to proceed with the roll call. *Jamal, Jamal*, my mind keeps reciting, *such a beautiful name. One I would have chosen.* Marzouk is probably the last name of Zenna’s dead husband. Or, for that matter, it could be Amar’s real last name.

Jamal yells, “Madam, Madam.” All the boys join in, bringing my drifting mind back to the class.

“Okay, boys. Enough!” I say and the students become quiet. As exotic as I am to these boys, they still respect my authority.

After roll call, I ask each boy about himself. They relish describing their lives with obvious embellishment. I specifically want to learn all I can about Jamal’s situation. I really don’t care about the other boys but must follow protocol. When it’s finally Jamal’s turn, I ask, with great anticipation, “And what about your family, Jamal Marzouk?”

“My father’s dead,” he replies, maintaining a grin. “He died with my brother before I was born.” The boy speaks proudly of the tragic fact. It’s family lore to him, far removed from his experiences. “I’m named after the greatest leader of all the Arabs. Gamal Abdel Nasser. All my grandparents are dead.”

“Do you have uncles or aunts?”

“Yes. Two uncles in Kuwait and one in Alexandria.”

“I see,” I say while imagining Amar in Alexandria working as an agriculturalist for the government. I want to ask Jamal what his uncle does but am spending too much time on him. I nod and move on to the next boy but my heart is filled only with my son Jamal Marzouk. His name means beauty and good fortune.

Over the next several weeks, I begin each of my hour-long lessons in my son’s class silently calling on my avatars Nefertiabet and Seshet Akeru. I ask them for a way to unite with my son as his mother. I try not to show Jamal special attention but I end up calling on him more than the other boys. The students seem to accept this and even admire Jamal’s new status as the American teacher’s favorite pupil. Like all the boys, Jamal is infatuated with me. When he speaks with the other students, I often overhear him call me *habibti*, his sweetheart. I don’t discourage this behavior. It’s a way to grow close to my son because one day soon, I plan to tell him the truth.

Mohammed Sharif gives me complete charge of my lessons. I devise ways to learn about Jamal. Roll-playing is a popular TESL method and my pupils get lost acting like detectives, spies and heroes from the adventure films Star Wars, Indiana Jones, and Rambo now featured in Cairo cinemas.

At the end of a lesson one day, Jamal runs up to me while pretending to shoot the other boys as they exit the room for recess. “Pow, pow pow,” he says. “Don’t be afraid Madam. I’ll protect you and take you up the Nile to the pyramids of Meroe. I’m the king of Kush. You’re Amanishakheto the great warrior queen.”

“And I’ll take you to America,” I playfully respond, watching the eyes of my clever son gleam.

“To Disneyland?!” Jamal shouts. All the boys in my class are fascinated with Disneyland and view it as the “coolest” playground in the world.

“*Aywa*. My little king. I’ll take you to Disneyland the moment we land in America.”

Jamal wildly runs around the room and returns to my desk to say without pausing to catch his breath, “And we’ll see Mickey Mouse? Donald Duck, and Goofy?”

“Of course. But Jamal,” I quickly add. “You must keep this a secret between us or our plan will never succeed. Don’t even tell your mother. You must be a secret spy. Like James Bond. Roger Moore.” I feel possessed with my avatars’ magic. Perhaps their spirits are even motivating my son’s attachment to me. It all seems too perfect. I’m simply floating along, day by day, lesson by lesson, on the love I’ve found for my son.

Jamal increasingly dawdles after class each day delighting in our secret plan to visit Disneyland. During these times, he pretends to be Indiana Jones in Raiders of the Lost Ark rescuing Marion Ravenwood. His vast and endless imagination intrigues me but I’m not sure how I’ll tell him the truth. I worry his excitement might lead him to expose me. He is, after all, only a little boy.

I decide to consult an attorney at Hamza, Baker and McKenzie to see if there’s any course of action I could take. I confess my story and for one hundred Egyptian Pounds Samir Hamza, Esquire asks, “Do you have any proof that you’re Jamal’s mother?”

“Only that his eyes are blue like mine and he’s fairer complexioned than most Egyptian boys.”

“I’m afraid, Miss Sarah, your biggest obstacle is Jamal’s birth certificate. And from what you tell me, you have none. You see, after the assassination of President Sadat the courts of Egypt implemented Sharia Law. It was a reaction to Sadat’s concessions to the U. S. and Israel.

Sharia governs the laws of family and inheritance. And these laws are strict and favor the patriarch of the family.”

What I learn is discouraging. It seems my only option is to take matters into my own hands. I need to find the right opportunity.

A few days later, one presents itself to me when Mohammed invites me to his office to discuss the progress of my students. As soon as he steps away to order shai, I peeked in his old filing cabinet and find Jamal’s folder with a copy of his birth certificate. I can’t believe my luck. But my enthusiasm dampens as soon as I clearly see that Zenna and her dead husband, Abu Kamal Marzouk, are parents to Jamal Marzouk. Amar and Zenna perfectly timed their caper. When Zenna was 40, she supposedly gave birth to Jamal nine months after her husband’s accident.

Without legal recourse, I can’t do anything. And the closer I grow to Jamal, the more determined I am to either tell him the truth or steal him from Egypt. Sometimes I’m so desperate to regain my son that the risk of kidnapping him hardly matters to me.

While I’m in bed one night listening to the traffic of Garden City, I call upon my avatars to intervene. *Nefertiabet, Seshet Akeru*, my mind repeatedly sings, *take me and my son away from Egypt*.

As soon as I fall asleep, the magic of my avatars possesses me. I dream Jamal and I are sailing up the Nile, away from Cairo, on a fleet of royal ships painted gold and draped in flags, banners, and strings of yellow chrysanthemums and blue lilies. Along the shores, priests are trumpeting ram horns and conch shells and priestesses are strumming lutes and harps. Crowds are cheering and tossing cornflowers at our vessel. They’re celebrating the victorious reunion of Isis with her son, Horus, the Golden Falcon.



Chapter 8: *Seshet Akeru* -- The Golden Falcon at Nekheny Heru

Beautiful spirit of Isis, young mother. Your face shines in my relic mirror of Khentkawes. By the powers of Hathor, the Golden One with the menat necklace, you are reunited with your son.

My story continues when the king's Wadjet fleet reached the pier of Nekheny Heru in the Southern Shrine Province. We were on a Second Jubilee voyage to celebrate my father's sixty-year reign.

Boatmen were blowing ram horns to announce our arrival. Along the river, boats with rudders and square sails were racing one another, smaller boats were competing in the city's canals. In the center of Nekheny Heru towered the Temple of the Golden Falcon Relic, one of the most sacred temples in my father's kingdom. More than eight-hundred years before Pepi's reign, the Scorpion kings built this temple as a mud brick shrine. Later kings added stone foyers, vestibules and a grand coronation hall lined with copper statues of kings since Hotepsekhemwy, the founder of the second dynasty. Hotepsekhemwy ruled after the reign of Queen MeryNit and her son King Den.

The temple housed ceremonial palettes and mace heads belonging to Fierce Stinging Catfish. At the north end of the hall were two ebony thrones from the time of Khasekhemwy, the last king of the second dynasty. The thrones had lion paw feet and lion head armrests. The backrests portrayed the king receiving sekhem powers from Atum Ra. The temple's most sacred relic was a cubit high gold falcon inlaid with turquoise and lapis lazuli. Queen MeryNit and King Den had the Golden Falcon relic made during their reign.

In the great hall the Crown Prince NeferMa'at, known as the Golden Falcon, held a coronation ceremony commemorating our father's second jubilee. He served as King Pepi and I dressed as the vulture goddess Nekhbet, Lady of Nekhen. I wore a gold vulture crown.

In front of governors, ladies, and dignitaries, NeferMa'at and I sat on the ebony thrones. From a clerestory above us, sunlight ignited the Golden Falcon relic placed on an alabaster pedestal between our thrones.

The ceremony began when High Priest Neb Khnumhotep entered the hall's large cedar doors. His body was clean shaven and he wore a cheetah pelt over his shoulder. On his right arm he upheld a falcon. He removed the bird's eye-shield when a guard at the door released a pigeon into the hall. In one swift swoop, the falcon's enormous talons caught the pigeon and flew to a door guard who placed the raptor in a gilded cage. The room filled with applause.

Neb Khnumhotep then said to the crown prince, "Many centuries ago kings from the north and south ruled two lands. The cobra and the bee protected northern kings in Pe Tep. From Nekheny Heru came the falcon kings under Fierce Stinging Catfish. He unified north and south in the place Set killed his brother Osiris."

Khnumhotep then placed the double crown on NeferMa'at and recited the names of ancestor kings.

At the end of the coronation, the crown prince stood before my throne, took my hand, and said in a voice loud and clear, “By my spirit and heart, I take you as my third and lesser wife because of the child in your womb.”

The ladies and noblemen clapped while I whispered, “Your proposal is unexpected. I revealed nothing to you, yet you know. Only a few days before our fleet set sail, I was at the tomb Nefertiabet asking for her blessings on this voyage. In her chapel she whispered *you carry the child of the Golden Falcon*. My intention was to reveal my news after I was certain that our baby would live. How did you learn of the child?”

“In a dream the crocodile Sobek revealed you carry my son. I will no longer bend to the will of my first wives. I care only to be with you.”

The Crown Prince tightened his grip on my hand and said to everyone in the hall, “I want the harvest of our love to one day be king.” He turned to the priest before us and said, “Neb Khnumhotep proceeded with the marriage rite.”

I gave the Golden Falcon a carnelian tyet of Isis, one the many amulets I carried that day. I said to him, “Isis in her knotted dress casts magic spells to protect you and our unborn child. The tyet is as red as the womb and possesses the magic of Isis-Hathor. By the will of Atum Ra, may I give you many sons and daughters.”

The Golden Falcon gave me the most finely crafted turquoise Eye of the Falcon I ever beheld. “I give you this for protection, royal power and good health,” he told me. “The power of the cobra abides in this relic. It was a gift to my mother from our grandmother Ankhnespepi.”

Later that evening, in the gardens of the royal estate, my new husband and I sat on a stone bench and drank spiced wine. Before us was a lily and papyrus pond under the full Khonsu

Moon. The Golden Falcon wore a pleated shendyt, leather sandals laced to his knees, and his pectoral insignia. I still wore the gold vulture crown over my braided black wig. Jasmine perfumed the air and priestesses played harps and sang the words NeferMa'at composed for me.

Mistress of Sweetness whose complexion lusters of gold,

Your lips are rose buds, your eyes are hypnotic,

You are established in the Mansions of Night.

You utter not one phrase too many with a voice of honey wine.

You appear to me as the Star Isis Sopdet.

Each day with you is New Year's Day.

My only wish is to be your relic mirror

And always see your face.

At one point in the evening, the crown prince knelt before me and took my hand. "I give you charge of the Golden Falcon relic," he said. "Deliver it to the king for his northern coronation at the temple of Ptah. This is a great honor I bestow on my third wife."

"Why?" I asked although it wasn't proper to question the Crown Prince in such a manner. I couldn't hold back my voice. "It's your honor to present the Golden Falcon to our father."

He silenced me with a gesture to his mouth. "My new wife without peer and with the beauty of Nefertiabet, by the will of Atum Ra, I will be king one day. And you, with your triple sekhem powers will be mother of the child now living in your womb. We'll prosper by the power of our love. You at my side, Seshet Akeru, my lesser wife but foremost love."

"I have loved you since you gave me the puppet of Djehuti and kissed my brow with the breath of Atum Ra."

“On that day I fell under your spell. I couldn’t act on my love until we met in my mother’s tomb. My first wives fear your triple sekhem powers. They envy your honest voice, poise, and grace. I was happy keeping our eternal love between us until you received my child.”

The Golden Falcon stood beside the lilies closing on the pond. He picked one for me. I inhaled its sweet fragrance. “Now I reveal my intentions for tomorrow,” he said. “As Lord of my troops, I will travel south of the border into Medjay and Yam with generals, foot soldiers, Nubian goats for milk and meat, and donkeys to carry sacks of grain, papyrus, flax, water, and food. I will follow General Harkhuf’s route east of the river into arid scrubland with wadis that dwindle into amber dunes. I will make new trade agreements with kings in the land of ebony, leopard skins and ivory.”

Fearing for my new husband, I dared to plead, “What about Sabni, Governor of Abu? He recovered the body of his father killed during such a dangerous mission. You may face skirmishes and we only just wed. Our love is no longer hidden. Upon returning home, I’ll relinquish my vows as a fulltime priestess.”

“Young sister-wife, my duty is to ensure expeditions into the treacherous lands south of the border. A crown prince cannot remain idle like ladies of the harem. Beneficent King Sneferu crushed a revolt in Medjay and Yam. He captured 200,000 head of cattle and 7,000 prisoners to work on his building projects.”

“You need not prove your value, Lord husband,” I continued to protest. I couldn’t help myself. The Golden Falcon was wagering with my life for he was my *ib* and *ka*, my essence. “Your brother Menka is not a threat to your position as crown prince. He has nothing but hot-tempered words. He’s a man afraid of cats!”

“Stir your heart no more. Let’s not speak of my brother.” My husband held me tightly as we stood beside the pond under Khonsu’s resplendent light. “I have something else to ask of you, my new wife.”

“Anything,” I said feeling warm in his embrace.

He kissed my brow as he had done when we first met. And again, I trembled from the breath of Ra filling me with my husband’s sekhem powers. “No matter what the gods choose for me, see that my name is etched on the desert cliffs of Medjay and Yam. In your splendidly crafted words, speak of my expedition on the walls of my tomb.”

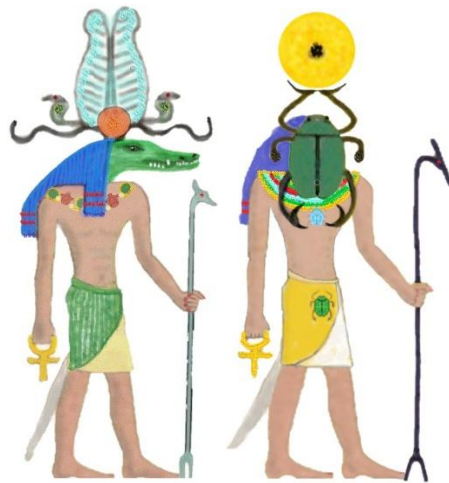
“Eternally, I live by your eminence,” I replied, holding back tears, fearing for my husband. Fearing for myself. The spell was already cast. I could do nothing to deter the Golden Falcon from his destiny. “The king shall build you a mighty tomb, no matter your fate,” I said. “One day soon you will be king and I’ll give you as many children as Lady Khentka gave her husband.”

“Silence, peer of no other. What the gods proclaim is hidden in the stars until the day of our afterlife journey. Sweet, beautiful, sister of my heart.”

While he held me, we listened to a priestess sing an ode to lovers. I felt protected by his love and by my for love him. I felt Nekhbet spreading her wings of protection over us as she protected my father and his kingdom.

The next day, when I awoke in our nuptial bed, my new husband had already left to travel with half the fleet to the frontier town of Abu where his caravan convened. I returned to MenNefer and presented my father with the Golden Falcon relic for his second coronation at the Temple of Ptah.

Beautiful young mother in my relic mirror. The god of MenNefer constructs stairwells and platforms to the Field of Reeds among the stars that never set. I have given you a stairwell to your son. Step by step you will reach your next platform. I give you the powers of my diadem to take the Golden Falcon and hide from the chaos of Set, the wild beast of the red desert sands.



Chapter 9: Backside Alley

I awake from a fantastic dream of a river voyage and a beautiful golden falcon. This is all I remember. The meaning is unclear except I believe my avatars were revealing my escape with Jamal.

I spend the day at the AUC library planning my caper. My life hangs in limbo. I can't just take my son to an airport teeming with custom officials and police. The crux of any plan is his willingness to leave with me. Everything depends on his imagination, his boyish drive for adventure and his infatuation with me. Perhaps it's puppy love, but it's love nonetheless. I'm just not sure how **I'll convince Jamal to play a game of escape and sail with me to Aswan. From there, I envision we'll join a camel caravan to the Pyramids of Meroe. Jamal would love this. Then in Khartoum we'll catch a plane to America, to Disneyland, to freedom.**

Our disguises should be easy. Jamal and I can simply blend in with the many tourists and fellahin along the river. I can easily hide behind a hajib and niqab veil. I couldn't ask for a better cover. And if in the middle of the adventure Jamal becomes frightened or unwilling to continue, I'll tell him the truth and show him the picture of me and Amar at the hostel in Venice, the only proof I have of my connection to Amar. Zenna kept my camera and film when she packed my duffle bag during a very confusing time. If Jamal doesn't accept me as his mother, I vow to give up and leave Cairo.

Over the following few days, I carefully test my son's resolve. "Will you really take me up the Nile to the pyramids of Meroe?" I ask him after class one day, after all the other boys have left.

"Yes, madam," he eagerly agrees then laughs so sweetly my heart flutters.

"That's wonderful Jamal. We'll also see Nabta Playa."

"Nabta Playa?"

"It's an ancient astronomical site, a circle of stones discovered in the Nubian desert the year after you were born."

"Yes madam. I'll take you to the pyramids of Meroe, you take me to play at the circle of stones. Can we ride camels?"

"That's exactly what we'll do. But how can we escape from Cairo?" I encourage his imagination.

"Why. On a felucca," he tells me. "And I'll show you Gamal's dam. My grandfather Yossif was Nasser's cabinet minister."

"And when can we go?" I restrain myself from stroking my son's thick brown hair. It's an impulse I can barely resist.

“We can go now!” he says with excitement. He pauses a moment as if to think seriously about our little gameplan. “Maybe tomorrow is better. Mama works at Al-Azhar Mosque on Wednesday afternoons and our driver picks me up.”

Intrigued by this new information, I dare to ask, “What does your mama do at the mosque?”

“She’s secretary to the ‘Grand Imam’ Sheikh Gad al-Haq. She types his letters and his *Khutba* for Friday prayer.” Jamal speaks articulately but I wonder if he’s playing make-believe. The Grand Imam is famous in Cairo. He runs Al-Azhar Mosque and university and oversees Cairo law with the Grand Mufti of Egypt. I learned this at Hamza, Baker and McKenzie when investigating my legal options. If Zenna is really the Grand Imam’s secretary, that’s a huge privilege.

I smile at Jamal, proud of his imagination, if that’s what this is. I whisper to him to emphasize our role-playing, “We’ll leave after class next Wednesday but you must keep our adventure between us, my little **Sultan Saladin.**” **I nickname my son after the Sultan of Cairo during the Ayyubid caliphate. Jamal loves pretending he’s Saladin fighting off the Templar Knights and restoring Islam in Jerusalem.**

“And you’re my warrior queen of Nubia, Amanishakheto,” Jamal responds. He mischievously giggles and for an instant my heart drops. *Is my scheme even possible?* I think to myself. *Can Jamal keep our secret? Does he love Zenna as his mother more than he’s infatuated with me? Will he be able to leave her?* I worry. But I’m willing to take any risk to regain my precious son.

The next day, early in the afternoon, I set out to finalize my plan by revealing everything to my taxi driver friend Abdul Hakim. He'll know exactly what I must do. I have plenty of money for baksheesh. My avatars have poised me with all the right armor to face this challenge. Nothing but spiritual magic could have brought me to the crossroads where I now stand.

In a long dress and hijab, I walk from my apartment to Khan el Khalili. The massive souq is on the way to Abdul Hakim's apartment in the heart of Islamic Cairo. Previously, when I needed Abdul's help, I sent a street urchin to fetch him and avoided Islamic Cairo. It has a reputation for not welcoming foreign tourists. But now I want to meet my friend on his turf after a walk through the Khan, one of my favorite haunts in Cairo. I'm hoping to find gifts for Abdul and gold good luck charms for myself. My upcoming quest seems Biblical or out of the Arabian Nights.

In the maze of Khan alleyways, men in Western clothes and in galabias persistently hawk their wares. Boys are running from shop to shop carrying trays of *shai* and *qahwa*. Egyptian women in long dresses and hijabs are walking hand in hand and carrying baskets with their purchases. At open cafes, radios are blasting the songs of 'Umm Kulthum while men are playing backgammon and smoking shishas with apple and strawberry scented tobacco. Occasionally, tourist police dressed in berets and khaki uniforms with blue armbands amble up and down the lanes.

I stroll by tailor shops, carpet souqs, spice souqs, silver and brassware shops, shops with ornate glass decanters of lavender, rose, and lily perfumes, and antique shops selling relics with certificates of provenance. I buy Hakim a shisha pipe. In Gold Souq Alley, shops are ignited with displays of high-quality gold bangles, wedding rings, necklaces, earrings, amulets, and custom-made gold cartouches like the earrings from Amar I left in Palatine.

I feel enchanted and inspired by my Old Kingdom avatars. I imagine they both wore such splendid jewelry. They believed gold came from the sun's rays. The hieroglyphic word for gold is Hathor's golden menat necklace. At one shop, I see an array of gold bangles and hear my avatar whisper *you need gold to pay your way from Egypt*.

I purchase thirty 24-carat gold bangles, which I place on my wrists under my long sleeves, then I see an 18-carat Horus wadjet on a gold chain. *The falcon's eye protects Isis and Horus and wards off the wild beast of the desert's red sands* the whisper returns. I purchase the wadjet which the clerk helps me clasp around my neck. I hide it under my blouse and vow to never take it off during my upcoming journey.

At a tea shop in the souq I hire a shai boy to take me to Abdul Hakim's address in Islamic Cairo, northeast of the bazaar. Along the way, we pass historic mosques, fountains and old Islamic *madrasas*. It's dark by the time we arrive at Abdul's second-floor apartment off a backside alley.

I pay the boy an Egyptian Pound and knock on the wooden door. An old woman yells something indecipherable. "I'm a customer of Abdul Hakim," I reply in Modern Standard Arabic. I'm uncertain how odd my remark sounds in the old Islamic neighborhood where **time** stopped centuries ago. *Has anyone like me ever stood before this door or in this alley?* I touch my wadjet and ask my avatars for courage and success.

The door creaks open. A stooped old woman with a black shawl covering her gray hair peers at me. She smiles with stained and missing teeth.

"*Ahlan wa sahlán.*" She gestures me inside.

I respectfully reply and follow her into a dimly lit sitting-room beyond the entry. She invites me to sit on Bedouin floor cushions before a round brass table low to the floor. Then she opens curtains to a balcony overlooking the backside alley.

A refreshing breeze blows inside the aroma of lamb grilling on coal braziers in the alley below. The room feels homey and smells of cumin spice from something cooking. Old family pictures and tapestries hang on the walls, a worn Persian carpet covers the wooden floor and a radio is playing a male Arabic singer. The old woman seems honored to have an American guest. I'm moved with emotion. I'm experiencing firsthand the cultural anthropology I studied at UC.

The old woman yells from the balcony to a vender below. Soon a man with a tray of mint tea appears at the door. The woman sits across from me at the brass table and serves the tea.

"Is Abdul your husband?" I sip my glass of *shai*.

The old woman giggles, covering her mouth, mindful of her smile. "*Abni*," she tells me and explains that Abdul will be home any moment. She then graciously invites me to join them for dinner. "Many times, my son speaks of you, *ya aasana*."

I quickly accept the invitation; it would be disrespectful not to. Besides, I'm embarking on a plot to kidnap an Egyptian child and travel up river on a swallow-sail felucca disguised as a *fellaha*. This part of the plan seems workable. I'm not sure how we'll be leaving Egypt after we reach Aswan. Back in Chicago I got a new passport under my married name because Amar knows me as Prentice. Now I need a passport for Jamal and perhaps two passes to cross the Egyptian/Sudanese border. I've been asking my avatars to convince Abdul to help me. He did say, I remind myself, *Whatever you may need, Abdul is at your service*.

I give *'Umm Abdul* the shisha I bought for Abdul. It seems the right thing to do. I would give her one of my gold bangles but I'm afraid it might be too much and I'm saving them for my upcoming journey. Who knows how many times I'll be making bribes and paying baksheesh.

My gift pleases the old woman and she fetches from a back room a packet of El-Hennawy strawberry tobacco. Together we take on the shisha. I begin feeling more at ease. Obviously, *'Umm Abdul* mixes a bit of kif with her tobacco. Then a bit of paranoia seeps in. Perhaps because of the kif. What if Abdul won't go along with my kidnapping plan? Maybe his sense of honor will betray me. To distract me from my anxieties I ask *'Umm Abdul*, "How many children do you have?"

She smiles and fetches from the back room an old leather album.

As I'm looking through the album of black and white photos from when the old woman was a child, Abdul enters the flat and stands at the threshold. He grins when recognizing me despite my hijab. He firmly shakes my hand, and says, "Welcome. How did you manage to find my humble abode? You will stay for dinner of course." He glances at his mother.

"I've come to discuss business. For as much money as you believe fair." My heart flutters in anticipation of Abdul's reaction. As an accomplice he could jeopardize his own wellbeing. And he has nothing but his taxi to bail him out. But he's the only person I know who can help me.

"Well, well, *ya aasana*," Abdul says. "You've always been more than fair and generous. But before we discuss business, we enjoy dinner." He speaks to the old woman who in turn leaves the flat to buy lamb to serve with the ful mudammas cooking in her kitchen. While she's away Abdul sits on the cushions opposite me. He offers an Egyptian cigarette. I accept, feeling quite comfortable now, quite at home. It seems I'm more of a foreigner with money than a

woman to Abdul. I'm glad for this. He may take me more seriously. As I inhale the harsh Cleopatra, I sense he's anticipating my business but will patiently wait until after dinner. Business is the last matter at hand during a meeting between old friends.

I resume paging through the photo album and come to a picture of Abdul with a woman and several boys seated before a grove of sycamore figs. "You're married?" I boldly ask. I had assumed he was widowed.

Abdul nods. "My wife lives in our village up river with my five sons. I send her money. My mother takes care of me."

"Five sons? You're an honored man, Abdul," I say while thinking how this bit of news places me in a good position. For an Arab man a son is probably everything and to have five is truly an accomplishment. Abdul will understand my plight to regain my stolen son.

"How can you live so far from your family?" I ask, wondering if such arrangements are common in his country. In America, only the very rich might live separately, due to careers, and fly via jet every weekend to be together. I know such couples.

And you have lived apart from your son for ten years, a voice whispers in my head.

The old woman returns with a man carrying a dish of saffron rice and kofta skewers of lamb mixed with onion, garlic, and spices. The aroma of garlic, lime, chilies and pepper is amazing. We sit on the floor near the balcony above voices and clatter from the alley below.

When the meal is over, I bring up my business. Otherwise, Abdul might dally all evening. "My friend." I hesitate and adjust myself comfortably on the cushions. "Remember when you said *A secret is like a dove. When it leaves your hand, it takes wing.*"

"I do. This old man never forgets."

“Like you Abdul, I have a son. His name is Jamal. My story is sad.” I want to gain sympathy but worry that for Abdul it’s sinful for a woman to have a “bastard” child. The thought gives me shivers. Then I remember to use my foreignness over my womanhood. I imagine myself as a dignified lady like beautiful Nefertibet. A woman of backbone and stature. A woman with her own purpose in life.

“It happened ten years ago, when I was young and naïve. In Venice I met an Egyptian man from Zamalek.”

“And this man from Zamalek. What did he do to you?” Abdul talks as if he’s figured out what I want. He must think it’s revenge. A simple matter, for the right price.

“He lied to me Abdul. He brought me to his house on Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street. I lived there seven months. I had his child. He promised to marry me. Abdul, I need your help.” Tears begin welling in my eyes. I feel emotional and high from the shisha kif. For the first time in ten long years, I’m telling my secret; the dove is taking flight.

Abdul asks his mother to fetch a cloth to wipe my tears. “This man dishonored you by breaking his promise. Scoundrel! Son of a dog.” Abdul seems furious.

“Yes.” I wipe my mouth. “This man’s sister wanted my child. They drugged me. Stole my baby before I even saw him. That’s why I didn’t know if my child was a boy or girl when you first took me to Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street.” I take from my purse the pictures of me and Amar at the Venice hostel and the passport pictures I took of Jamal during class one day. I had taken pictures of all my students, using up two rolls of Kodak film, just for a photo of Jamal.

Abdul and his mother intently look at the gleeful boy. “See his eyes? Do you believe me Abdul? I need your help. I’ve come back to Cairo for my child.”

Abdul and his 'umm speak together in a village dialect from upper Egypt. "Aywa," Abdul says at last. "We believe he looks like you. But what can I do? Have you gone to the police?"

I explain that the boy's records show him as Zenna's baby. "Abdul, you name the price. I'm divorced and have lost two children. Now I have a chance to get one back. I need an American passport for my son. Can you arrange this? And I need a felucca boatman to take us to Aswan on Wednesday afternoon when Jamal's mother doesn't come to his school."

For a moment Abdul remains silent then he laughs with delight. "Abdul will help you. But how can this boy simply leave by his own free will? Especially if he doesn't know you're his mother."

"This is the crux of the matter." I explain Jamal's playful enthusiasm for the adventure and our role-playing.

"He must indeed be your child," Abdul admits. "And now you have returned to Egypt to right a wrong of ten years past. This is a most amazing story. When you are safely back in your country, you must write old Abdul so I can amuse my friends with this tale of the 'agnabi and her son." He sits back in serious contemplation. "You will give me his photo and not return here again. I will contact you before Wednesday and give you details. Yes, the price shall be very high. We'll discuss this when we next meet. As for now, allow me to take you home as my guest."

As we head out the door 'Umm Abdul peers at me from the kitchen. *What does she think of all this?* I wonder. Then I tell myself that the old woman is a mother and must understand the hope of being reunited with a lost child.

A few days later, a street urchin knocks at my apartment door. “Abdul Hakim waits in taxi a block away,” he tells me

When I meet Hakim, I sit in the back seat and he hands me Jamal’s American passport, which looks authentic, then suggests the cost of my upcoming journey.

“I’ll pay with gold bangles.”

“It’s a good plan. You buy two air tickets from Cairo to Europe to confuse police and Amar.”

“Good idea.”

“Now you meet your boatman.”

Abdul takes me to a deserted stretch of the riverbank in Garden City. A thin man is standing barefoot on the gravelly shore. He wears a blue galabia and a keffiyeh turban on his head. Moored in the Nile behind him and tied to a tamarisk tree, is a white and blue felucca with a furled lateen sail, a canvas awning over the deck, and the name “Mintaka” painted on its side in English and Arabic.

“This is Majid bin Al Mohammed.” Abdul indicates the boatman before the felucca. “He speaks good English like me.”

“Because I transport tourists from Cairo to Luxor and Luxor to Aswan. In Aswan, I buy fig and date jellies to sell in the souqs of Cairo.”

“Sounds like you’re an enterprising man,” I suggest as I shake Majid’s hand. Both men chuckle; I’m not sure why.

We discuss my plan and for several gold bangles Majid agrees to take me and my son to Aswan. “I know camel traders near Aswan. You and son can join caravan out of Egypt.”

“Jamal will love it. One adventure after the next.”

“Life’s this way,” Majid tells me.

I give him money to buy bottled water, rice, fava beans, and spices for the river trip.

“Is this what we’ll be living off?” I ask. “And how long will the river trip take? I don’t want to get scurvy.”

“Don’t know how long,” Majid says as he puts the money in his galabia pocket. “The journey is against the current and could take as long as two weeks. Depends on conditions. No scurvy. We buy fresh fruit and bread from villages along the shore.”

“You must never leave the boat during the river journey,” Abdul warns me.

“What about going to the bathroom?” The two men again chuckle.

“You bathe behind a blanket on the deck or behind bushes on the riverbank” Majid suggests.

“But I want to see the ruins of Luxor. I’ll need to walk around. How can I stay on the boat under such limited conditions. There’s not even a cabin or a chair.”

“I fear police will look for you everywhere,” Abdul says.

“Hordes of tourists and fellahin are in Luxor,” I argue. “I’ll blend-in behind the veil. Besides, I’m sure Jamal wants to see the temples as part of our adventure. He’s the reason for this whole undertaking. I must keep him amused.”

The men talk together for a moment, then Abdul says, “My village is across the river from Dendera. You can stay at my house, give my wife two bangles and one for each son.”

“Thank you for the compromise. At least I’ll see the temple of Hathor, the goddess of Nefertiabet and Seshet Akeru.”

“Who?” both men ask at once.

“Ancient Egyptians. That’s all. Perhaps at the ruins, Hathor herself will bless me and my son with success.” Again, my remark amuses the men.

The next day I purchase two airline tickets to London, to throw off Amar, and ship home my camera; it would be too conspicuous to bring along an SLR on my fugitive run. Besides, I don’t want to document my crime with photographic evidence. And I don’t see many covered fellaha shooting pictures with expensive SLRS.

By late evening I return to Majid’s felucca and stows two duffle bags at the bow next to the provisions Majid has already purchased. When organizing Jamal’s bag, I carefully considered what a ten-year-old boy might need and what kinds of toys might amuse him. At the Khan, I bought him a Walkman with extra batteries, Egyptian comic books, and the Kenner Star Wars action figures Chewbacca and Darth Vader. In my bag I’ve packed my own Walkman and music tapes, a few books and writing pads, and everything else I might need such as o.b. tampons, baggies for trash, soap, a toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo, and an ample supply of toilet paper.

When Wednesday arrives, I’m prepared to set sail with my son. Ten minutes before class, I stop Jamal as he runs down the hallway. At first, he grimaces as if I’m about to punish him for mischievous behavior. But his expression changes when I smile and fondly stroke his soft brown hair. No one else is around.

“How are you my little Saladin?” I ask, trying to conceal my anxiety. Jamal must be in the right frame of mind and in a playful mood. To my delight he grins affectionately. I whisper close to his ear, “Jamal. Are you ready to sail to Aswan?”

He looks at me as if for the first time he senses the game we are playing is real. But for a ten-year-old boy I doubt there’s much difference between playtime and reality.

To my relief Jamal seems quite pleased. “Are we going to Disneyland?”

“Yes, Jamal.” I can scarcely manage my own excitement. To soothe my nerves, I rub the gold wadjet around my neck and silently ask my avatars for their protection and guidance. Everything has fallen into place and my son is willing to go along with the adventure.

“Let’s get going before Farouq arrives to pick you up!” I take hold of Jamal’s hand and lead him to the door. Before exiting the school, I crouch and whisper, “Jamal, you must now pretend you’re James Bond shadowing me. We are acting in the progressive tense.”

Jamal seems entirely in command and without any apprehension. He’s embarking on the greatest game he’s ever played, a game according to his own imagination with his warrior queen, Amanishakheto.

When I reach Abdul’s idling taxi, I stop for the first time to see if Jamal is close behind. He is and with an expression of delight.

“*Yalla! Yalla!*” Abdul whispers through the window. I open the backdoor, usher my son inside and jump in beside him.

Abdul screeches from the curb and speeds through the city while I slip on a black abaya, hijab and a niqab to cover my face and look like a modest Muslim woman. Jamal enthusiastically slips on a boy’s galabia and the red fez tarboosh with a black tassel that I found in the Khan, I knew he’d like it.

By the time Abdul parks at the deserted riverbank in Garden City, Jamal and I are disguised as rustic villagers who came to Cairo to sell produce, relics from ancient tombs or fish from the Nile.

“Here we are,” I say to Jamal from behind my veil. “No one will find us. Look, the felucca’s sail is unfurled. Everything’s ready and in place.”

Jamal lunges from the taxi and slips down the bank to the boat.

I thank my old friend Abdul as he sits in his taxi eager to leave the scene and discard Jamal's school clothes. I want to hug him in gratitude but haven't the time and such a hug would probably cast the evil eye upon him and me. "If the police catch me, I promise to claim I just flagged down your taxi and never saw you before. God be with you, old friend," I say and hand him another bangle. "For your mama."

"God's protection," I hear Abdul call as I close the door and he pulls away.

I run to the felucca. Majid appears nervous although in charge of the situation. He holds my hand to help me up the ramp onto his felucca. Jamal is already standing at the stern's large rudder, prepared to navigate the Nile.

I sit on the felucca deck beneath the canvas awning and quietly absorbed the surroundings as my heart patters with emotion. I listen to the flapping sail and hear my avatar whisper *Behold; the Milky Way gives birth to her daughter the morning star. Rise and purify yourself in the Lake of Jackals. Receive your throne. Your Akh is now immortal in the flames of your sekhem power when Mintaka touches the horizon and marks the east and west.*



Chapter 10: The Mintaka

Jamal joins me on deck under the canvas awning. We watch Majid align the rudder and pull the ramp onto the boat. “Do you know about the star Mintaka?” I ask my son.

“No, ya Sarah,” he says reminding me he’s unaware of our true relationship.

“I learned about the stars of Orion during a star-gazing class in college. The course captured my imagination and now I want to capture yours.”

“Are we really going to Aswan? I can hardly wait. Then we’ll be on our way to Disneyland. You’re the best teacher ever.”

I hug my son feeling the pride of a mama lion. Of Sekhmet and Tefnut. “Yes yes. Jamal. We’re on our way. Like Mintaka journeys across the night sky with Orion. Did you know the ancient Egyptians called Orion Sah?”

“Like you, Sah ra.”

“Exactly. Mintaka is the first star of Orion’s belt to appear in the east and the first one to set in the west. Until the Scorpion rises in May and Orion gets lost in the sun’s glare.”

“How far away is Mintaka? As far as Aswan? Or Disneyland?”

“Much much farther. Mintaka is a multiple star system 1200 light years away and it’s nearly 100,000 times brighter than the Sun and 20 times bigger.”

“That’s big!”

“It is. And at the end its life, Mintaka will explode in a supernova.”

“Can we watch the stars each night, ya Sarah?” Jamal asks. “I want to see one explode. I want to see a supernova!”

“One day you will. But I can’t promise you when. For now, let’s quietly watch Cairo pass by. We’re secret spies now, remember? We’re Moonraker escaping from the Nazi’s.”

Jamal sits back with me--playing the game, anticipating our journey ahead, and living off the energy of his own excitement. I wish I could do the same but I'm a bundle of nerves. I touch my wadjet and ask my avatars' to bring me as much courage as my little Saladin seems to have.

The hardest part of my plan is over and the adventure begins. I've kidnapped my son. Now, everything depends on Jamal. He's never even sailed on the Nile. His boyhood outings were mostly field trips to city parks, the pyramids of Giza, Dahshur, Saqqara, and the Cairo Museum. He went to Alexandria many times to visit his father, a man he knows as his mother's brother. In class one day I remember Jamal saying *I went to Greece with my uncle. He played on the handball team for Cairo University.*

I ache to tell Jamal everything about me and Amar. Perhaps I will in a day or two after I better understands how he reacts to our real-life adventure. Will he lose his courage and cry for home? Betray me to the police? I keep telling myself that all these risks are worth the price of being with my son.

"We're sailing to Nubia," Jamal whispers in Arabic. "Won't Mama be surprised?"

I stroke his thick brown hair as it blows in the river breeze, like a mother would do to her son. "You're a brave little man to take me on this adventure. I'm so happy. Are you?"

"My yes. We escaped and nobody saw us, *Ustazza.*"

He addresses me like a respectful school boy should but soon he'll be calling me Mommy,
I think to myself.

"When can I sail the felucca?" Jamal asks.

"Majid will teach you to be a great boatman. Won't that be fun?"

Jamal tries to get up to help Majid sail through the city. I pull him back and whisper, “Not yet. We must first outwit our enemies and stay hidden. Tomorrow, I promise, when we’re far from Cairo, we’ll both learn to sail the Mintaka.”

“You?” Jamal looks at me quizzically. “Sailing is man’s work. You must cook and wash dishes while I man the ship.”

“*Aywa*. You’re right,” I say, not wanting to interfere in his fantasy. “Sailing’s a man’s job. And you’re the headman of this journey. You and Majid will sail the boat unless you permit me to join in the fun.”

“Maybe,” Jamal teases. He snuggles against me, enthralled with the game of hiding until leaving the outskirts of Cairo.

When the Mintaka passes the pyramid tombs of Saqqara, Jamal excitedly yells, “Djoser’s Step Pyramid! I’ve been there. It’s the first pyramid built in Egypt.”

“Saqqara is also the burial ground of Hotepsekhemwy, the first king of the second dynasty.” I’m eager to share all I know about ancient Egypt although I won’t mention my spiritual avatars protecting our venture with magic. I want my son to tell me about the spirits in his head that fill his boyhood with imagination and adventure. He doesn’t need to partake in mine. Besides, he seems to assume I’m Muslim perhaps because he’s only known the Islamic religion.

“Khasekhemwy was father of Djoser,” I continue. “Djoser’s son, King Sekhemkhet of the third dynasty, is also buried in Saqqara.”

“And kings and queens of the Pyramid Texts, don’t forget,” Jamal adds.

“And the tomb of Ptahhotep.”

“Ptahhotep?”

“You don’t know Ptahhotep?” My son shakes his head. “He was the ancient Egyptian philosopher who said *Let your thoughts be abundant, your mouth restrained.*”

“You want me quiet, Sarah?” Jamal pinches my arm.

“Not at all. But listening is a virtue, according to Ptahhotep.”

Jamal laughs as the Mintaka sails in the middle of the river and a breeze brings us the scent of wheat growing along the shore.

Soon we sail past Dahshur where Sneferu’s Bent and Red pyramids tower among pyramids of the 12th dynasty kings. Near Beni Suef, Jamal excitedly points to the first pyramid of Sneferu, in Meidum.

“We did it, my Saladin,” I exclaim. “You and me! We escaped from the evil eye of Cairo. From our enemies.”

Jamal yawns, rubs his eyes, and offers his familiar boyish grin. “Teacher, you look funny in a hijab and niqab.” He giggles.

“And you look handsome in that red fez snug on your head,” I join in Jamal’s laughter.

“But aren’t you too warm?”

“Fortunately, the wind that sails Mintaka keeps me refreshed. Besides, discomfort encourages my hope for success. *If there is no suffering, Ptahhotep advised, the venture is too easy and you will never make it to the Promised Land.*”

Jamal gives me a puzzled look as if he’s unsure of my meaning.

“Jamal. I have toys for you,” I say, feeling I need to keep him constantly amused and engaged in our adventure.

“What kind” he asks with glee as I retrieve his duffle bag from under the bow,

He's enthralled with everything and immediately pretends his action dolls are shooting the fellahin children splashing in the water near the shore. I open a bottle of water and listen to the river lapping against the boat. Just being on the river eases my anxieties. **How is it? I wonder. I've never taken advantage of seeing the wonders of Egypt until now.**

It's evening when Majid says, "We're far enough from Cairo. No one follows us." He anchors Mintaka near a west bank village, sets up a brazier by the rudder and heats a pot of ful mudammas. We eat from the pot with the aish baladi Majid buys from a village vendor. For the rest of the voyage, I have the feeling this dish will be the mainstay of our diet.

By the time we finish our meal it's dark. Majid lights a lantern on the mid-deck and brings out a red clay doumbek with a goatskin top. He slaps the Egyptian goblet drum in rhythm with the lapping river. He plays until midnight then smokes on the middeck where he sleeps.

Under the canopy, my son and I lie on woven matts under a camel wool blanket. Countless mosquitoes, gnats, and midges attack us. I hold Jamal tightly to keep him warm and safe as I should have done when he was a newborn. "Are you happy Jamal?" I ask, praying he is.

He turns and gently kisses me on the lips and drowsily says, "I am. Because I love you, ya Amanishakheto."

"And I love you, too, my hero Saladin." I kiss his brow feeling unimaginable love for my little cherub. As I watch him drift to sleep, I wonder if Zenna, Amar, or any wet-nurse, ever held him with so much affection. I decide it's not possible. Nobody could love him more than I do.

Early the next morning the muezzin's call echoes from the nearby village mosque. Mintaka's lateen sail is furled on its boom, perpendicular to the mast like a cross at the bow of

the boat. I sit up and look at my child but let him sleep. I don't want him to wake up feeling troubled by the reality of our escape. With my hair and face covered like a pious Muslim woman living on a felucca with her family of fishermen, I sit at the edge of the bow and gaze at the shimmering river. Majid is in the village fetching fresh fruit and aish baladi.

In the emerging light, vapors are rising from the river. Only one other felucca moors nearby in the pampas grass wavering in the breeze. A few row boats are fishing for tilapia, perch, and catfish, I imagine, and women are filling large ceramic jugs with river water. What I'm seeing could be from five thousand years ago. From the time of my Old Kingdom avatars.

How long must I hide behind the niqab? I ask my avatars. *When will all the divine forces of this world lift the final barriers between me and Jamal?* I peer at the Nile flowing below me and call for Seshet Akeru to appear in my reflection.

The image remains only me, the veiled fellaha. *You cannot force an apparition to appear,* I remember the Haitian woman at the Paris youth hostel telling me. Or maybe it was Mary who said this.

A breeze blows as the sun strikes the Nile. *Hathor, open the way for Isis and Horus* a voice in my mind whispers. *Close the door to the followers of Set. Sleep on the Milky Way boat and sail in the boat that grows stronger through the day.*

The breeze fades with the voice and Majid appears at the felucca carrying a basket of oranges and fresh bread.

"We'll set sail after iftar," he says and begins preparing Turkish coffee over the brazier.

Jamal sits up and rubs his eyes as if he's just woke from a dream. His young mind must be puzzled, I realize, and quickly go to him. It brings tears to my eyes to think, *he is my son, my*

firstborn and although he doesn't know this yet, he will when the time is right. And he'll accept the truth. “How is my little prince this morning, ya Saladin?” I sit beside him on deck cushion.

“I forgot,” he groggily stutters without calling me Amanishakheto. He behaves like a disoriented little boy and I fear he's lost his courage.

“Are you hungry?” I hand my son some water.

“I must make water.” He stands in his disheveled galabia.

Majid and I both laugh. I forgot about the basics of life. Motherhood is new to me; I've only touched it in my womb. I smile as Jamal pees in the river like the son of a felucca boatman. My basic functions are much more cumbersome, like camping in Wisconsin which was never my favorite pastime. It's difficult to keep clean but I keep telling myself that temporary discomforts are inconsequential when compared to the monumental task at hand. Both day and night, I thank the gods and my avatars for every moment I have with my son.

As the days of sailing pass by, I become less anxious about the endeavor and stay busy keeping Jamal amused. Except for a mid-day nap and when he soundly sleeps at night, Jamal is always active. In the early mornings he typically joins Majid at village markets for the day's provisions of fresh produce and bread. Majid teaches Jamal to play the doumbek and how to man the rudder and set the sail. My son is a natural sailor and happily helps Majid push off from shore by hiking up his galabia and wading in his leather sandals. I forbid him to climb the mast to furl or unfurl the sail. When he's not busy sailing, Jamal plays with his action figures, reads his comic books, draws pictures of desert jinn while listening to cassettes. Sometimes he and I sing Michael Jackson songs.

The Mintaka sails about 30 miles a day with a good southerly wind. We pass mosques, modern houses, sugar cane factories, and fields of cotton and rice. Majid knows every ruin and village along the river. We usually moor at sandy beaches near clumps of reeds. The dunes and mountains beyond the river appear like the Valley of the Kings and I often wonder if I'll ever see the inside of an ancient Egyptian tomb.



Chapter 11: Seshet Akeru -- Selection of a Tomb

Beautiful soul of Isis, I see your reflection in the river. I hear you sing with Horus your son. Every good thing you command will be yours as you sail over the walls of Shu. Prepare your Temple of Life to receive offerings from the living. If the ka has no place to return, it will wander in darkness.

I continue my story to reveal the importance of selecting a tomb.

In the tenth month of my father's second jubilee, I was eight months with child. Nearly six months had passed since I presented the Golden Falcon relic to Pepi. I relinquished my vows as a fulltime priestess and awaited my husband's return and the arrival of my firstborn--my wepem khat. Each day I taught royal children on the harem terrace overlooking the gardens, the river and the pyramids of Sokar Ra Amentet.

On the 11th day of Ipet Hemet, in the season of harvest, feather clouds were crossing the blue sky in the mid-morning sun. My students sat on cushions. Each had a sheet of papyrus paper, a wooden writing palette, reed brushes, and red and black ink blocks. I walked among them teaching them how to draw picture words of gods.

“Atum Ra created Shu to uphold the sky and Tefnut to house the king’s star,” I told the children. “Shu and Tefnut gave birth to the Earth god Geb and the Milky Way goddess Nut. Nut gave birth to Earth’s first children—Osiris, Set, Isis and Nebet-Het. Set is the beast who kills and destroys all things that please Atum Ra.”

As I spoke to the royal children, I heard my avatar Nefertiabet whisper to me *Great peace comes from watching children draw the many names of god.*

Prince Menka suddenly appeared, flanked by two guards. He improperly grasped my arm and pulled me from the terrace. The children chattered in confusion over his abrupt presence.

“Beautiful sister,” Menka said to me. “You are free now to marry me.”

“What could you mean by this taunting?” I asked as I freed myself from his grip.

“Your husband, the Golden Falcon, is now a mummy in Abu. A band of Medjay warriors killed him,” Menka said without emotion. “I will be king and marry his widows, the first wives of royal lineage. And you will be my lesser wife now that you’re widowed and free from your priestly vows.”

On that day the king’s eldest son behaved at his cruelest. My blissful life dissolved into the Great Green Sea of misfortune. But the gods were not through with me. Set himself unleashed the crushing jaws of a bull hippo. My belly cramped and my child did not survive outside my womb.

In the days to follow, I faced my sorrows but found comfort when my avatars whispered that my son would blossom in the Afterworld with his father. I continued my duties and obligations and endured my sorrows because life is a preparation for the afterlife where we are reunited with all those we have loved on Earth.

My husband the Golden Falcon had the beginnings of a mastaba near our father's pyramid. But this tomb was meant for him as a prince. Pepi had expected his chosen son to become the sixth king of his dynasty. As king, the Golden Falcon would require a pyramid to match his father's and those of ancestor kings. But he died before fulfilling the measure of his life.

It distressed me that the Golden Falcon's mastaba neighbored Menka's tomb. Menka was my husband's greatest rival. Such an arrangement would displease my husband's ka. I also believed that Menka somehow instigated his death to become the crown prince. But I couldn't express this concern to my father. I had no voice in the matter. The Golden Falcon had two other wives who were above my station. I doubted I'd even be buried in his tomb. I was merely his third and lesser wife of no parentage.

The final decision concerning my husband's tomb belonged to our father. At the time, priests were keeping him heavily sedated with blue lily potion to help ease his grief. The king was protector of his people and everyone tried to protect the king from disturbing news. But no one could shield him from the death of his favorite son. My father became inconsolable. The greatest hope of his legacy had vanished.

Only I could comfort my father. He often summoned me to his receiving hall. As he sat on his throne, I held his hand and spoke about his many victories. "You are a great and beneficent king. Just and true. Your subjects adore you. The Golden Falcon climbs the platforms

and ladders of Ptah to reach the Field of Reeds. His sekhem powers will never diminish or perish. Father, you made your son a man as noble as Re-Horakhty, defeater of chaos and harm. He lives with Osiris among the stars that never set.”

When the floods began to subside, the funeral armada arrived with my husband’s mummy. Small boats and skiffs decked with streamers and flags sailed among the funeral vessels. Along the shore subjects shouted, “The Golden Falcon is Kawab, son of Khufu.” They wailed and lamented, “The promise of our kingdom is dead.”

While workmen finished the mastaba tomb, Pepi placed my husband’s mummy in his private chapel, the Sa Step. Day and night four guards with spears stood vigil at the coffin, one at each corner. A fifth guard stood outside the chapel door. The scorpion goddess Serqet protected the priests who prayed over the mummy at sunrise and sunset.

The sight of his son’s mummy and beautiful death mask revived my father enough to overpower his grief. He refused the lily potion and started making decrees.

While we awaited conclusions from vizier Nemty Hotep, concerning my husband’s death, Hetepheres and Nedjeftet remarried their half-brother, the king’s eldest son. Menka had always desired them for their pure lineage. The elite sisters believed that the eldest son was first in line to the throne. They wanted to be ruling queens more than anything else.

Upon receiving news of their marriage, my father banned his elite daughters from entering the Sa Step chapel to pray at the royal mummy. He also decreed they wouldn’t have a place in the tomb of the Golden Falcon.

Menka declared himself the new crown prince until my father held court and decreed, “There is only one crown prince during my kingship. Only one Golden Falcon. I gave that title to my favorite son. May the strongest son win the crown after I am gone. My prophets tell me my

demise is far in coming.” The king glared at Menka when he spoke these words and the eldest son backed away from the room with each of his brothers following.

King Pepi then turned to me and said, “Seshet Akeru, you are the King’s Favorite Daughter. I declare you Foremost Wife of the Golden Falcon. You will share his Temple of Life and write your husband’s autobiography on the walls of his sarcophagus chamber.”

I was grateful for my father’s decrees but the fact that Menka’s tomb neighbored my husband’s infested my heart. For many hours I pondered the matter. I had to be delicate when telling my father my concerns. He wanted his favorite son near him in death.

In the end, I decided to say nothing. Instead, I put my heart and ba into my husband’s story for his mastaba wall. On papyrus paper, I composed many letters to his ka. I wrote about his first wives remarrying Menka and about his daughter Hetepheres VI. *“She’s beautiful and skilled in her studies* my letter said. *A king’s prodigy. I’m very fond of my step-daughter.* In one letter I explained I retook my vows as a fulltime priestess. *The king has appointed me High Priestess of the Palace and gifted I spend eternity in your tomb. I’ll never remarry or have another child. My life is dedicated to you, the king, our gods, and our son whom I have named Wepemnofret after the husband of my avatar Nefertiabet. Because our son failed to live beyond my womb, I have become a Prophet of Ba’ast to intercede on behalf of young mothers and their children.*

While masons were carving my picture words on the stone walls of my husband’s mastaba, gossip rumbled through the harem that someone in the palace had incited the band of Medjay warriors to kill the crown prince. Although no one dared whisper his name, I knew Menka had overstepped his powers. How did he learn the news that he told me three days before

messengers arrived at the Palace? I pondered this for many days but never mentioned the matter to the vizier or my father. To accuse the eldest son of treason was treason itself.

Every evening on the observatory roof I searched the stars for what might happen. At midnight I visited the Sa Step chapel and stayed by my husband's mummy until the priests arrived at the break of day.

Beside the open coffin, by the light of a single wall torch, I recited sacred verses to the beautiful death mask. It was golden with eyes inlaid with lapis lazuli and lips with red carnelian. Priests had made an exact impression of my beloved's face so his ka would recognize him when he visited his tomb. I was glad these priests placed my wedding tyet in his wrappings. In Medjay and Yam, the garrison generals had found it in his hand. I prayed to Isis that her tyet amulet protects my husband in the Afterworld.

Everything changed at midnight on 4 Peret, 14 Ren Wet. On my way to the king's Sa Step chapel, I felt an unnerving premonition. When I arrived, the outer guard was away from his post. I cautiously pushed open the chapel door, upheld my torch, and entered the dark chamber. My torchlight quickly revealed the five guards sprawled on the floor. Someone has slit their throats. Then I saw my husband's beautiful funerary mask on the floor beside the coffin, smashed and shredded by a knife.

A few hours later, the priests discovered me on the floor. In one hand I held the extinguished torch; my other hand was touching the defiled death mask of the Golden Falcon.

My father was inflamed. By destroying the death mask someone attempted to kill his favorite son once again. The king formed a commission of inquiry, consisting of vizier Nemty and several high officials including myself.

By the end of Wep Renpet, the commission met in Pepi's receiving hall. Vizier Nemty told the king, "We've determined followers of Set poisoned the guards. The guards lie unconscious when these same evil men slit their throats. I don't believe there's a connection between the murder of the crown prince and the desecration of his death mask."

"How so?" My father stood from his throne and stomped his wa's scepter.

"For many years, Sire. There's been no trouble in Medjay and Yam."

"I know this imbecile." Pepi stomped his scepter once more. "This is why I authorized my son's expedition after he took my favorite daughter as his third and lesser wife. I refute your findings. Someone in my palace conspired to defile the death mask of my son after killing him in Medjay and Yam."

"My commission found no evidence sire. No soldier on the expedition betrayed any source of sedition. No one in the palace surrendered a name. The official story holds. A hostile tribe of renegade Madjay warriors killed the Golden Falcon in his sleep because of a trade dispute."

My father then looked at the High Priest of Ptah. Nebwenenef stood before Pepi's throne with his cheetah skin draped over his shoulder for the cat goddess Mafdet.

"I made you Overseer of the Royal Mummy," Pepi said to the priest. "I accuse you of masterminding the crime to advance your position. You undermine my legacy by destroying my chosen son. No one else was permitted inside the chapel except me, Queen Wedjebten, Seshet Akeru, and the priests who prayed at the coffin and provided the guards with food and water."

The receiving hall grew silent. Pepi's guards grabbed the arms of Nebwenenef and forced him to kneel before Pepi.

My father upheld his wa's staff and declared, "I am warrior king of the world's greatest kingdom. My enemies come from far north of the delta and south of the border. Spies from Alashiya or Madjay and Yam have infiltrated my palace. I don't know who sought my son's death but you are accountable for the defilement of his death mask. High Priest, defend yourself."

"I am no mankiller," the priest declared. "I am blameless by the judgment of Mafdet. My only crime is I am Overseer of the Royal Mummy. By my ka, Set himself topples my position and puts in motion the forces of chaos."

Enraged, my father proclaimed, "You have no defense. Kagemni in all his wisdom declared *Sharp are the knives against those who desecrate the dead*. And you dare invoke Mafdet, cat goddess who dwells in the Mansion of Life. She protects my justice. Not yours."

"Sire. I beg you in the name of Serqet. In the name of Ptah."

"I strip you of your priesthood. Do not call upon my gods. You will throw yourself in the scorpion pit at Per Serqet. In the pit you will call for Mafdet to protect you. She will rip out your heart and eyes for your transgression. I order your name erased. You will have no house of eternity. Ptah will not guide you to the Field of Reeds. My soldiers will cast your corpse in the red lands. Jackals will rip apart your flesh. Your ka will forever perish."

Shortly following the execution of Nebwenenef, my father summoned me to his chambers. "I had a foreboding dream last night. In it followers of Set enter my favorite son's mastaba and erase his name. Djehuti told me to make my son's tomb inconspicuous because someone from the palace plots to forever erase my son, the Golden Falcon."

“Father. Hathor herself whispers to me that you entomb you chosen son in the rock-cut cliffs on your royal estate outside Bastet. I will officiate as Prophet of Ba’ast. Although his tomb won’t be near your pyramid, the Golden Falcon will be hidden from followers of Set who desecrate and pillage what’s sacred. No one will know about the tomb except your majesty, Queen Wedjebten, myself, and the priests who make votive offerings. This is where I’d like my husband entombed.”

My father took pause. I thought maybe the idea appealed to him. But I could never be certain because my father’s eminence hid his intentions.

“I spent many seasons with my son fishing and fowling in the delta,” my father then said. “The Golden Falcon shall have his tomb in the rock-cut cliffs of Bastet with his foremost wife, my favorite daughter.”

The king immediately directed his Military Overseer, a Friend of the King, Lord Intef, to relinquish his unfinished rock-cut tomb on the royal estate. Intef’s tomb had five chambers cut from the limestone rock but no etchings had yet been made.

The General was honored to surrender his tomb to the king. For eternity, his name would be chiseled on the tomb of the greatest crown prince of all time, the Golden Falcon of Pepi Neferkare. My husband.

Beautiful soul of Isis, young mother in my relic mirror, I have given you my story of long ago. Ipet failed to cause my son to take a breath of life. Sobek failed to protect my husband in Medjay and Yam. For a moment in time, I believed I’d write the names of many children on the walls of my tomb. But Set wore the guise of the Hippo with the Crock on his back. He stole my child and husband and left me to live a long life without all that I loved.

I now call on Isis-Hathor to spread her wings of protection over you and your son. Sail forth on the Earth's great river into the stars that never set. Akhakh Shen en Pet.



Chapter 12: Hathor's Temple at Dendera

After two weeks of sailing, we arrive at the village of “Qaryat e Abdul” near Qena, 285 miles south of Cairo. We eat dinner on the felucca then Jamal and I follow Majid along a dirt road through the moonlit village. We pass wandering cats and donkeys and egrets nesting in sycamore trees. Yellow and blue mudbrick houses with flat roofs stand among doum palms with fan fronds and date palms with feather fronds. Goats, sheep, even cows live in courtyards that have ovens built into the walls.

The aroma of roasting meat fills the warm night air. “Someone slaughtered a goat for a special occasion,” Majid suggests.

At a café, men are playing backgammon and smoking a shisha with apple tobacco. They stare at me as we pass by even though I’m fully covered and veiled. It must be the way I walk.

We enter the courtyard of a house where a mongrel dog is sleeping on the front stoop. Majid calls, “Zawja Abdul!”

A woman appears at the door draped in a black abaya. She kicks the dog aside and smiles when she sees Majid. “*Marhaban ahlan wa sahlán,*” she says.

“Alsalam ‘alaykum,” I politely reply and offer my hand. The woman’s grip is modest.

I follow her into the house. The aroma inside reminds me of the spice souq of Khan el Khalili. Abdul’s wife gestures we sit on a sheep skin rug in the front room. She and Majid rapidly speak in a dialect I can’t fully understand. Jamal rests his head on my lap and before long I realize we’re spending the night in Abdul’s hut. I resign myself to roughing it once again. I didn’t bring along any toiletries and am carrying only the gold bangles I always wear.

While my hosts continue speaking, I lie beside my son and try to fall asleep. I can’t. The woolly pelt is scratchy and smells of livestock, the room is stuffy and hot, and I’m worried about being a fugitive. Anything could go wrong. Somehow, I fall asleep until the morning call to prayer, the adhan.

I nudge Jamal.

He rubs his eyes and yawns. “I’m hungry and want to see the temples.”

“Majid,” I call out, feeling helpless in the strange house. No one answers. I’m covering myself with the hijab when Abdul’s wife appears from the back kitchen. She gestures we sit on the sod kitchen floor and eat aish baladi and ful mudammas with mish, a sharp, salty cheese. The food is satisfying, delicious in fact, like food when camping in Wisconsin. It seems I’m growing accustomed to the simple life of a fellaha.

Soon Majid enters the kitchen with a sack of dates. Jamal takes one and declares, “We want to see the temples.”

Looking at me, Majid tersely replies, “First you give Abdul’s wife her gifts.”

In the front room, I discreetly take off the bangles for Abdul’s wife and her sons. The old woman accepts them with delight and leaves to stash her gifts.

By mid-morning, Majid hires a donkey and cart that takes us down a bumpy dirt road to a river ferry. We cross the Nile and take another donkey cart to the temples of Dendera. Except for the gathered hawkers and touts, the tour buses and hordes of tourists with SLR cameras, it's a scene straight from a Baedeker travel guide or a David Roberts lithographic print.

A few rustic fellahin mingle before the pylons of the Hathor temple; Majid, Jamal, and I stand among them. Behind my veil I look like a woman in purdah. Jamal wears a galabia and his hair is tousled. Long ago, the wind blew his fez into the Nile.

As soon as we enter the gates, a tout with a polaroid camera offers to take our picture. My boatman tries to shoo the boy away but I jump at the chance for a picture with my son. Although I'm always leery of somehow getting caught, this is the only picture I'll have of our journey. Besides, I don't see any tourist police around. I remove my veil for the photo and stand with Jamal before the large boxy temple of columns depicting Hathor with cow ears.

"Why is her face smashed up?" Jamal asks.

"Centuries ago, religious zealots chipped away Hathor's face like they defaced the Sphinx."

"That was Napoleon's soldiers," my son informs me.

"Maybe," I say. "It's a riddle of the Sphinx."

The tout snaps the picture and shows it to me. It's endearing. I almost burst with emotion like I'm pregnant all over again. "Here," I say to the tout as I slyly slip off a gold bangle, feeling the picture is worth the price.

"Shukran." The boy grins and runs to show a nearby man who could be his father or his bassha, his bossman.

I place the photo in my abaya pocket and take my son's hand. We follow Majid into the enormous complex and blend into antiquity.

At first Jamal is thrilled to play the game of hunting for jinn lurking among the pillars and shrines. Then he says, "Let's play hide-and-seek. You're Marion Ravenwood, ya Sarah. Nazis hold you prisoner in the Temple of Doom."

"All right Saladin. To keep you amused I'll play along," I say. "Although I'd prefer to always have you beside me."

"Go on, Ravenwood Sarah! Hide."

As I watch Jamal and Majid walk away to let me hide, I suddenly feel uneasy. I want to quickly end our little sightseeing tour of the Hathor Temple and continue with our dangerous escape. I feel like we're dallying and taking a big risk. Then I remind myself that our escape is a balancing act. I must keep Jamal entertained and enthusiastic about what we're doing. My biggest fear, even more than getting caught, is Jamal grows bored and wants to return to his so-called mother in Cairo.

Jamal and Majid head to the pylons. I enter the temple's enormous hypostyle hall. Chirping sparrows are flying among the pillars Hathor. English, German, French, and Arabic phrases echo through the great hall.

The mother goddess upholds a ceiling of Zodiac constellations. The spectacular pronaos
I hear a tour guide say to his flock of tourists. It's almost like hearing the voices of my avatars.

You're looking at Nut across the sky. She gives birth to Ra at sunrise and swallows him at sunset. I hear another voice. Then another and another.

Follow me, I want to show you the Eye of Ra in a mirror reflecting the subconscious journey into consciousness. In actuality, it's a solar eclipse.

Voila, l'ampoule de Dendera. . . Von Daniken. . . ou symbolizer la creation comme manifestation de la conscience. C'est une question de croyance."

I leave the pronaos temple to get away from the chatter and explore the temple grounds. I become so enthralled with what I'm seeing I forget about the game with Jamal. I unleash my Egyptologist mind and feel the presence of my **avatars. During the Old Kingdom they both must have traveled to this sacred temple grounds although what they saw was much different. Most of the ruins now were built during the era of Cleopatra VII. Amazingly, the time span from Cleopatra to my avatars is about the same length of time from Cleopatra to me. It gives me chills to think about all this history at play. The presence of my avatars is so strong I can almost see their auras in the stone statues and reliefs surrounding me. It makes my head spin.**

I pass a wall carving of a woman giving birth and stand before an etching of the last ruler of Egypt, Cleopatra VII Philopator herself. Maybe she's an avatar as well. She saw herself as Hathor. In the relief she's with Caesarion, her son by Caesar. Together, mother and son are Isis and Horus paying homage to their god. I touch my gold wadjet and recites Cleopatra's two Horus names inscribed on the wall, "Great Lady of Perfection and excellent counsel in the image of her father. Cleopatra Netjeret Meretites," I say. "Bring me the power of ancient Egypt. Bring me divine magic. See me and my son from Egypt."

For a moment, I remain before the relief hoping to hear her whisper to me. But I only hear tourists walking nearby. I guess she isn't one of my avatars.

I return to the Hathor Temple and climb the worn spiral staircase to the roof. I want to see the round replica Zodiac Ceiling of the Portico, something I learned about during Tut mania

seven years before. In the Zodiac circle Isis is holding the tail of Thoth as a baboon. The image is supposed to be the solar eclipse of March 7, 51 BC, the year Cleopatra VII began her reign.

My son's game of hid-and-seek returns to mind and I make my way to an inner courtyard on the temple roof, to hide from him. Pillars and their capitals are scattered around the stone floor. Some of the cow-headed faces are marred and damaged. In the mid-day warmth, in my billowing attire, I stand before an undamaged capital on the ground where it probably landed when religious zealots toppled it centuries before but long after Cleopatra VII journeyed to the afterworld by her own hand.

I recall the words of an Arab tour guide *The Sky Cow Hathor carries the solar disk between her horns. She sustains life with her sweet milk.*

No one is around. I sit before the stone face and gaze at the perfectly carved mouth, eyes, and cow ears. "Religious fanatics haven't killed your spirit," I say aloud. "I call on you Hathor Cleopatra. Help me and my son make our way home to America."

I stare at the unblemished face for a minute or two, waiting for a whisper to answer me. I hear nothing and begin to worry tourist police will enter the courtyard and find my behavior suspicious, not something a typical fellaha would be doing.

Suddenly, the statue's eyes blink, its nose flares, the perfect mouth upturns a twitch and its ears wiggle. I squint and pinch my arm to make sure I'm not hallucinating. Then I touch my gold wadjet and whisper, "Goddess of motherhood, my life isn't so different from that of an ancient Egyptian. The world strips me until I'm left with nothing but love for my child. I call upon your spirit, Isis-Huthur, Cleopatra. Do you hear me?" I touch the cool stone face. "We need your protection and guidance, my son and I."

A breeze blows across the courtyard and whispers *Young mother, I am Seshet Akeru, the Prophet of Ba'ast at the altar in the Temple of Heavenly Fields.*

I call upon Hathor, Mistress of the Divine Pillar. Adoration to you. Bring failure to those who cast evil on Earth. To he who steals Horus from Isis. You are a fiery force against evil. You are Hathor, protector of mother and child. Heqaf Heqaf Heqaf Henenhenenhenen, Shen Urit."

"Hathor protect Isis and her child," I say aloud the words ringing in my mind. It feels like the blue lily drug runs through my veins.

A flash of light jolts me from my trance. A tourist just took my picture—a photo of a fellaha before a Hathor capital. I must appear like a relic of ancient Egypt. Then someone whistles and further awakens me. I turn and spot Jamal standing outside the courtyard. He's gesturing for me to hide. I'm spoiling his game of hide and seek.

I worry the tourist in the courtyard might become suspicious and notify the tourist police so I set off to hide. I don't want to disappoint Jamal but I'm growing weary of the game. When can I end this pretense? I ask myself as I wander back to the great hypostyle hall.

At the entrance, I scan the front plaza and notice two uniformed guards walking toward me. My heart leaps as one glares in my direction at the temple façade. I can't budge. *Where is my son?* I want to shout his name. If the police catch me, I must tell Jamal who I really am.

The policemen talk to each other as they continue nearing me. I nearly die inside. I want to flee. But where? I can't run far in my voluminous garb.

I slowly walk in the opposite direction, looking downward, wondering how I can speak Arabic with a village accent. It's simply impossible. I tightly hold my hijab and walk away hoping they'll ignore me. When I'm past the Roman Birthing House and Coptic church, I still sense their presence but don't look back.

After reaching the pylons I turn to survey the temple grounds. My head is down when I hear Jamal shouting in Arabic, “We’ve found you, Marion Ravenwood!” The boy gleefully laughs and runs to me. Majid is close behind, grinning in amusement.

“Come here! Yalla, yalla,” I gesture to my boatman.

“Madha?” he asks; his expression changes.

“Police,” I whisper when Majid’s beside me.

“This is great!” Jamal cheers. “Now let’s hide from them, ya Sarah.”

“No, be still.” I grab Jamal’s hand and look across the grounds.

The police are approaching us. “What should we do?” I ask Majid.

“You and the boy sit and keep your face covered,” he says.

I embrace my son beside me and whisper that he must play at his best to fool the police.

“Salam al akum,” Majid greets the two uniformed men. Their armbands say River Police.

“Salam,” one replies. “Are you from nearby?”

“My village is down river. I’m a boatman and often stay in Cairo. I have papers if you like.”

The two men say nothing but look at each other. One asks about me and Jamal. I understand the question and resign myself to my fate. I’ve the urge to tell Jamal the truth about me but I keep silent and call upon my avatars asking for a miracle.

“She’s my second wife,” Majid says. “We married in Cairo. And he’s my son. We stopped on our honeymoon to see the temples. Is there trouble?”

“La, la, not at all,” a policeman says. I sigh with relief although I’m skeptical of their actual intent. “We’re merely talking to local villagers,” he continues. “Several tourists complain

their cameras and purses are stolen. But I can see you carry no bags and since it's your honeymoon, we bid you a good day." The man coyly winks and the policemen saunter away.

I remain frozen on the ground, holding Jamal, protecting him from harm. During the encounter Jamal has kept quiet but once the police are out of hearing, he says aloud, "Did I play well?" He stands and pretends to shoot at them.

"My yes, my little Saladin," I reply as I shakily stand. "We're master spies at the Hathor temple. Now please, let's get back to Abdul's house and have something to eat before I faint. This sun is killing me in these clothes."

That night on the Mintaka moored near the village of Abdul, Jamal nestles beside me, exhausted from the day's adventure. The river gently rocks the boat and the lapping waves lull me to sleep like a baby in a cradle. I dream Jamal and I are voyaging among a fleet of royal ships traveling to the southern border.



Chapter 13: *Seshet Akeru* -- Abu at the Southern Frontier

Beautiful ba of Isis, young mother. Hathor draws you up the steps to the Milky Way. The Golden Falcon guides you to the imperishable stars. You receive the powers of your own diadem. Your son is the falcon perfumed.

Now my story continues. During my father's third jubilee, I also journeyed to the southern border.

For ten days, Pepi's Wadjet fleet moored at the piers of Abu, the main town on a river island. Along the western shores stretched the red desert sands with innumerable tombs, monuments, and funerary markers. Abu was rich in red granite deposits that my father and the kings before him used for building projects throughout the kingdom. King Sneferu erected shrines in Abu and his father King Huni built a garrison fortress. Abu was a defensive port and trade center where expeditions began and ended and where my husband started his journey into Medjay and Yam thirty years before my arrival.

Tall muscular soldiers from Medjay and Yam patrolled the border town. At the docks, Medjay workers unloaded our cargo of grain, papyrus, vats of wine, and crates of turquoise. My father's "Overseer of Trade" bartered with foreign exporters for gold, frankincense, ivory, cheetah and leopard skins, ostrich feathers and eggs, live monkeys, giraffes, and pygmies to perform for governors and noblemen and the king himself.

The main temples of Abu belonged to Khnum the Ram, his consort Satet the Gazelle and Anuket their virgin daughter. These temples were famous because of what had happened nearly five hundred years before my arrival. At that time, the tears of Isis had stopped reaching the river and a drought plagued Djoser's kingdom. Without flood waters, his people couldn't grow food to feed themselves and their animals. Men were robbing neighbors, children were collapsing from hunger and women were selling their bodies to provide their children with bread and milk.

After seven years of drought and famine, Lord Khnum appeared to King Djoser in a dream. He told Djoser to repair his temple in Abu and build shrines for Satet and Anuket and the river would rise again and end the famine. King Djoser traveled to Abu and restored Khnum's

temple and erected temples to Anuket and Satet beside the gurgling caverns at the south end of Abu. Satet in her white crown with antelope horns upheld her ceramic bowl, caught the tears of Isis and poured them into the river. Khnum opened the cavern gates, released the flood waters and restore Djoser's kingdom to prosperity.

While in Abu, I paid homage at Satet and Anuket's temples on behalf of my father then embarked on my own mission with my father's blessings. To help with arrangements, I enlisted my personal guard at Governor Heqaib's estate where I was residing.

Taharq was a brawny Medjay soldier making his way through the ranks of Governor Heqaib's palace guards. He spoke with clarity, a mark of his trustworthiness.

"I'm looking for a scribe," I told Taharq. "An etcher of stone who travels through the wadis of Medjay and Yam."

"You can find such a man at the night market," Taharq suggested.

"Night Market? I know nothing of such a place."

"It happens each night in a borough near Satet's temple," he said. "Mercenaries, scribes, merchants, and commoners alike frequent the night market before traveling to Medjay and Yam."

When the third-quarter moon rose at midnight, I disguised myself as a common old woman and Taharq escorted me across town to the poorest section of Abu. In darkness we walked along narrow streets past colorful mudbrick shops, brothels, and taverns for smoke, potions, and beer. I had never seen such a place of illicit gambling, prostitution, narcotics, excessive drinking and untaxed bounty passing hands. I couldn't help but think I was born in such a neighborhood.

I closely followed Taharq to a park lit by torches attached to doum palms. The air smelled of the roasted goose sold at food stalls. Commoners and caravan soldiers were mingling in the park. At one corner soldiers were throwing sticks and moving amulets on a Senet board drawn in the soil. They wagered potions and amulets, shell jewelry, and semiprecious stones looted from their enemies. Senet is the game of journeying to the Afterworld of Osiris. The player who passes the test of 42 negative confessions proves himself true of voice and wins the game.

We arrived at a group of scribes seated on the bare earth beside red granite boulders. By torchlight, these men were selling scarabs, djed pillar, and ankh amulets they drew on broken pieces of pottery. Some scribes were writing letters to the dead and magic spells on papyrus paper.

I examined the quality of work among them and noticed a small man drawing the king's Golden Falcon name.

"They say a dwarf brings good-luck and is trustworthy," I said to the small scribe. In the wavering light he kept his sight on his detailed drawing. "Where did you learn to write so splendidly? Little man of divine picture words," I asked him.

"They call me Dag," the dwarf said without looking from his work. "My father was Sesh Nesu, scribe to the king. He kept cargo lists at the harbor of Abu. I learned to write at the temple academy and inherited my father's position twenty years ago. I then joined expeditions to Medjay and Yam to keep records for the generals in charge. Lots of riches are to be had south of the border. Lots of adventures to keep a little man amused."

"And what occupies you now, Dag, son of Sesh Nesu?" I asked while already suspecting he was just the scribe I sought.

“I’m awaiting my next expedition.” He peers at me for the first time and adds, “Old Woman.”

“Can you chisel such a fine Golden Falcon on a wadi cliff in Medjay and Yam?” I asked with hope.

“Dear lady, I spent ten years chiseling divine words on stela and tombs. My work appears on the temples of Isis-Hathor in Iunet and at Per Satet here in Abu. I’m a master carver and a dedicated follower of Hathor, Horus, and Osiris. I may be small but I’m a pious man.”

I handed him a papyrus scroll and said, “I want these words chiseled onto a wadi cliff along Harkhuf’s last route east of the river, where Wadi Halfa dwindles beyond sight.”

The dwarf studied the words on my scroll. “Old Woman,” he said. “Such a project will take one month even with ten master carvers. We have no such leisure time during a caravan trek. We are slaves to the generals.”

“I will reward you to enlist these ten men and extend the length of time you travel. If you undertake my commission, you’ll receive payment in gold, turquoise, and a blessing and seal from the High Priestess of King Pepi’s Great Palace. The king himself will grant you royal titles and rank, little scribe.”

The dwarf held up his lantern and carefully studied my face. “I know who you are, Daughter of the King. I saw you during the procession through the city. I’m as keen at remembering faces as I am in drawing my picture words. I must say, you disguise yourself quite well. You are Seshet Akeru, Seal Bearer of King Pepi himself. Without your signet rings and fine jewelry, of course.” He chuckled.

“Quiet pigmy,” Taharq protested defensively.

I stilled my bodyguard with my hand and said, “Can you chisel these words? Master Dag, son of Sesh Nesu?”

To demonstrate his skill, the scribe copied my words on a sheet of papyrus. It took some time but when finished, his drawings were precise and elegant. The fluidity of his pen was as glib as his tongue.

From a pouch I carried, I took out a turquoise winged scarab, an ankh, and the four sons of Horus. The scribe examined them and agreed to their quality. “After you arrange for ten master carvers of divine picture words, I’ll give you these amulets plus a fair amount of gold.”

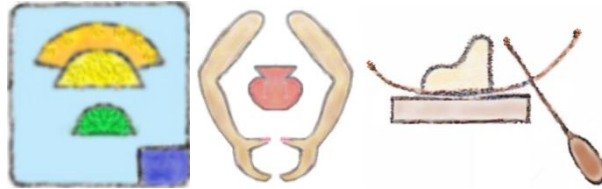
“A most generous offer,” Taharq volunteered to say.

I then took from my pouch a dark turquoise Eye of the Falcon magnificently crafted and mathematically proportioned. It wasn’t the translucent wadjet the Golden Falcon gave me on the day we wed. **Embalming priests wrapped that wadjet in my mummy.**

I showed the wadjet to the master scribe and said, “This is not for you. You are to bury this Eye of Horus under rocks at the mountainside cliffs where you etch the name and story of my husband the Golden Falcon. And if you don’t fulfill this contract, these amulets will become Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra. She will take vengeance on you. Your heart will grow heavy from grief and misfortune. You’ll never enter the double gates to the imperishable stars. This is preordained by the High Priestess of King Pepi, Prophet of the Stars and of Mothers and Children.”

“By my ka, ba, and ib, and by the ka of my father, Daughter of the King, I swear to fulfill our contract.” The dwarf placed his fist at his heart and continued, “Although I’m a small man, I’m honorable. I am Dag the Dwarf master scribe of the king. All caravan generals seek my service. It’s true, my royal Lady, a dwarf is trustworthy and a bringer of good fortune.”

And now, young mother, beautiful ba of Isis, I have reached the end of my story. I say to you what I said to Dag the Dwarf long ago. Isis-Hathor and Satet give you their powers and blessings for your journey to the wadi cliffs beyond the southern border.



Chapter 14: Sailing to the Southern Border

Just before sunrise I awake with Jamal beside me. I feel reinvigorated and know my avatars and Hathor herself entered my dreams to give me strength and insight to finish our journey.

When Majid sets sail for the camel market near Aswan, the sunlit river reflects the shore. An ibis makes a nasal croak and several magpies caw from tamarisk trees. I call Jamal to my side at the bow. Instead of wearing my veil and hijab, I'm enshrouded with serenity.

Jamal is holding his Chewbacca. "Let's play Star Wars," I say to encourage his imagination. After nearly two weeks, Jamal has never said anything negative or shown any anxiety about our journey.

"Do you want to be Darth Vader or Chewbacca?" I take hold of his action doll.

For a moment Jamal peers pensively into the river, then says, "You know Sarah, Mama will be jealous. She's never done anything like this. Women never do. Except for you, my very best teacher. I wish you were my mother."

My heart patters. I haven't yet told him the truth. The right moment never seems to happen and I don't want to disrupt his joy by shattering his reality. *Perhaps now is the right time,*

I think and wonder if my avatar is telling me this. Has her magic prepared my son for this moment? “Jamal, ya Saladin,” I say. “Would you like me to be your mother?”

“Aywa! I would like that. But since you aren’t, I want you for my wife.” He leans on my shoulder. I take him in my arms.

This is the right time I’m now certain. Then I hear a soft voice saying *Soon he’ll tire of this game. He’ll begin to ask questions. Be tactful when revealing the truth.*

“Jamal,” I whisper. “I can’t marry you.”

My son draws away and gives me a puzzled look. He takes back his Chewbacca. “You can. You’re Amanishakheto! By God, you will be my wife!”

I think for a moment to carefully chose my words. “Let me tell you a story,” I say. Jamal nods in anticipation. He loves hearing adventure stories. “A long time ago, before you were born, a young American woman traveled to Venice and met a handsome man from Egypt.”

“Like us,” Jamal excitedly adds.

“Exactly. And this American woman and Egyptian man fell in love and had a baby in Cairo.” Jamal listens with interest, awaiting the adventuresome part of the story, I’m sure. “But something terrible happened as soon as the baby came into the world.”

“What? What?”

“The Egyptian man and his sister forced the American woman to leave their house without her baby.” I fall silent, feeling overwhelmed with emotion but I can’t cry in front of my son. I call on Seshet Akeru to give me the stamina my son needs. *Make me a pillar of strength*, I silently ask. *A djed pillar. A distinguished lady of stature like you and Nefertiabet.*

“And?” Jamal eagerly asks.

“And, the American woman returns to Cairo ten years later to find her son and take him home.”

“Really? Well, what a stupid story. Didn’t someone get shot and killed? Weren’t there spies? Warriors?”

“Jamal, the story isn’t over yet. You see, it’s true.”

“What? Aren’t all stories true?”

“They are, I believe. When we tell them. Listen. You wait here. I want to show you something.” I fetch a portfolio of important papers from my bag and pull out the photo of me and Amar at the hostel in Venice. “Do you recognize these two?”

“That’s my uncle,” Jamal says. “And is that you?”

“Yes. Don’t you see. I’m that American girl in the story. Your uncle is the Egyptian man.”

“You’re lying!” Jamal protests. “This can’t be true. You don’t even know my uncle. He lives in Alexandria.”

“The picture is proof.” I pause, wondering if I dare tell more, upset the boy and foil this whole endeavor. I’ve never seen Jamal grow so concerned. So serious. How far will his emotions take him? I then hear my avatar whisper *you’ve gone this far. It’s time to finish the story.*

“Jamal, my little Sultan Saladin,” I hug him. “If you want me to be your mother, don’t you see, I can.”

“Why?”

“Because I *am* your mother. You’re the baby in the story. Zenna isn’t your real mommy. I am.”

Jamal jumps up, throws Chewbacca mid-deck and points at me screaming, “Liar! liar!” He insults me in Arabic and says, “My father is dead. Mommy is mother! I hate you! Take me home! Alan. Alan.” He begins crying and runs to Majid who is manning the rudder.

The game is over. Now it’s entirely up to Jamal. If he can’t accept me, I’ll leave the boat and flee Egypt on my own while Majid anonymously leaves my son at a police station. And if the police apprehend me, I’ll create an international incident over my story. *Mother kidnaps son out of love* the headlines will read. *A son stolen from her womb.*

“Jamal, Jamal,” I cry as I reach for the boy hiding behind the boatman. Majid pulls him out and scolds him for misbehaving.

“Stop,” I ask Majid then turn to my son. “I love you, Jamal. You’re the life of my heart. We’ll go to Disneyland. I promise. I’ll take you to Hollywood, a football game. Basketball. We’ll see Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Magic Johnson. But you must behave, *Habibi*.”

“La!” The boy runs to the bow under the canvas awning. He stands center deck staring threateningly at me. “You can’t make me do anything. I don’t like this game. I want to go home to Mommy.”

“Jamal.” I slowly approach him. “The picture. Look at my eyes, my skin. They’re like yours, not Zenna’s. Please believe me. I’ll never hurt you. I’m your real mother. Zenna isn’t. *‘Ana al’umm*. I am mommy.”

Jamal glares at me for a long time. He’s trying to make sense of the shocking news. His face grows stern and he shouts, “Now you must do whatever I say or I’ll scream for the police to take you to jail.”

“Yes, Jamal. I’ll do whatever you say. *‘Ahabak*.” I near him, aching to cuddle him tightly, make up for all the years he didn’t know me as his real mother.

“Stop,” he says, pointing at me. “Get on your knees.” Majid yells at the boy to behave but I obey Jamal’s wishes. Jamal approaches me and pushes down my head. “Kiss my feet,” he demands.

Feeling helpless and at my son’s mercy, I gently bend down and kiss his soiled little feet.

“Ha!” he laughs. “Now you’re my slave.”

“Oh, Jamal,” I plead. “Please stop. I love you. *Ahabak.*”

“You must do whatever I say. Now kiss my mouth.” I comply, feeling the soft tender lips of my son.

“It’s enough Jamal.” I stand. “We must stop this and talk about our future.”

“No,” he hits my arm. “Get back down. Now you must touch my zib.”

I gaze at Jamal, shocked by his words. He’s gone too far. I must stop his vile little game at the risk of destroying all hope of our escaping together. I slap my son’s little hand like teachers do to naughty boys at the elementary school. “*Kifaaya!* enough. *Ana al’umm.* I’m your mother. You’re a part of me, Jamal. No matter what you think, this will always be true. But you must stop this game. We must decide what to do.”

Jamal begins to cry from the shock of my discipline and from the upheaval in his young life. Reality has crashed down on the ten-year old boy who has been living by his imagination. How can he suddenly understand a new truth about his life?

I reach over and hug my son. He doesn’t pull away. In fact, he rests against my shoulder and continues to cry. I hold him firmly and begin singing Michael Jackson’s *I want to rock with you all night. . . rock the night away.*

Jamal looks at me and I see a slight upturn at the corners of his mouth, a twinkle of delight in his eyes. He’s my happy little son. My perfect cherub. My entire world.

He is Re-Horakhty, falcon of the rising and setting sun my avatar whispers. You don't know what tomorrow might bring, but for the present, you have regained your rightful son.

The Mintaka sails past the famed archaeological sites of Luxor, Esna, and Edfu before we reach our destination. The Daraw Camel Market is near Kom Obo, a cruise ship port and another spectacular site I won't be seeing.

As our felucca nears the famous camel souq, I've a sudden urge to see Aswan. Or maybe I'm apprehensive about starting the next leg of our journey. Maybe I need a little time before we go to Daraw. Maybe I'm afraid of what's ahead. "Ya Majid," I say. "Before we go to the camel souq, can we sail twenty miles further up river. I've traveled this far and reclaimed my son. I want to sail through the city of Agatha Christie's 'Death on the Nile' and see the ancient sites for my first and what may be my only time."

"As you like madam."

"I want to ride a camel across the desert with my beautiful teacher," Jamal protests.

"We will. And soon. But first don't you want to see the temples of Philae, the Rameses monuments in Abu Simbel, and the dam Nassar built in the 1960's."

"Yes," Jamal says with excitement. "My grandfather worked for Gamal Nassar. I want to show you the dam. Sarah."

My heart nearly flies from my chest at Jamal's acceptance of me. He's completely slipped back into his boyhood with even more enthusiasm and energy than he had before. If that's even possible.

By late afternoon, the Mintaka nears the heart of Aswan on the most beautiful leg of our journey. The swallow wing is at full sail. I'm resting at the bow with Jamal, wearing a scarf but not my niqab. We pass through a stunning landscape of amber sand and granite rock edging the shore. The river glimmers with golden sunshine. If only I had my six-star lens and camera, I keep thinking, but everything is more spectacular than a picture could ever capture. With my son, I've reached the frontier passage to the unknown.

Since Jamal learned the truth, my relationship with him has been delicate. Sometimes I think he's contemplating his situation. He seems happy and I believe he accepts this new reality although he doesn't call me "Mama." I think it's too soon for that. His little boy emotions are probably somewhat raw. His puppy love for me has become confusing for him, perhaps. And I don't push him to accept me as his new mommy and I don't ask him how he's feeling about me or about Zenna. When he seems deep in thought, it quickly passes and we continue with our adventure sailing the Mintaka.

As we pass the sand dune of Qubbet el-Hawa, Jamal points to the rock-cut tombs high on the cliffs and exclaims, "The Generals!"

Previously, I had stirred Jamal's anticipation with stories about the Old Kingdom generals of Pepi II.

"Pepi's generals led military caravans into Nubia and blazed new trade-routes while battling nomads with swords and maces," I tell my son as we sail past the tombs. "On Governor Harkhuf's tomb is a letter Pepi II wrote when he was a little boy king like you."

"What did he say?"

"Pepi asked Harkhuf to bring him a healthy pygmy, a little man about your size."

"I'm not so little anymore," Jamal exclaims. "I'm a boatman."

“You’re right. Sultan Saladin. And you’re as good a boatman as *‘al sayid* Majid.”

The northerly winds blow our boat past the botanical gardens of Kitchner’s Island which appears like an emerald in the flowing Nile. At the shoreline are cruise ships, domed mosques, minarets, ruins, and contemporary houses. Galabia clad men are steering donkey carts along waterfront roads where abaya clad women are washing clothes while their naked children are splashing in the water. Feluccas, dahabeyas, rowboats, and ferries are navigating the river around us. I feel like my ancient avatar on her boat sailing through Pepi’s kingdom.

“Have you ever heard of Eratosthenes?” I ask my son.

“My uncle told me Eratosthenes was Chief Librarian at the Library of Alexandria. I’ve been to Alexandria,” my son proudly states. “Many times!”

“Did you know that in Aswan Eratosthenes discovered the Earth has a tilt?”

“This is my first visit to Aswan!” Jamal exclaims. “But I know all about Gamal’s dam. My grandfather was his minister of agriculture.”

“Yes, I know. You have lots to be proud of. Do you know Ptahhotep inscribed on his tomb, ‘a son is kind hearted by nature when he listens to his mother. If he pays attention, he is a follower of Horus the Falcon,’” I tease my son and we smile at each other.

“On the summer solstice,” I continue my story. “When the sun was directly overhead, Eratosthenes looked down a well and saw his reflection but he noticed there wasn’t a shadow because Aswan is at the Tropic of Cancer. The year before in Alexandria he saw a shadow when he looked down a well at noon. He calculated the Earth’s tilt from the angle of the sun’s shadow and distance between the two cities.”

“Sarah,” Jamal says. “Can we look down a well in Aswan?”

We pass the ruins of the Satet temple, Khnum's temple, and the Nilometer the ancients used to predict the Nile flood.

"Jamal. Look on the steep bank across from the Nilometer," I say.

"The red brick building?"

"Yes, that's the Old Cataract Hotel. It opened in 1899. Agatha Christie wrote about it in *Death on the Nile*."

"Who's Agatha?"

"A famous old writer. I'll tell you the story. It has lots of people mysteriously murdered. But for now, I wish we could stay at the Old Cataract." I look at Majid as he navigates the Mintaka. "I'd have a broiled steak, a glass of Chardonnay and I'd take a long hot bath in a clean porcelain tub with lavender scented Epsom salts. What do you say Majid? Do you think we'd pass for an average Egyptian family? I know the idea seems ludicrous but I'm hoping you'll agree. It's worth two or three of my bangles."

Majid merely chuckles at my foolish talk and continues manning the rudder.

As we near Elephantine Island, Jamal joins Majid with Chewbacca in his hand. They turn the bow into the eye of the Northerly, the wind moves from one side of the boat to the other, the boom shifts, the sail changes, and I watch my talented son help the boatman zig-zag across the Nile. Jamal really does know what he's doing.

Feeling overjoyed with where we now are, but worried I might become overly confident and invite the evil eye on our escape, I call on Seshet Akeru to make our border crossing successful.

From the flapping sails I hear her whisper *O Satet of the seasonal floods, protector of childbirth and motherhood, guard the southern gates to the unknown as Isis carries her son across the border.*

Young beautiful mother. You are the archer Satet. You catch the tears of Isis and shoot arrows at the river's source to bring lifegiving waters to Earth.

"Now," I say to Majid, feeling filled with strength and power. "Let's get to the bartering table in Daraw. I'm ready to meet whatever the gods throw before me beyond the southern border."



Chapter 15: Across the Desert

Under the swelter of noon, far from a refreshing river breeze, the odor of manure, fresh alfalfa, wet fur and urine accost my senses. Camels are everywhere. Some are tied to wooden fences, some kneel in stillness, some are asleep while standing, many are hobbled. They're light-tan, dark-tan, and white baby camels, cows and large bulls. Birds on their backs eat ticks and mites. A few goats and dogs are roaming the souq along with tourists taking pictures. Arab and Nubian men in galabias stand or sit among the beasts, many are smoking hookahs around braziers roasting greasy camel meat that streams through the air. Men are gesturing and shouting above the groans, snorts, and animal murmurs. *Hamdulila . . . too expensive . . . too scrawny, too old . . . finished!* Flies are everywhere.

"My goodness!" I exclaim as Jamal and I closely follow Majid.

“Welcome to the Camel Market of Daraw,” Majid tells us. He’s carrying our duffle bags on his head like there’s nothing inside. Such skill.

“Look Sarah.” Jamal indicates two men beating camels with sticks, forcing them onto paneled pickup trucks.

“They’re camel masters taking their camels to the Birqash Camel Market near Cairo,” Majid tells us. “It’s a two-day drive.”

“Where do all these beasts come from?”

“The Sudan and Somalia.”

“Are they all for riding?”

“La. They’re traded for meat, racing, riding, and breeding.”

“When will we buy our camels?” My son tugs at the sleeve of my hijab.

“Soon, I hope. Are you sure you’re ready for this, my brave Saladin?”

“Of course. I’m a camel master and I’ve been to the Birqash market in Cairo. Uncle took me there. He wouldn’t let me to ride one. But you will. Sarah.”

“That’s the plan, ya Saladin.”

Majid leads us to a mudbrick structure beside one of the many corrals. I touch my gold wadjet and say in my mind *Priestess of the Nile. Seshet Akeru. See us through this upcoming endeavor. Find us the right camel master and the right camels.*

Outside the mudbrick hovel, Majid introduces me to a camel trader named Naguib Mafid. He’s a small, middle-aged man, unshaven and shady looking with a patched eye, a worn tan galabia and a Yasser Arafat red checkered keffiyeh turban. I reach to shake his hand and see he has no right arm below his elbow. I’m embarrassment.

“Naguib’s arm was crushed when loading crates on a pickup truck.” Majid explains. “A camel master had to cut off his arm. He lost his eye in a squabble with thieves. But he knows all the camel masters from Sudan.”

Inside the scantily furnished hovel, Naguib asks us to sit on floor mats. He offers us sweet mint tea in small glass cups. Majid and Naguib discuss something in village Arabic. Evidently, Naguib doesn’t speak English. He’s not in the tourist business.

“I tell Naguib what you require,” Majid explains to me. “I say you aren’t sightseeing tourists. Naguib knows a Beja man from the Red Sea Hills.”

“A Beja man?” I ask, feeling stiff and uncomfortable on the dusty sod floor.

“Yes. He and his brother come to Daraw every year to trade their camels for money and grain.”

Naguib says in Arabic. “Beja men breed Bishari Kiliewau camels, the best racing camels in Egypt.”

“Only males are used for racing,” Majid adds. “Females are dangerous. They’re strictly used for breeding. The Bejas ride young bulls on their caravan so the camel proves its strength. Only the best males become Bishari Kiliewau breeding studs.”

“Fascinating. Can we go meet this Beja man, now?” I ask. “I’m anxious to leave Egypt with my son as quickly as possible.”

“Naguib and I go speak to the camel master first,” Majid suggests. “He’ll meet you here later, *inshalla*. Understand?”

As Majid and his friend walk out the door, I realize our journey beyond Egypt remains only a possibility. This Beja man could refuse to take me with him or worse, he could surrender me to the police for a reward. Or I could be forced to wait for days, weeks, for another Sudanese

nomad to wander along. The wait would be intolerable. Jamal wouldn't stand for it unless he could spend each day racing camels.

Half an hour later the front door of the hovel creaks open. Majid and Naguib enter with a tall lean African man in his forties counting black prayer beads with his right hand. He wears a white galabia and a black vest; his belt carries a curved sheathed dagger and his face has distinctive vertical scars below his eyes. I presume they're tribal markings. He's handsome, I think to myself, a rugged Marlborough Man from the Sudan; although, he's not the sort man I'd feel romantic about. He's not Omar Sharif or Jamal's father in Venice.

A younger man and two boys Jamal's age dressed like the Marlborough Man follow him inside. Each has an ornate wooden comb in his long fuzzy "afro" hair. They all wear sandals made from tires. Their feet look as hard and leathery as a camel's.

The boys brightly smile with big front teeth and beautiful faces. I imagine them as the sons of Amanishakheto and am pleased to watch them go straight to my son. Jamal shows them his action figures and Walkman. They seem instant boyhood pals. I guess that's how it goes with children, especially boys.

The two Beja men sit on the floor across from me and Naguib offers them tea and cigarettes and hummus and bread to eat.

"What's happening?" I ask, feeling a bit impatient and insecure about the situation. No one responds. The men drink their tea, smoke, and talk among themselves as if I'm not even present. I sigh and smile to show I'm not angry but deep inside, I think about how thankful I'll be when my son and I are home in America and I won't be depending on strange Beja men.

"He's Sharaab Abu Bahrin of the Abu bin Ali tribe of the Beni Amer Clan," Majid finally introduces the tall African to me. "His brother is Hamlab. Hamlab's sons are Bashok and

Samarr. They came early to Aswan because there is no rain on their land this season. Sharaab fears drought will soon come. Inshalla, they'll endure."

"Sarah. I want to see the camels," Jamal says, eagerly breaking from his play with the Beja boys. "Can we ride camels to Nabta Playa after the Pyramids of Meroe?"

I look at Majid and ask, "Can we?"

"La La. You cannot. Sometimes the Bisharin pass the Pyramids of Meroe. Maybe Nabta Playa. This year Sharaab travels the eastern deserts to Port Sudan. You can take a ship from there to some far away port."

"This is the first time I've heard about boarding a ship in Port Sudan. It's an intriguing idea. What do you think Jamal? Would you like to sail the Red Sea after our camel safari?"

"Yes, ya Sarah. We can do that too."

"Port Sudan sounds perfect," I remark to the men.

"Okay, you must barter with Sharaab, ya Sarah," Majid suggests. "Or he doesn't trust you. Maybe he thinks you cannot make it across the desert on a Bisharin camel."

"Tell him I'll pay whatever he thinks fair. We need to get to Port Sudan as soon as possible and find a ship that takes on passengers. We like this new idea. Don't we Jamal?"

"I can ride a camel and sail a ship," my son says to his new friends as he shows them how to use his Walkman.

"You can do anything my brave Saladin." The boys all giggle. Over what, I'm not sure.

Sharaab stares at me as if he's never seen an 'agnabi woman before, or heard her speak so close-up. I'm not wearing the niqab. Only my abaya. "Do you have a husband?" he abruptly asks me in Arabic.

“Aywa, he’s meeting us later,” I give my standard reply. Everyone chuckles, as is so often the case. Sometimes it seems that my every move and word is an ‘agnabi event. “How long will it take to get to Port Sudan?”

“Trek takes maybe one month,” Sharaab says in clear Arabic. He has a serious expression. “Camels must rest. And we must avoid the border patrol and desert jinn. The trek will be risky. You and the boy don’t look Bisharin. You pay three thousand Egyptian pounds.”

“One month? I assumed it would take one week, two at most.”

Majid talks with Naguib. The men are intently involved in the negotiations like this is a game of dominos at the hookah cafe. They know exactly how to participate in the bidding. “Aanesa Sarah. Now you say 1000 Egyptian pounds.”

The bartering goes back and forth until I finally offer 800 dollars. The whole process is annoying me. “This is my last offer,” I say more to Majid than the Beja men. “If they don’t accept it, I’ll give them whatever they ask.”

“And you give me three gold bangles,” Sharaab says. This surprises me; it **seems my old taxi friend in Cairo told Majid** who told this Beja man about my secret cache. This makes me uncomfortable but I can’t do anything but agree to the price.

“Is it settled now?” I look at Majid, hoping he’s satisfied with the transaction.

“La! Not settled,” Naguib states. “You must buy camels from this man. You pay 1000 EL for two Bishari Kiliewau camels. Bred by Beja and best suited for desert travel. You give camels back when you reach Port Sudan. No refund. Understand?”

I nod, unwilling to prolong the deal making. To my relief, the bartering has ended. I go to the back room, take off my bangles and hand them over to the men. No one needs to see how many bangles are on my arm.

“How can I learn to ride if I’m hiding away?” I think to ask. “I don’t see any fellaha riding or selling camels.”

The men talk among themselves until Majid says, “You dress as a Beja woman in a thawb.”

“Thawb?”

“Like Indian sari.”

“What about me. Can I dress like the king of Meroe?” Jamal asks in Arabic filling the room with laughter.

“La la. Majid says. Jamal dress like Bashok and Samarr but with a turban.”

“But the Bejas are Africans and Jamal and I are quite pale.”

“You use scarfs to cover your faces.” Hamlab assures me in Arabic. “We don’t expect to encounter any patrol. If we meet an intruder, my brother Sharaab will claim you are his wife and son.”

“Really? Well, all right. A good enough plan.”

“Today I buy your supplies and Sudanese clothes in the Kom Obo souq,” Majid suggests. “Tonight, you sleep in Beja tent. Mishy? Maybe it will take you and the boy one week to ride a Bishari Kiliewau camel.” The room again fills with laughter.

“Or maybe one year,” Naguib adds to further amuse the men and boys. Clearly, I’m outnumbered.

Under a gibbous moon, Majid and Naguib escort us to the Beja camp at a desert watering hole outside of Kom Obo. I suddenly realize I’ll never see Majid again. “I’m sorry you won’t be

guiding us through the desert mountains to the Sudan. For several weeks you've been our trustworthy boatman and friend."

"Yes. But I'm not a camel driver."

I pay Naguib a gold bangle for his wife and am glad to see the shady looking man depart. Although he's a friend of Majid, I don't trust him. Besides, how can I ever trust anyone after the betrayal I experienced ten years ago? I simply have no choice.

The Beja camp contains only what the pack camels and donkeys carry--mostly bags of grain and fodder. A herd of Nubian goats are penned in a rudimentary corral with female camels and their babies. The prized Bishari Kiliewau males are hobbled at the edge of camp. Five dogs with pricked ears and tightly curled tails rest by the camp fire.

"Look Sarah," Jamal exclaims. "Doggies."

"They look like the basenjis etched on tomb walls in ancient Egypt," I say to my son. "In one scene, a basenji sits at its master's feet, in another a Basenji is biting the neck of a gazelle."

"Really? They're that old?" Jamal tries to pet one. It growls and snaps.

"La!" Sharaab scolds. "These dogs hunt and kill. Not play with boys."

"It's okay Jamal. I'll buy you a basenji or any kind of dog you like in America."

"I want a rottweiler or a Doberman."

"Of course. Maybe even a pit bull. Maybe all three."

"Do your dogs have names?" I ask Sharaab in an effort to be friendly. To break the ice.

"No," he replies.

"What do you call them?"

“Dog,” he says. I get the feeling it’s going to be a long caravan ride. Sharaab isn’t anything like Majid or my friendly Cairo cabbie.

After Majid and Naguib leave, the coolness of night drifts over the camp. The Beja boys take Jamal and I to one of the dome tents made from palm mats. On wool blankets Jamal quickly falls asleep but I lie awake for hours listening to crickets as the wind rustles the surrounding date palms and white acacia trees. I think about our upcoming trek and worry a snake or scorpion or tarantula will creep inside the tent. Finally, I drift to sleep with my hand clasping my wadjet charm.

The next morning, after a breakfast of sorghum porridge and goat milk, Bashok and Samarr show us our camels. The beasts have small pointy ears, split lips, deep wide chests, long legs, thick gnarly knee pads and large black eyes with long lashes. “Yours is Asfar for its light pinkish color,” Bashok says to me.

“What’s the name of my camel,” Jamal excitedly asks.

“Tai Basshir. The best Bishari Kiliewau.”

“My camel’s brown, Sarah. My Tai Basshir.”

Samarr pats Tai Basshir. “See. He has a good round hump and matted wool at its throat.”

“Tai Basshir is better than your camel, Sarah,” Jamal tells me.

“Both are good Bishari Kiliewau,” Bashok says. “They stand two meters at the shoulders and weigh about 1200 pounds each.”

“We call this a mahlufa,” Samarr says as he places a wooden frame and red woven blanket on the camel’s hump.

“Why so many decorations? Is it Beja tradition?”

“The tassels and magic stones between the camels’ eyes protect us from desert jinn,” Bashok explains.

“I understand magic charms. They’re as ancient as Old Kingdom Egypt.” I touch my wadjet and silently ask my avatars for their protection against whatever jinn may cross our caravan path.

For the rest of the day, Bashok and Samarr teach Jamal riding techniques while Hamlab instructs me how to climb on Asfar. He hands me the reins and helps me place my left foot on the camel’s knee. “Now you put right leg over camel back and sit on mahlufa.”

“I’m trying but my thawb is hiking up. Glad I’m wearing long cotton trousers underneath.”

Hamlab laughs.

To shield me from the hot sandy wind, I cover my face with part of the thawb. Hamlab takes the rope and leads me a few paces. “Now you’re a bedawi woman.” He jokingly says.

“I don’t think Asfar likes me,” I say between the jolts from the camel’s stride. “He doesn’t seem interested in helping me out.”

“Each camel different,” Hamlab says. “You must know your camel. Like a woman must know her husband. In my language camels have many names. We say ‘camel too young to ride,’ ‘camel too old to ride,’ ‘camel ready to ride,’ ‘female ready to breed,’ ‘nursing calf with pregnant cow.’”

“What’s Asfar’s Beja name?”

“Camel ready to ride.” Hamlab laughs. So do I.

During my training sessions over the next few days, Sharaab is usually nearby sitting high on his camel watching me and speaking to his brother in their native language. He uses his driving stick rather roughly on his animals, I notice, and he rarely speaks to me. In fact, I sense my questions annoy him, like I'm stupid for not knowing how to ride a camel. When I stumble from my kneeling beast or am unable to get it to stand, Hamlab smiles and encourages me to try again while Sharaab makes a huffing sound like a camel.

Sometimes I emphasize my awkwardness to produce a chuckle from the headman but he remains aloof. He doesn't laugh as much as his brother and nephews and Jamal. I'm thankful when Sharaab rides over to the boys and listens to Jamal's Walkman. I decide to give the headman my Walkman and try to win him over. It served its purpose during the Nile voyage. Besides, now the Bejas make plenty of music around the camp fire every night.

Finally, one day, Hamlab says to me, "Okay, Miss. you handle camel well enough, like bedawi."

"Jamal is better at riding Tai Bashir. He struts with his camel's rhythm and runs Tai Basshir across the desert with your boys."

"I know," Hamlab grins. "It's no matter. Afa will follow the caravan on his own. Jamal can help my sons."

"Good I hardly need to be an expert camel jockey from Dubai."

Hamlab chuckles and I think I notice Sharaab slightly grin.

During dinner one evening, around the camp fire, Sharaab declares, "Tomorrow we go. Soon the *haiyuk serar* will come."

"Haiyuk Serar?" I ask. "Is that a jinn spirit?"

"Yes. Jinn stars shoot across heaven like arrows of Sekhmet."

“Sekhmet is the lion of old Egypt,” my son remarks. As always, he’s sitting with his new best friends playing with his action figures and Walkman. I think the boys are equally enthralled with one another. It fills my heart with pride and love. I know it’s the magic of my avatars or maybe of the little stones between our camels’ eyes.

“Sharaab means the Lyrid Meteor shower,” I explain to Jamal. “It’s in April. I imagine Sharaab knows dates and time by the movement of stars, the desert sands and the position of the sun on its journey north to south.”

“True miss,” Hamlab remarks. “But we are changing. In Aswan, I buy instamatic camera.”

“You have a camera?”

“I must take pictures of our prized Bishari Kiliewau racing males for market. Sharaab buy a Casio watch.”

Sharaab now fully grins and raises his sleeve to show off his watch. “Very good,” he says to me in Arabic. “I don’t understand how to use.”

“Let me show you how to set the calendar and date.” I say hoping to make inroads with the headman.

“*Shukran*,” Sharaab says but his warm grin is gone. Perhaps, I can’t help but think, he’s offended that a female has to show him how to use his new tribal ornament.

Just before sunrise, the Beja men and boys start breaking camp and preparing for the trek. The camels snarl and roar in the growing light as the men and the boys gear up the donkeys and camels with saddles and packs. They meticulously check the goatskin water bags for leaks and fill them with the murky well water.

“Camels and goats go without water for three days,” Hamlab tells me. “People, dogs, and donkeys cannot.”

“Look Sarah,” Jamal shouts from the well where he’s helping his friends fill the goatskin bags. “I’m Eratosthenes looking down a well.”

“You’re a master of everything, Jamal. A master with many names.”

When Bashok and Samarr unpen the goats, I climb on Asfar and the caravan leaves on its thirty-mile trek to the next watering hole across the dry barren landscape east of the Nile and south of Aswan.

As the days pass by our caravan travels from morning to evening. Hamlab tells me the names of each watering hole and the distance between them. He also tells me names for each landmark formation and wadi and even the night stars. I jot down the names so Jamal will have a record of his adventure on Tai Bashir with his Beja friends and newly found mother. The trek is difficult and the heat is strenuous, but I’m proud of Jamal and find most everything other than the inconveniences, enchanting.

From Bir Abu Hashim, we ride fifty miles in two days. Along Wadi el-Anid, we pass stunning sand drifts, low-lying hills and wide expanses of the barren desert. We rest for two days at the Bir Abraaq watering hole then cross the border unnoticed. Hamlab simply says, “Sudan.”

Nothing’s in sight but wadis and hills. There aren’t any lookout towers, border patrols or other nomads around. Just me, my son and our Beja caravan. Sharaab sits tall on the lead camel while his dogs scout for prey. Sharaab easily takes quail and rabbits from their mouths. He’s alpha of the pack. Bashok and Samarr follow Sharaab and herd the loose goats and camels. Jamal is usually ahead of me keeping pace with Bashok.

The Beja boys are just living their lives and Jamal is lost in his adventure. He's as happy as a boy could possibly be. Most mornings, my son wakes before dawn and is ready to get going. I live off his enthusiasm.

Caravaning is hard work under the blazing sun while wearing synthetic garb. Each day I'm sore, dusty, and riddled with camel fly bites. I suffer from a dry throat and the water in the sheep skin bags tastes like soot. For my dry lips and hands, Hamlab gives me lamb grease but it stinks and I don't use it. My hair under the thawb is a rat's nest. I can't keep it tame in the hot breeze of the desert. I wash it at the watering holes but have quit trying to brush out the tangles. Once my gold wadjet got tangled in my mass of hair and Hamlab had to cut it free with his dagger.

Somehow, I'm getting used to conditions I never thought possible to endure. Sometime, when riding Asfar, I feel the magic power of optimism from my avatars helping me along on our trek. When I ease into the rhythm of my camel's stride, the desert is a peaceful terrain. In the mornings, shadows are long. By late afternoon, before we pitch camp, shadows grow long again in the opposite direction.

When the caravan stops to rest, I nap a few minutes in the shade while the boys listen to Jamal's Walkman, throw boomerangs, or play with Jamal's action figures. On one occasion, they use Chewbacca and Darth Vader as targets for their sling shots. Sharaab got angry and scolded them for their mischief, including Jamal.

Each night at dusk the caravan stops at a grove of dry shrubs and trees or boulders along a wadi or at a watering hole, as long as it's not possessed by bad jinn spirits. The men and boys hobble the camels, including Tai Basshir and Asfar, pen the goats and tie up the donkeys. They pitch tents, set up the evening's hearth, make coffee, and prepare dinner.

During these times the desert is quiet except for gibbering guinea fowls and cooing doves and the ever-chirping crickets. Bashok and Samarr like to hunt with the dogs. Jamal always goes with them. My son is learning how to live off the desert. When he tells me only men and boys milk the camels and goats, he speaks with pride. He's a lion cub.

Jamal teaches me some Beja words and phrases. When I first say good morning *shibo mha* to Sharaab, he grins at me for the second time and then returns the greeting and shows me his Casio watch.

Everyone in camp watches my interaction with their tribal headman. To the Bejas, I'm probably something of a desert waiflike-jinni.

While the flickering flames of the night's campfire dance on the hard faces of the Beja men, we eat sorghum porridge, roasted rabbit, dove or Guinea fowl.

After our meal one evening, Sharaab tells stories about the jinn spirits of the desert. "God created both good and bad jinn from a smokeless fire," he explains.

"Where do they stay," Jamal asks. "These jinn."

"They're always among us, enjoying the cool evenings, listening to our voices, watching what we do. The good desert jinn help our caravan find safety. Bad jinn wander the desert and change their shapes."

"Into what?" Jamal asks. "Monsters. Ghosts? Gorillas?"

The boys all laugh.

"Into beetles, wild dogs, wasps, and horned vipers that spit their venom in your eyes and blind you. This is why we avoid certain ravines and mountains."

"The bad jinn make boulders fall off cliffs," Bashok adds while holding up Darth Vader as a bad jinn tossing a boulder.

“Bad jinn want to kill us,” Samarr says. “Or make our camel sick or cause him to stumble.”

Bashok plays like he’s sick to amuse my son. They boys are always at play.

Another evening, I ask Sharaab to tell us about his people. This seems to please him as I suspected it would. “We have four Beja tribes,” he says. “The Hadendowa, the Amarar, the Ababda, and the Beni Amer. We all live in Nubia for more than 4,000 years. Our ancestors are sons of Sekhmet and of Noah’s grandson Cush, son of Ham. We are sons of Madjay warriors and archers.”

“And the kings of Meroe,” Jamal suggests enthusiastically.

“Yes. Boy.” Sharaab grins at my son, his face alit by the evening’s fire. “In ancient times our people captured Meroe and Beja kings Shorkaor and Nakakamani ruled the kingdom of Kush, named after the son of Ham.”

After telling stories each evening, Hamlab plays his rabab, a guitar-like instrument that’s worn and aged, obviously passed down several generations. Sometimes the men and boys dance around the fire with their prized long bladed swords called badad sulimanis. The swords have two half-moons on the tasseled handles. Hamlab’s sword has Koranic inscriptions on the blade.

“To give me the power of Allah,” he tells me on the first night they pull out their swords for the evening dance. “We name our swords like we name their camels.”

“I call my badad sulimanis Emehai,” Bashok declares. “It’s our name for Orion.”

“I call mine Shorkaor, after the king of Meroe,” Samarr says as he upholds his sword prepared to dance around the fire, or fight a battle, it seems to me.

“Sarah, I want a badad sulimani,” my son says as he joins the boys in their sword dance. His boyhood adventure has no bounds.

“You can buy one in Port Sudan but it costs half as much as camel.” Hamlab says as he polishes his sword with a cloth to gleam magnificently as he dances around the fire.

“I’ll buy you one for your birthday,” I tell Jamal from where I sit on the ground outside the dance circle.

“I forgot about my birthday.” My son dances along with our Beja friends without missing a beat or breath.

“It’s soon. Probably during our caravan trek. Back on the Mintaka I gave you all your gifts at once. I wasn’t thinking about saving one for your birthday. I assumed we’d be at Disneyland by now.

“It’s okay Sarah. I want a badad sulimanis more than anything.” He looks at his best friends as they flash their swords in the dance. “I’ll call my sword Tai Basshir after my Bishari Kiliewau camel.”

“That’s a great name Jamal. And I’ll name my sword Gegi after the pole star,” I joke and everyone laughs.

“Women don’t have swords,” Jamal states the obvious and continues dancing around the fire with his sword bearing brothers.

On the night of the Lyrid Meteor Shower, the haiyuk serar, the first quarter moon is overhead at sunset. After dinner and coffee, Hamlab plays the rabab and the Bejas sing about great warrior jinn falling from the sky. They don’t dance tonight because they want to watch the spirits shoot across the sky.

By firelight, the boys play with Jamal’s action figures and I point out Saturn, Venus, and Mercury. “During college, I went on many stargazing fieldtrips away from the city lights. I went

to campgrounds and forest clearings, to the observatory in Dearborn at Northwestern and to the observatory in Urbana. But I never went anywhere as dark as the Nubian desert at night.”

“Yes. Very dark,” Sharaab tells me.

“Chicago is much farther north than here,” I say as Orion sets while the first quarter moon still shines. “We never see the Southern Cross, Alpha Centauri, and the Magellan clouds. I guess we all see Orion.”

“Emehai is our guide, like the moon, Tirga, the sun, Yin, the Big Dipper, Elulena, and the pole star, Gegi.” Hamlab says.

When the moon sets at midnight, the men watch the meteor shower beside the hearth and smoke their pipes. By two AM they retire to their tents. They’ve seen enough jinn for the night. Jamal and I stay up another hour counting meteors as Saturn crosses the sky behind Spica. By three AM, cool air enshrouds our camp and we retreat to our tent.

“I can’t sleep,” Jamal says. “My head’s filled with stars.”

“And most of them have Arabic names You too, Jamal, have a proud heritage.”

“Like a Medjay warrior?”

“Yes. Like a Medjay warrior.”

Jamal says nothing. He’s fallen asleep with, I’m quite certain, sword wielding stars dancing in his head.

I lay back but can’t fall asleep. My head is also filled with shooting stars. Sekhmet shooting her arrows across the Nubian night. I keep replaying what we’ve been experiencing on this caravan trek. My son thoroughly impresses me as do our African hosts. They seem to know every inch of the terrain. I wonder how people can be so in touch with their environment, so tied to their place of birth. I have no such connection to Palatine, Illinois. It’s just where I grew up.

Nothing connects me to my dysfunctional family. Nothing so interesting and pedigreed as the Bisharin warriors of Sekhmet and the grandson of Noah. I'm not tied to the ancient Egyptians! At least not by blood.

I start thinking about where my son and I will end up. Lately I've been considering California. I could get a teaching job and take Jamal to Disneyland every week. He won't even miss his childhood in Egypt. I know I'll never miss mine in Palatine. My son and I are adrift on a Great Green Sea. Of hope? Perhaps. Of redemption? Even more so.

I hold my gold wadjet charm and ask Seshet Akeru to make each shooting star we saw tonight a promise that my son and I will find a happy new life together.

Through the chirping crickets and rustling acacia trees, I hear her lulling whisper *You and your son will prosper with stability, health, beauty and gladness of heart, and live lives of contentment forever.*



Chapter 16: Haboob, the Desert's Fiercest Jinn

The day after the meteor shower the mid-afternoon heat grows intense. Sharaab wants to reach the next watering hole near the Red Sea Hills before evening and hurry past a wadi he claims is haunted with bad jinn.

My camel strides along in the middle of the caravan. My lips are smeared with grease and my head and face are covered with the thawb. It's quiet, except for a bleat or growl and the continual clomping of animal feet on the hard desert floor.

I watch amber sand blow over curved dunes and melt into the rhythm of Asfar. Dry and desolate thoughts drift in my mind maybe just to fill the boredom. I think about the Nubian warrior queen Amanishakheto, and the Beja kings Shorkaor and Nakakamani. I picture Nabta Playa and see the pyramids of Meroe form on the horizon. For a moment, I wonder if it's real or really a mirage.

Suddenly, Hamlab shouts, "Helas! Helas!" I jolt from my stupor. The dogs bark. All the animals stir from their passive caravan pace.

"Willa, willa!" Sharaab yells.

I look at the dunes in the direction of the sun and see a wall of crimson sand emerging from the desert's edge. It rises like a genie a mile high and as wide as the desert plateau. It makes a crisp howling roar like a herd of growling camels.

"Jamal," I shout with panic.

My son rides up to me as his boyhood friends race to contain the animals. They know the drill.

Across the plateau the sand wall approaches like a locomotive from Lawrence of Arabia. Sharaab gallops to me and **Jamal, grabs the reins of our camels and leads us to the cliff wall of a large wadi, the very place Sharaab was trying to avoid. The one filled with bad jinn. But there's no other sheltered place to go.**

The dust storm reaches us, smothering the ground. I see only a few feet before me. Sharaab and Jamal appear like ghosts with chalky white faces. “Keep moving or the haboob buries you in minutes,” Sharaab yells.

At a cliffside mound of scree, Sharaab kneels our camels and in the stirring grit, Jamal and I dismount. I reach for my wadjet to call for my avatars but a torrent of sand rips it from my neck as if the demon jinn from the cursed wadi yanked it off my neck.

Jamal and I drop to the ground between our kneeled camels. Sharaab covers us with a saddle blanket and warns us to wait out the storm. In the windblown sand he gallops off to help with the animals.

The howling storm crackles around us like a cat o’ nine tails. I lean against Asfar and huddled with my son under the blanket. It feels like we’re in an oven. Darkness falls like a solar eclipse. I taste the sand and grit. It reaches my skin beneath the blanket and my thawb. It stings like millions of biting ants.

“Are you afraid, Jamal?” I ask. He can’t hear me as he bravely faces another amazing adventure with his teacher from America who happens to be his mother. My only thought is that if the desert buries us alive, my son and I will become mummies entombed together forever. I again call for my avatar and hear *Isis and Horus. When Set appears, I propitiate his violent spirit. The vulture Nekhbet spreads her enormous wings over you. She keeps the red desert sands from burying you alive.*

The sandstorm lasts an hour, maybe two; it’s difficult to measure the time. After it passes, everything becomes eerily quiet. Jamal and I survived nestle together beside the kneeling camels. But sand covers much of us.

We stand and brush off the grit and dust.

“Jamal. You got to help me search for my wadjet and gold chain.”

“What happened Sarah?”

“A jinn yanked it off my neck.”

“It’s impossible to find, Sarah. You lost it for good. Everything’s covered in sand.”

“I know. But I can’t lose my good luck charm. It’s my connection to ancient Egypt and my avatars.”

“Avatars? What’s that?”

Sharaab and Hamlab ride up before I can explain. “Everything all right?” Hamlab asks.

“I lost my eye of Horus.”

“It’s gone then. Lost forever. We must go,” Sharaab exclaims. “We must move far from the wadi cursed by bad jinn.”

“Sarah,” Jamal shouts and runs to me with something in his hands, “Hatha, Mama, Hatha.”

It is the first time Jamal has called me Mama. I’m so overwhelmed with emotion I don’t look at the object he’s trying to show me. I catch my breath and touch his beautiful face whitened from the sandstorm. Then I see he’s holding a translucent turquoise Eye of the Falcon. I take it from him. “This is old. Where did you find it?”

“In the pile of rocks. There,” he points to the tall looming cliff where we waited out the haboob. Where Asfar and Tai Basshir remain kneeling partially covered with sand.

High above the camels on the wadi cliff, I notice ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs etched in the stone.

“Look, Sharaab,” I practically yell. “The hieroglyphs. The haboob scoured them clean. Did you know about this?”

“The bad wadi jinn,” Sharaab says as he sits high on his camel. **“Our caravan disturbed them because we dared pass by without paying their price.”**

“Hamlab,” I say, ignoring the headman’s urgency. I’m too excited about what I’ve found. “Where’s your camera? Let me buy it. I’ll give you two gold bangles.”

Hamlab pulls the instamatic from his camel bag as he sits high on the mahlufa. “My last roll of film,” he says.

“Okay. Three bangles then. I must record the words on the cliff. This isn’t bad jinn. This is an unbelievable archaeological discovery.”

I take off three bangles and reach up to give them to Hamlab. He hands me the camera with a grin.

“Take my picture Sarah,” my son says. “I’ll stand by the cliff.”

“A wonderful idea, son.” I begin snapping a few photos careful to capture all the picture words. “Jamal, I recognize the cartouche of Pepi II and the votive formulas. I wonder if anyone has ever seen these hieroglyphs since the time of the Old Kingdom.”

“We go now,” Sharaab scolds.

“Just a few more pictures, sir. These words come from the time of your ancestor Sekhmet. They’re not bad jinn. They’re good jinn, if anything.”

“What do they say?” Jamal asks.

“Yes. Tell us,” Hamlab adds. “You now must say the words to calm the jinn that caused the haboob.”

I call Jamal to my side and hold the ancient wadjet in one hand and Jamal’s in the other. Our Beja hosts impatiently wait on their camels before the wadi cliff.

“I’ll do my best,” I say and ask my avatar to help me read the ancient inscription. It seems Seshet Akeru herself is reciting the words, or at least telling me what to say.

“In the reaches of Madjay and Yam, praise the ka of the Golden Falcon, Seer of the Night Sky, chosen son of King Pepi Neferkare and Queen Wedjebten. I am Seshet Akeru, his Foremost Wife. I give him the Eye of the Falcon to hold in the house of Osiris.”

“O ye who are living and pass this wadi, the Golden Falcon was caravan Lord when enemies released his ka beyond living eyes. He is not overcome. His troops cry ‘Wadjet-Khepri-Ra’ Mighty is the punisher of misdeeds.”

“A curse on you who pass without reciting this voice offering to the Golden Falcon. If you fail to do so a great and mighty force will appear from the double doors of Nun and forever erase your name.”

I look at Hamlab and Sharaab to see how they’re reacting. From their camels, they are passively staring at the hieroglyphs as if under a spell.

I’m about to call on my avatar to ask for our safe passage to the Red Sea Hills when, before the wall of hieroglyphs, a form materializes. **It’s an apparition of a woman in a long white gown flowing around her like my thawb flows in the desert winds. She wears a golden vulture crown over black hair with many tiny braids. A green and orange aura surrounds her. She holds out her hands, palms up, as if inviting me to embrace her essence.**

“I know you,” I say. You’re the dignified lady Seshet Akeru, daughter of King Pepi II and Foremost Wife of the Golden Falcon. Did you lead me here to show me the text? To give me the wadjet to replace my gold charm?”

She doesn’t answer and no one else seems to hear me. They still appear spellbound. I don’t think the others see her.

“Jamal, do you see her?”

“Who, Mama?”

“The beautiful dignified lady at the wall of hieroglyphs.”

“What? I see only the pictures on the cliff walls.”

I look back to the apparition. She stands clear to me as I hear her whisper *Young mother, with your son you survived the red desert sands. I see your face and hear your voice. I call upon Hathor to light the path of Isis and Horus. When the Eye of Ra speaks the Earth trembles and Isis sheds her tears at the eternal Temple of Life.*



Chapter 17: *Seshet Akeru* -- Tomb of the Golden Falcon

During the ninety-first year of Pepi's reign, my father held the three-day Grape Harvest Festival in Bastet, the City of Cats. People at the festival stomped grapes to make wine. Pilgrims sailed to Bastet from afar to celebrate the cat spirit of Isis-Hathor and pay reverence to the king.

At the plaza before the Temple of Ba'ast, Pepi provided his subjects roasted geese, pig, and cattle, loaves of bread, and vats of beer. Priestesses strummed harps and jugglers entertained

the crowds. Storytellers talked of my father's many victories. Pilgrims shouted, "Long live King Pepi, maker of beauty, righteousness, and joy. Bringer of good fortune."

As Daughter of the King and High Prophet of Ba'ast, I opened the festival at the pylon gates. Before the crowd of revelers, I upheld a chalice of wine and said, "Daughter of Ra, we entreat you to light our path."

For thirty years, I traveled to the City of Cats to pay homage at my husband's tomb. It lay hidden in the cliffs of my father's estate. At the bottom of these cliffs were copper gates where two royal soldiers stood guard beside a large granite statute of Ba'ast. Etched at the statue's base were the words *Our Lady Nurse Mother, Hathor-Ba'ast-Sekhmet. Erected by King Pepi Neferkare for his First Jubilee.*

On a hillside beyond the copper gates, subjects buried mummified cats as an offering to Hathor-Ba'ast. People left cat figurines, catnip, and raw meat for the cat mummies and for the living cats that wandered the estate to kill scorpions and rats. This is where I entombed my own beloved cat, Min Tep's Shadow. After the death of my husband, the black cat with white paws comforted me for many years. I took him on river voyages and carried him around the palace and into the king's receiving hall.

During the season of sowing one year, my vessel moored in Abdju. While I was away, Min Tep wandered from my cabin and a jackal near the pier killed him. A soldier retrieved the corpse. I gave Min Tep a lavish funeral at the catacombs near my husband's tomb. Lamenters wailed and priestesses sang *Lady of Compassion, Ba of Isis-Hathor, lift your son into the Field of Reeds.* For many years I grieved for this cat but found comfort in knowing that one day I would reunite with all I had loved on Earth.

Beyond the hillside of cats were many paths that led to the tombs of generals, governors, and Friends of the King. Before each tomb, grape vines grew on columns and stelae etched with words from the dead to the living. *Hotep-di-Nesu, a voice-offering from the king. I offer you every good and pure thing upon which to live. The ka of the deceased is true of voice. What the sky gives, the Earth creates, and the inundation brings.*

The hidden tomb of the Golden Falcon had a rock-cut terrace with clay pots of fragrant star jasmine. A stone bench overlooked the valley's vineyards, fig orchards, lakes, and the City of Bastet. On each side of the entry stood a pillar carved from the cliff. One had an opened lotus capital, the other a closed lotus capital. Together these pillars marked the cycle of time, the journey of Atum Ra.

By lantern light, I entered the tomb always telling myself *My husband and child are good, beautiful, and happy in the hereafter.*

The main chamber stored his sarcophagus made of granite quarried from the hills near MenNefer. His mummy lay under the unmovable lid. Over his face was a golden mask with red carnelian lips and blue lapis lazuli eyes. It was not his death mask. I always prayed to Hathor asking she help my husband's ka recognize the beauty of his face. Next to his mummy lay the tiny alabaster coffin containing the perfect mummy of our infant son Wepemnofret.

Etched on the east wall of the sarcophagus room was the story of my husband's death in Medjay and Yam and the names of the generals who escorted his body back to the kingdom and the name Intefi, the general who surrendered his tomb. Also on this wall were the words -- *to the children yet unborn, to you alive on Earth, I am the Golden Falcon, the King's Hereditary Son. I Oversee the Prophets of Seshat. More than anyone, my father desired I wed the dignified lady Seshet Akeru. She joins me in my hidden horizon. I am true of voice. I respected my parents. I*

never repeated anything harmful against anyone destitute. I honored the dead and the disabled soldier. I fed the hungry, clothed the naked, ferried the boatless, and buried the man who had no son. With my sekhem powers, I gladdened the hearts of gods and accomplished what they asked of me.

At the west wall of the chapel stood a stone altar before the tomb's ka door. This door was a carved rectangle of recessed stone slabs. Through a narrow opening, I could see a small chamber with life-sized statues of my husband and myself seated side by side. My father commissioned these statues after he made me foremost wife of his chosen son.

When the ka of my husband entered the portal to his tomb, these statues received him. The narrow opening at the ka door allowed him to gaze into the chapel and receive his offerings on the altar. His ka saw outwardly as I saw inwardly like the reflection of you, young mother, in my relic mirror of Khentkawes.

On the ninety-first year of our father's reign, after the grape harvest festivities, I stood at the altar and said to my husband's ka *I worry about our father's kingdom. He is too feeble to live another year. No one knows who's next in line. Menka will fight Merenre for the throne. If Menka becomes king, there will be discord in an already troubled kingdom. Menka will force me into marriage only to torment me. Set himself will test my station in life. I would die by cobra poison, a thousand scorpion stings, or the arrows of nine bows to spend eternity with you and our child. By your sekhem powers, take me with you on the boat of Atum Ra.*

I listened to my own breath and heartbeat while the orange lamplight in the chamber wavered on the stone walls. My husband's shadow appeared from the ka door between life on Earth and life in eternity. I sensed his cool and soothing breath at the nape of my neck. His essence made me tremble as it had when he lived on Earth.

“Behold I am Horus, the son,” he spoke. “I am your protector, defender, and avenger. You command your strengths. The gods lift you up as Shu upholds the sky. You rule the south and north. The east and west. The Golden Falcon gives you the spirit of jackals.”

The ka shadow of my husband dispersed into the light of the burning lantern. He drew away from me through the ka door where he would inhabit his statue beside my own. He had received his offerings, had given me counsel and departed on his journey through the light of day and the perils of night.

When he was no longer present, I gazed at the east wall. To find peace, comfort, and happiness, I read my autobiography etched at the end of his.

Although I was born an orphan of unknown parentage, King Pepi Neferkare adopted me as Daughter of his Body. I wedded the Golden Falcon. With my father the king, I caused my burial in my husband’s tomb. We are together through the cycle of time.

The Sahu spirit of the Golden Falcon travels with Osiris-Orion on his Milky Way boat. He is an Akh star in the house of Hathor. She finds the true of voice and lifts them into the imperishable stars.



Chapter 18: The Bravery Dance

After a peaceful night’s sleep at a watering hole far from the cursed wadi, we all recover from the harrowing experience of yesterday’s haboob. No one mentions the hieroglyphs on the

cliff wall or says anything about seeing a jinn spirit. I don't ask Hamlab or Sharaab if they saw my vision because I don't believe they did.

I return the camera to Hamlab and pack away the film and the ancient wadjet in my duffle bag strapped to one of the pack donkeys. I would carry the wadjet in my trouser pockets and rub it from time to time, like I did my gold charm, but I'm afraid of losing it.

When our caravan finally arrives at the rocky ocean shore of Mohamed Qol, the sun is nearing the Red Sea Hills. The glimmering sea before us is aqua marine with dark patches of coral reefs. Beside me and Asfar, at the frothy surf, Jamal sits on Tai Basshir like a brave Beja warrior. The air smells of camel sweat or maybe it's me.

"This is the Red Sea, son. It stretches from the Suez Canal to the Gulf of Aden."

"I know, Sarah," Jamal says. He seems as retrospective as I feel.

I kneel Asfar, dismount and deeply inhale the hot and humid air. I'm spellbound by the scenery. "This is why people worship God," I say.

"Allah Akbar," Jamal replies.

"Son. You seem as overwhelmed as me by the beauty surrounding us. This is a remarkable feat for a boy your age. It shows your maturity. This makes me proud and adds to my joy. We did it. Jamal. You and I."

"Look Mama. See the ship."

"I do. Take us away," I say as the vessel travels north until disappearing in the haze where the sky meets the Red Sea. "Jamal. Imagine Moses parting the waters on his escape from Egypt. It's like we're living in Biblical times. We're in the presence of the God of Moses, of Rameses, of Nefertiabet and Seshet Akeru, of your god, Jamal and the god of your Beja friends".

"Yes Mama. Our god is Allah."

“Son. All I know is we escaped from Egypt and I’m grateful to all the gods. But we still have a long way to go. We both have a lot of praying to do.”

“What do you pray for most, ya Sarah?”

“You. Jamal. Only you. And maybe that we make it to the promised land.”

“I pray I can take Tai Bashir with us to Disneyland with the badad sulimani you promise.”

“That’s a big wish, more than a prayer, son.”

Suddenly, Sharaab shatters out tranquil moment when he shouts, “*Sauwar willa Sauwar!*” He begins loudly ululating. I turn to see him hold up of his reigns, tighten his knees at the mahlufa, lean back and smack his camel’s rear with his driving stick. Sharaab’s prized Bishari Kiliewau rips down the beach with its tassels flying around its neck. Hamlab and his sons follow their headman, shouting and ululating. Their camels splash through the surf with their powerful split feet. They kick up the pebbly sand as their long legs propel them **in expansive strides**.

“Mommy, can I race with them?” Jamal exclaims and looks as if he’s ready to take off.

“No!” I yell, thankful my son asks me before acting. I’m fully his mother now. “No matter how much I want to indulge you, it’s too dangerous to race on a camel. Stay with mommy and tomorrow we’ll buy your badad sulimani, maybe even a dagger.”

Jamal and I quietly watch the camels racing perhaps 40 mph. Half a mile up the beach the Beja men and boys maneuver around a rocky outcropping like hajjis circumambulating the Kaaba in Mecca. They then race back to where Jamal and I are facing the sea. Jamal cheers and raises his arms in victory as his boyhood pal Bashok wins the race.

When the sun begins setting in the hills behind us, the men and boys remove the mahlufa saddles. They release their camels onto the seashore grasses where the goats and donkeys are

already grazing. The men then unroll saddle blankets on the beach and face Mecca across the sea. Toward the Qibla of God. Jamal joins them in their evening prayers.

During our caravan, I witnessed Hamlab pray a few times and Sharaab more often, but this is the first time I've seen all my Beja hosts praying together as if they were in the Al Azhar Mosque of Cairo. They've made a successful caravan trek to and from Aswan and evaded the jinn once more. Not to mention the border patrol. All their livestock survived. They sold their racing camels for silver jewelry, grain, coffee, sugar, and a few electronic gadgets and gifts. And they gained extra bounty from an exotic foreign woman with gold bangles. They have much to be thankful for.

While the men pray, I sit on my own blanket facing the sea with my kneeled camel at my back. I listen to Sharaab lead the Salat al-Maghrib. "God is great. . . Praise Allah, sustainer of the world. Master of Judgement Day. We worship you. Seek your help. Show us the right path. The way of grace."

The planets and bright stars begin popping from the deep violet sky above the eastern sea. The waning crescent won't appear until a few hours before sunrise so the stars will shine brilliantly tonight.

Thank you Seshet Akeru I say aloud. You've seen us through a difficult journey. Hathor has blessed me. Jamal now calls me Mama. Your magic protected us during the haboob. I pray for that protection until we safely reach the Magic Kingdom.

A few days later, our caravan reaches the outskirts of Port Sudan. It's nearly sunset on the new Moon night when our camels ride through Sharaab's village. "We are the Abu bin Ali tribe of the Beni Amer Clan," he says with pride as villagers gather around to greet greet Hamlab and

Sharaab as we ride to the corrals and dismount. The headman has returned with goods and gifts from Aswan I imagine everyone's saying.

Goats, Basenjis, and chickens wander among the concrete dwellings. Tall acacia trees, doum and date palms, and guava and mango trees grow at the settlement's edge. Beyond are fields of sorghum wheat and animal fodder.

"Who tends your animals when you're away," I ask.

"When we travel to Aswan or the pyramids of Meroe and the souqs of Khartoum, our parents, wives, and daughters tend the livestock and work in the fields."

In the main dirt plaza, clansmen are roasting sheep over fire pits burning dry acacia wood and camel dung. "Tonight we have big feast and sword dance," Hamlab says.

At the corral, I return Asfar and Tai Basshir to Sharaab. Three girls run up and greet him with folded hands and a slight bow. They're wearing colorful thawbs and have coppery unblemished complexions, dark eyes lined with kohl, and black hair in tiny braids adorned with beads and coins. "These are my daughters Ahok, LaLa, and Aesha," Sharaab tells me and Jamal.

I give them each a gold bangle. They smile at me with bright white teeth but their expressions are more serious than the mischievous gleam in their cousins' eyes. I can't help but wonder if they're shy because, as little girls, they were painfully circumcised and have learned to live under strict rules about what they can or can't do. They're protected. Sheltered. Their purpose in life is to please the warrior, produce his children, and take care of his house, animals, and cultivations.

Inside a one-room concrete dwelling I meet Sharaab's wife, Wilad. She wears a maroon thawb, has a gold nose ring and the same vertical scars below her eyes as her husband. "Wilad is

my father's brother's daughter," Sharaab tells me. "It's our tradition to marry cousins and keep our wealth in the Abu bin Ali tribe."

Wilad warmly greets Jamal and limply shakes my hand. Most likely she hasn't heard from her husband for nearly three months and, I'm sure, she hardly expected him to bring home a foreign woman clad like a bedawi. *Could she be jealous?* I wonder while feeling awkward. It's jolting to be surrounded by a close tribal clan who are stunned by my foreignness. To make matters worse, I'm dead tired, on my period and almost out of o.b.'s. The nomadic settlement is dusty and dry. Enormous flies are buzzing around like at the camel souq and my orange thawb is soiled and ripped after a month of constant wear.

I give Wilad two bangles and she happily puts them on her tiny wrist. I turn to Sharaab and say, "I really need a hot bath."

"No electricity. No running water."

"Can you take me and Jamal to Port Sudan's best hotel?"

"La la," the headman exclaims. "Tonight, big celebration. Our bravery dance with the badad sulimani sword. I greet my father, father-in-law, uncles, and cousins Shakar, Mustafa, Abdo, and Ibrahim. Tomorrow, I take you to Port Sudan."

"Sarah. We have to stay for the festival," Jamal insists. "I want to dance with my friends in the bravery dance."

"Once again, I'm outnumbered and don't have much choice but to camp another night. And I'm tired of camping no matter how much you love it, Jamal. I desperately need to wash and change my clothes."

Sharaab speaks to Wilad and she sorts through a large clay pot and pulls out a green thawb.

“She give to you for tonight.” Sharaab grins.

“Shookran,” I tell the Beja woman and accept the thawb although, in truth I’d prefer to put on my own clothes after a shower. But all my things are stuffed away in my duffle bag on a donkey. And I want to please Sharaab’s wife, make her warm up to me like her husband eventually did.

“Wilad take you to bath house now,” Sharaab says as he’s stepping outside the hut to greet his clan.

“Jamal. You need a bath too,” I say.

“No, Mommy. My friends will take me to the well to wash up. I told them about Eratosthenes and they want to see the Earth tilt.”

Wilad leads me across the settlement to the communal washhouse, another concrete building. It’s dark. The only light comes from the roasting pit fires and the kerosene lantern Wilad carries. I carry the clean thawb, a few toiletries, and a bucket of water from the well.

Wilad leaves me inside the washhouse with the smoking kerosene lantern. One side of the room is for bathing; the other has a trough for the toilet. There’s a slight breeze entering the one open window but it doesn’t flush out the stench of urine and waste that accosts me as much as the bull flies. Crickets are chirping and I’m petrified scorpions, tarantulas, and spit bugs are lurking in the dark corners. Since leaving my apartment in Garden City, hygiene has been cumbersome. It’s no problem for my son, or men in general, but is for a young woman who menstruates and has kept tidy and clean all her life. During my journey so far, I’ve had to sponge bathe and go to the toilet behind a canvas covering or in the brush then bury my bagged trash in the desert sands. It’s been far worse than any Wisconsin camping trip.

In the dim light of the communal outhouse, I wash from the bucket and shampoos my tangled hair. My scalp itches because I haven't washed since the last watering hole before the Red Sea. My situation is severe. I've run out of toilet paper and none is available. I have no more baggies for my trash and don't want to drop it in the trough. It's just too humiliating. What if some clansman unknowingly walks into the room to use the facility?

I feel desperate. Hardly a dignified lady. I quickly change my o.b. and hurl the used one out the open window into the darkness unconcerned about where it might land or who might find it. Whoever does probably won't know what it is anyway.

I quickly change into Wilad's green thawb, leave the bucket and tattered orange thawb in the washroom, and carry the lantern back to the festivities.

By nine o'clock hundreds of men, women, and children are feasting on sorghum and roasted sheep and drinking coffee and goat's milk. After the feast, Jamal and I join the Abu bin Ali tribe at a bonfire in the barren land outside the settlement. Dozens of clansmen are already dancing in a semi-circle.

The spectators cheer as the dancers bob their heads forward then back, leap high and land with agility, and balance their badad sulimani swords on their brows. Most spectators are men in white galabias with daggers at their belts. They hold up their own prized swords and encourage the dancers. One man is strumming a five-stringed lyre, another man is beating drums, and others are playing rababs. Only a few women and their children are present. The bonfire illuminates the coins in their hair and their turquoise, purple, and yellow thawbs.

Sharaab, his brother and his nephews participate in the dance held in their honor. Jamal joins them in his own rendition of acting out the pride of being a Beja man, a Medjay warrior, a descendant of Sekhmet and the grandson of Noah.

As I watch the dance and listen to the music and songs of an exotic tongue now somewhat familiar, I feel uncomfortable in the green thawb; the sponge bath barely washed away the grit and dirt from a month of caravanning. I'm worried about the next step in my own bravery dance. *I need to jump up and down with a sword on my brow* I joke to myself.

I feel immense pressure to move-on and worry we won't find a ship that'll take us as passengers. Then what will we do? I gaze back at the dancers and their swords shimmering from the bonfire flames and hope Amar fell for my ruse and believes I took Jamal to London.

The next day I gratefully make the trip to Port Sudan with Sharaab, Hamlab and Jamal's best friends and heroes of his latest adventure. We book a room at the Basiri Hotel near the main souq. Sharaab, his brother and nephews then head to the docks with our passports for the necessary entry stamps from the port authority and to ask their Amarar Beja friends working at the docks about passage on a ship in port.

I take a hot bath, shower, and bathe again shampooing and shampooing my unmanageable hair. I cut my nails, brush my teeth, and have a healthy bowel movement on the sit-down flush toilet. I put on a kaftan and recline on the bed, my hair wrapped in a towel, and read from my guidebook to Jamal. He's watching a movie on a state-run television channel.

"The British founded Port Sudan in 1909 as a Red Sea cargo port north of the Horn of Africa," I say. "In ancient Egypt, Port Sudan was in the Land of Punt."

"I want my birthday sword, Mama. I want my Tai Basshir," Jamal exclaims impatiently. He's lost interest in the black and white Egyptian film.

"We'll head for the souq as soon as our friends return," I reassure him. Jamal switches channels on the TV and I start thinking about a new problem. How am I going to keep my son

entertained now that it's just the two of us? No boatman. No sailing a felucca. No boyhood best friends. No hunting for quail and rabbits, dancing with swords, and riding camels.

Jamal gave his Walkman and action figures to Bashok and Samarr. Without constant adventure and entertainment, I worry he'll grow restless and start missing his home in Cairo and the woman he thought was his mother for ten years. Worse yet, he'll start resenting me. To calm my anxiety, I tightly hold the turquoise wadjet against my heart and ask my avatar to see to our continued escape. I don't know what else to do. I'm exhausted thinking up ideas, strategies and plans. It seems to be what my life's about.

At 3 PM we meet our Beja friends in to the hotel lobby. Sharaab hands me the passports stamped with entry visas into Port Sudan

"What about our ship passage?" I anxiously ask.

Sharaab grins. "It was a simple matter with your gold bangles."

"A cargo ship from Singapore will give you passage but it isn't leaving for a week," Hamlab tells me.

"That won't do," I exclaim with the sword dance pounding in my head. "We need to leave in a day or two. There must be another way." I look at my Beja friends. They say nothing and I realize they've done all they can do for us. Jamal and I are now on our own. It's up to me to clearly think out our next move no matter how exhausted I am. But first things first, I decide. "Can you take me to get my hair cut and to where I can buy my son his badad sulimani?"

"Yes, Na'am. We go to barbershop alley in the Deim Arab Market, the main souq of Port Sudan."

We catch a taxi to the Deim market where Jamal and I follow our caravan friends down crowded and bustling lanes and streets rather like the Khan El Khalili souq in Cairo. In

barbershop alley dozens of galabia clad barbers have stools beside mirrors hanging on concrete buildings edging the narrow lane.

All the barbers gesture we come to their set up. To avoid all the commotion, I sit at the first stool. With large cast-iron scissors, probably forged in the neighboring blacksmith souq, the grinning barber wastes no time cutting my tangled hair while he sings. When finished, he holds up a hand mirror for me to see his work. I hardly recognize the image looking back. I see a ragtag woman with short, choppy hair. At least it's clean and out of my face.

"You look funny, Mama." Jamal giggles.

"Okay Jamal. Now your turn for a scissor cut. Maybe a dab of the barber's cologne."

"La la la. Bashok and Samarr don't get haircuts why should I?"

"Because you need one. They don't."

"I want my badad sulimani now Sarah. Before anything else."

Sharaab takes Jamal's hand and leads us to the sword alley. In small open shops, swordsmiths are forging swords over charcoal fires. They stoke the flames with antique bellows and display their wares at the front stoops of their shops.

"Much of what they make is on commission," Hamlab tells me. He points out a workshop where men are etching the finished swords and daggers. "They draw ancestral marks and words from the Koran."

"I want my badad sulimani etched. Mama."

"With what? Can you give us some idea. Hamlab. What does your badad sulimani say?"

"Allah's mercy embraces all things."

"I want that on my sword," Jamal says.

From one shop I buy the sword Jamal selects and a dagger for myself. Then we head to an etcher and a leather shop to have the sheaths made.

That night, while Jamal is asleep, I lie awake wondering how we'll leave the Sudan without delay. Waiting for a ship may take weeks and it appears we're in a country on the verge of a coup d'état or a full-scale civil war. I didn't know this when making plans at the AUC library in Cairo. I guess you can't plan for the unexpected. Maybe Gadhafi's Libya would have been a better escape route or a trek through the Sinai to Israel, like Moses. No, I decide, our escape had to be up the Nile on the Mintaka and by Bashari camels into war-torn Sudan. I had to keep Jamal entertained. Think positive, I tell myself while remembering my son dancing around the room this evening with his Tai Basshir sword. I've never seen a happier boy.

My unsheathed and brandishing thoughts dance late into the night. I now face the problem of my appearance. Jamal can dress as a young Arab boy but I can't keep pretending to be a Bedawi. A few Sudanese women wrap the thawb around their heads and faces but I'm much too pale to run around Sudan in a thawb. I consider dressing as a pious Muslim woman in a hijab, abaya, and white gloves and taking the Namma ferry across the sea to Jeddah. But it just isn't the right date to make the haj. I decide my best disguise is to dress as myself and act like an American relief worker with her son. I could say I'm on R&R from a border refugee camp. These days a lot of Eritreans are seeking asylum in Sudan in their fight for independence from Ethiopia.

I then conclude we must travel to Khartoum as soon as possible. The problem is I'm reluctant to fly because airlines use computerized databases that could easily track us down. But how else can we reach the capital city? Traveling by train would involve days of unbearable heat

in boxcars so overcrowded that people ride on the roofs. And very few American and Europeans are traveling in the Sudan so I'd really stand out. I assume Sudan has an extradition treaty with Egypt for wanted criminals. For all I know, Amar has discovered Jamal and I are in Sudan and check points along the way to Atbara probably display my wanted poster. A taxi to Khartoum or horse and buggy are also out of the question. They'd stop at the same checkpoints as a train.

In the morning, while my son plays with his sheathed Tai Basshir in front of the television, I call the airport and learn international flights from Port Sudan only go to Cairo, Jeddah, and Dubai, all of which are out of the question. I take a chance and book a flight to Khartoum. There, Jamal and I can fly directly to Istanbul and on to Chicago or wherever else in the world we decide to go.

I think about all the risks ahead of us and all the maneuvering I must do and silently call for the help of Seshet Akeru. But I don't hear her whispering voice and haven't since the haboob. I sense she's no longer with me because I'm away from Egypt. Perhaps the haboob was the last time her spirit could guide me and Jamal. I don't know. I feel alone and unprotected now, without her magic powers. "I guess this is why you gave me the ancient wadjet," I whisper to my avatar but she doesn't reply.

In the afternoon, we take the Sudan Airways flight to Khartoum Airport where I arrange a Turkish Airlines flight to Istanbul for the next evening. After a night at the Airport Hotel, I dress as an American Muslim traveling with her son, wearing a hijab to cover my awkward haircut but without a niqab. We take a taxi to the Turkish embassy and get our visas. By early evening, we check our luggage, with the sword and dagger hidden inside, and go to an airport food stall to wait for yet another amazing adventure to begin.

“What about Tai Basshir?” Jamal asks as we eat Kak chicken at a small cafeteria table.

“When we get to our hotel in Istanbul and the bellhop delivers our luggage, you’ll get Tai Basshir. Then you can brandish it before Hagia Sophia. In a bravery dance.” I wink and my son winks back. “Son, *Habibi*,” I say. “We still must play like we’re secret spies. It’s called being discreet.”

“I am, Mommy,” he says but I can tell he’s nervous. Worried. I’ve never seen him this way before not even when I revealed the truth. Before I can reassure my son, the loudspeaker bellows, “Turkish Airlines flight TK681 to Istanbul, now boarding gate 9.”

My heart leaps.

“Mommy our plane is here. We need to go to Istanbul, right?”

“Yes son. That’s our flight. I thought we had plenty of time.” I touch the wadjet in my pocket hoping its powers will keep me from appearing agitated.

We leave what’s left of our snack on the table and head for the gate, pressed for time. Gate 9 lies across the terminal.

As we rush down the corridor, hand in hand, time seems to crawl. I’m so close to making our escape from Africa, yet the gate seems miles away. I hurry my pace, pulling Jamal along. His hand is sweaty. He misses his badad sulimani and his best friends Bashok and Samarr.

I stop for a moment, bend to his level, place my hands on his shoulders and ask, “What is it? *Habibi*.”

“I’m afraid for you,” he tells me.

“Why? You’re a camel master of the Abu Bin Ali tribe.”

“I don’t know why I’m afraid. But I am, Mama.”

“Me too. But come now, my brave little Saladin. We have a flight to catch. Istanbul has the most beautiful mosques in the world.”

We continue to rush down the long corridor, passing terminal gate after terminal gate. At last, we near gate number nine where our DC-10 sits on the runway. I’m sweaty; the terminal is not air-conditioned. The ceiling fans are almost useless. Mostly Sudanese and Arab families are waiting for flights or hastily walking down the corridor. No one is European or American. I stand out in the crowd.

As soon as we reach the gate the loudspeaker calls, “Turkish Airlines flight TK681 to Istanbul, now boarding at gate 9.”

“We’ve made it,” I exclaim to Jamal. “We’re at the boarding gate to freedom. Gate number nine. Mother and son. Together as we should be.” I squeeze Jamal’s hand and concentrate on viewing Khartoum from the sky. “It’ll be amazing to see the Blue and White Nile confluence Al-Mogran,” I tell Jamal. “I’ll point out Tuti island and the colonial ministry buildings along Nile Street, and Souq Omdurman. It’s the largest market in Africa.”

“And we’ll be off to Turkey. Right mommy?”

Before I can reply I hear from behind a man calling my name and wonder if I’m being paged over the loudspeaker. I hear my name again. The voice isn’t from the loud speaker, I realize. And it’s familiar.

I turn to see if someone’s calling for another woman with my name.

My knees nearly buckle when I see Amar approaching from the corridor. Behind him are customs and airport police dressed in gray camo-fatigues and blue berets. They all have guns drawn.

“Run to the plane,” I shout to Jamal. “Leave on your own.”

“What mama? I can’t go alone.”

“I know Jamal. I’m not thinking clearly. I became too sure of myself. I thought we were on our way home.”

In a flash I decide to hand the steward our boarding passes, grab my son’s hand and try to run onto the plane.

“Stop.” I hear a shout.

A warning shot is fired in the terminal. I can’t believe it.

Amar runs to Jamal and takes hold of his hand.

“Uncle,” I hear my son say. I know he’s beside himself with confusion.

His uncle-father leads him from the boarding gate as a crowd of Arab and Sudanese men gather around.

Two airport police grab my arms. One frisks me and takes the ancient wadjet from my pocket. The other man forces my hands behind my back and cuffs me.

“No, no,” I scream at Amar who’s walking away, hand in hand with my son. “It’s not possible! How did you find me?”

Amar stops. He wants to answer my question. “Your friend Naguib in Aswan gave you up for the reward. I advertised nationally. It was easy to learn you worked at Kalifa Bin Oman Primary School under the name Sarah Anderson. Information is cheap. I knew you’d leave from Khartoum, sooner or later. The Sudanese police called me when you reserved your flight to Istanbul. Sarah Anderson, is it? The name you used in Cairo.”

“He is my son! You and Zenna stole him from me,” I scream as the police tighten their grip on my arms.

Amar stands with Jamal at his side. My son is unable to react. “You’ll never get him. You’re a criminal. Sarah Prentice. We’ll prosecute you for kidnapping. You’ll get a death sentence. The boy isn’t yours. You didn’t want him.” He spews out venom so hateful I no longer hear him.

“Jamal,” I plead, “I’m your mother.”

My son looks at me with sad eyes but before he can speak, Amar pulls him back and leads him away from me.

“Jamal. Jamal,” I scream and scream until I can’t see my son anymore. The police wrestle me from gate number nine and force me down the corridor. I hear the fans overhead tweaking but feel no relief from the heat. Crowds and voices surround me, staring at the spectacle, at me. In a fleeting glance out the corridor windows, I see, beyond the jumbo jets parked on the tarmac, the eastern sky at twilight. I think to myself *the gates to heaven open but heaven is out of my reach. They’ll bury me in a hidden tomb and I’ll never see my son again or the light of day.*



Chapter 19: Al-Qanater Women’s Prison

The Sudanese police fly me from Khartoum to Cairo where an Egyptian National Police transport van hurls me to al-Qanater Women’s Prison in north Cairo. Handlers at the receiving

room give me a prison galabia. A matronly guard in a stiff gray overcoat escorts me to a large shabby office that reeks of stale cigar. My hands are cuffed behind me and my sticky body smells of sweat. I know worse things are yet to come.

I stand before one of the three desks in the room. I feel depleted and sore. A lit cigar teeters on the desktop ashtray before me. Behind the desk sits a man with a military haircut looking out the window; his back is to me. The matronly guard leaves. No one else is present.

I'm in very big trouble, I keep thinking as the man slowly turns in his swivel chair. His small pointy eyes glare at me without a trace of compassion. The pock-faced, middle-aged man has a thick black moustache and wears Egyptian army greens with epaulets and a full eagle over a star. Lieutenant colonel, I wonder. His name tag reads, Muqaddam Basheem.

Why should he care about me? I'm the source of disturbance. He was probably asleep before I arrived. According to the clock on the wall, it's ten past midnight.

I notice a "page a day calendar" on the desk. It's turned to May 10th. Today is my 30th birthday. Not that it matters to anyone here, including myself. I have no control over this situation, no recourse. I completely belong to the official behind the desk.

He empties my personal bag of toiletries on his desk, including my remaining o.b.s. I couldn't be more humiliated.

On the other two desks sit the two suitcases I bought at the Deim Arab market. They're both open with the contents ruffled through, probably several times. The luggage contains nothing but clothes. I lost everything of value when cold-cocked in Khartoum. My captors at the airport even stripped searched me and took all my remaining gold bangles.

The police confiscated everything I valued including the Kodak film of the wadi hieroglyphs, the sword and dagger, my journal, and the polaroid shot of me and Jamal at the

Dendera Temple. I don't know what happened to the ancient Eye of the Falcon the police took from me. I doubt I'll ever see it again. And I don't believe my avatar will help me because I lost her relic amulet. The Falcon Eye of Horus. I don't know about anything anymore.

"Very serious crimes, Aanesa Amerika." The official's imposing voice wakes me from my thoughts. "Al-Qanater will be your home for a very long time." He pauses as if waiting for my response.

I have no words to offer. I look down at the parquet floor.

"You're charged with kidnapping and antiquities theft," the man continues. "Here in Egypt, we protect our national treasures. You'll receive at least two years in prison and a fine of fifty-thousand Egyptian Pounds. Penalties and sanctions are harsh under Egyptian Antiquities Law."

"I had no antiquities. I'm not a thief," I summon the courage to say.

"Oh, but you are, Aanesa Amerika. Your little token wadjet is four-thousand years old. It's our heritage. And you take this from us?"

I say nothing.

"We've confiscated your valuables."

"My son's badad sulimani?"

"You'll get everything back if you ever leave this prison." He makes a sinister chuckle. "To ease the severity of your circumstances, I'll give you a small stipend for commissary. Then you can manage your life in al-Qanater. You see, young Aanesa, I'm not a heartless man."

"Shookran," I mutter.

The Lt. Colonel makes a call on a black dial phone. Shortly, the matronly guard enters the room and grabs my arm. I yank away and protest, "I need to call my father!"

She ignores me.

“In due time, Miss Anderson,” I hear the Lt. Colonel say as the guard wrestles me out the door.

She takes me down several stark corridors lit by bare bulbs dangling from cracked ceilings. We reach a dim hallway that looks like a poor Cairene back alley.

Beyond a few dormitory cells, the matron opens a door of bars and ushers me inside a dark, concrete chamber rank with urine. I gag but I’ve grown used to peculiar and unpleasant things.

The matron locks the door with a clunk. By the hallway light, I see that all but one of four metal bunks are occupied with dark figures. A woman groans, another snores, but no one stirs because of my abrupt entrance.

I sit on the empty bottom bunk and listen to the matron’s footsteps fade away. I lie down hoping sleep will ease my pain. The thin mattress is as hard as the raw Nubian desert and I taste the unpleasant smells in the cell. I try to sleep on my back until bedbugs start biting me, without mercy.

I crawl onto the concrete floor. It’s cooler and unburdened with bugs. I curl up and picture Jamal on the felucca with his Beja friends. I start thinking thoughts of self-preservation. *Tomorrow I’ll clean up however I can. Someone will let me phone Daddy. He’ll help me out. Maybe Jake will prove Jamal’s my son. Soon Jamal and I will leave Egypt forever.* Without hope, I feel broken and incapable of surviving. I call for Nefertiabet and Seshet Akeru praying they’ll magically intervene. I keep repeating their names but before I hear them whisper back, exhaustion drives me to sleep.

Through a barred window, morning light streams onto my face in the twenty by twenty-foot cell. A woman greets me in Arabic. “Min ‘ant? Who are you?” she asks. I sit up and see the seven other women in the cell. They’re all dressed in galabias like fellaha from the streets.

“Sarah,” I say. Everyone suddenly seems aware I’m an ‘agnabi. They chatter among themselves.

“I need to pee,” I say, not sure of what to do.

“Toilet over there.” A woman gestures toward the corner of the cell.

I gag at the sight of a vile hole in the concrete floor, the source of the cell’s foul odor. Feces, menstrual blood, and urine cake its sides. I begin crying impulsively. Now my basic functions are really causing problems. More so than in the arid desert of the Red Sea Hills or on the felucca.

Another woman indicates a faucet near the toilet. It’s the first hopeful sight I’ve seen since being tossed in this tomb. Beneath the faucet is a rusty bucket filled with water. I douse my face with a handful of cool water and pour the rest into the toilet to rinse it out. It overflows.

My cellmates laugh at my attempt to change the conditions. This makes me laugh too and some of the tension I’ve been feeling goes away. But the horror remains.

“Are you British?” a tiny, malnourished woman asks. She wears a hijab.

“Ana min Amerika.”

“And your crime?” asks a plump woman sitting on a top bunk. “Drugs no doubt. I once knew an ‘agnabi stupid enough to smuggle hashish at the airport.”

“What happened to her?” I sit on the cool concrete floor in the streaming sunlight. It feels good to have part of the natural world touching me.

“Don’t know. They moved her from my cell.” The women laugh. They’re whiling away their time.

The outer metal door suddenly clinks open. “*Shawisha*,” an inmate announces. “It is 7:30.”

The matronly guard from the night before, the *shawisha*, opens our cell. I follow my cellmates out to a small courtyard. At one end is a barred door to a large dirt, recreation area surrounded by a 4-meter concrete wall topped with razor wire. Two towers with sharpshooters stand above the wall, beyond it I hear the traffic of Cairo. I can taste the smog.

The shawisha sits on a stone bench in the inner courtyard and begins crocheting a baby blanket probably for a grandchild. I approach her and ask in Arabic, “When’s my hearing? When can I phone my father?”

The guard looks at me but says nothing as if I obviously don’t understand prison protocol.

I repeat my questions.

“Be quiet!” the shawisha snaps in Arabic.

I ask again. “This matter’s too important. I must get out of this situation.”

“Shut up,” the guard declares. “Or you’ll never have a hearing with the magistrate.”

I back off. Anger gets me nowhere; it’s a lesson I learned many times before. But sometimes my emotions have their way with me.

I sit against the black soot wall of the inner courtyard feeling tormented and hopeless. I have no leverage and must take things slowly, cautiously, and learn how to use the system to my advantage. For the moment, my only relief is that I’m away from the foul odor of the pit toilet in my cell.

The hours pass and the days routinely stumble by like a cold Chicago drizzle. I use my small commissary allowance to buy basic toiletries and cigarettes and chocolate bars which inmates use as prison currency. I also purchase a blanket for my bed on the floor and materials to write my father.

In the letter I explain the perils I went through to retrieve my son. “Your grandson,” I emphasize. “I need your help, Daddy. More now than ever before. Please get me out of this hellhole.”

Three times each day a male trustee brings meals to the inner courtyard on a pushcart. After lights-out at seven, a uniformed man with a German Shephard begins making his rounds.

In neighboring cells pre-sentenced mothers are living with their babies who cry throughout the night while I’m trying to fall asleep thinking about my fate and deeply missing my son.

Every time the shawisha is sitting with us in the courtyard I politely ask for permission to call my father and the US embassy. My efforts are fruitless. I’m destitute. In the pit of the whale’s stomach. I can’t do anything except talk to my cellmates. They’re also waiting for their trial and sentencing. I’m living in the pre-sentencing block, they tell me.

I learn to know my cellmates by their crimes—prostitution, thievery, and drug possession. The worst criminal in my cell is me, a kidnapper of a young Egyptian boy, but my cellmates treat me with kindness. They’re fascinated I speak Arabic and encourage me to teach them English. I haven’t noticed any other ‘agnabi during my hour in the rec yard when all the inmates of the pre-sentenced block mingle in view of the tower guards.

Two of my cellmates pray during the adhan. The others don't seem to believe in Allah's mercy. Like me, they believe god has forsaken them.

"Prison is filled with jinn spirits," one cellmate tells me.

"I used to believe in guardian angels and jinn spirits," I admit. "But I no longer call on them. God and his angels have let me down,"

My cellmates agree and call me their sister. They're women with little hope in life. Some have been imprisoned several times and think of prison as a better place than their village or the streets. They're fed regularly and have no father, husband, or pimp to beat them.

"We have one another and are sisters waiting in bondage," the prostitute remarks.

After two weeks of confinement, I approach the shawisha during our morning break. She's sitting on the stone bench knitting a child's sweater and paying no attention to the inmates. "I need a lawyer. Al muhami," I insist in Arabic.

The shawisha looks up from her knitting. "Cigarettes," she says. "You bring me cigarettes. You call home."

"I have no cigarettes on me!" My mind nearly snaps from frustration like it did when a child dealing with Mom's alcoholic behavior. "I've been waiting and waiting for news about my case. I need to call home now!"

The guard puts down her knitting and out hollers me. "Battal el kalam. Stop talking to me!"

I'm suddenly so overwhelmed with emotion I yell, "Eat shit bitch." It's what I felt like saying during Mom's punishment sessions.

Before I realize what's happening, a male guard bursts through the barred doors and wrestles me to the sodden ground with the shawisha on top of us. They both hit me with batons then cuff and shackle me. The next thing I know, they haul me to the "Punishment Wing" in the oldest part of the prison. They toss me in a 7 by 7 concrete cell that has no toilet, no water faucet, nor any light other than what enters the barred window on the door to the outside hall.

An Arab woman my age is sitting on the concrete floor of the cell listening to a small transistor radio that's playing Maghreb music. "Hello dear," she says.

"Hello," I reply while noticing her beautiful hands and fingers as she combs her long black hair that has a purple luster even in the meager light. She's thin at the top and her bottom is heavy but not in an unattractive way.

"You take the bottom bunk," the woman says.

"Any bed bugs?"

"No. They fumigate the cells between inmates. I'm Noura, by the way." She turns down her music. "Why are you here? In the punishment cell. What did you do?"

Exhausted and sore from the beating, I recline on the bed and prop up my head with the blanket. "I'm in a new world now, one I've never encountered before, one I have nothing to compare to except my mother's punishment sessions which I've spent most of my adult life trying to forget. And new worlds and new places have always held my interest. This is just a study of a different place," I tell Noura.

She repeats her question and I explain what happened with the shawisha.

"That's a funny story, mon petite. And what is your crime? Why are you in al-Qanater? Drugs? I venture to guess. The only reason a foreigner ends up here."

“I kidnapped my son and got caught with a turquoise wadjet that my son found in the Nubian desert, after a great Haboobi jinn jinxed our caravan. It’s such a long story.”

Noura smiles. “We have nothing but time to tell such stories.”

“In that case, let me begin with the canals of Venice,” I say and go on to tell my new cellmate everything from Amar in Venice to the streets of Port Sudan with my son.

“How did you get caught?” she asks. It’s a story every prisoner tells.

I tell her about my apprehension in Khartoum. After I finish, she says, “You’re either telling the truth or you’re a great liar, *mon petite soeur*.” We both laugh.

“I’m beginning to like you, Noura. You’re different from my other cellmates, the pre-sentence ladies. You’re more cosmopolitan, sophisticated and hardly fascinated that I’m an ‘agnabi. What was your crime and how’d you end up in the punishment cell?”

“I’m serving a death sentence for drug trafficking.”

“What? Death? No. I can’t believe you.”

“Yes, *mon petite*. I made a rash decision at the Cairo airport. I ran from the airport police.”

“I thought this cell was just for punishment. For unruly inmates. We’re on death row?”

“I am. Not you.”

“But you have a radio and they put me, a pre-sentenced detainee, in the cell with you. Certainly, you’re embellishing your story.”

“A tribunal of judges sentenced me to death for manslaughter in the commission of a felony. The police thought I was a terrorist. It was shortly after the assassination of Sadat. And I’m Palestinian. I ran and the police fired shots at me. An old man couldn’t move away in time. They killed him. Poor dear.”

“That’s their fault. How stupid to shoot off a gun in the crowded airport. Remarkably, it happened to me in Sudan.”

“The courts saw it differently. The poor old dear died because of me in the process of a felony.”

“What felony?”

“They found hashish on me and a smuggled shabti from the Middle Kingdom.”

“You’re the poor dear.”

“I am. I’ve been here six months writing letters of protest. Mon ami brought me this radio. He visits once a month and pays for my protection.”

“I assumed you were Egyptian,” I say just to make conversation. I really don’t know or understand this poor woman who claims to be sentenced to death.

“My father was a Palestinian refugee. His people were displaced.”

“How?”

“In ‘48, the Brits ceded our land to Israel and Jordan and expelled my father and his family from his village Ibdīs, in Gaza. He’s been in Egypt thirty-seven years without any hope of returning to Ibdīs. Palestine is the Holy Land of three world religions, you know. It’s the heart of the Wailing Wall, the Dome of the Rock, and the Via Dolorosa of your Christ.”

“I’m really not religious,” I say looking over at Noura. She’s still combing her luscious hair. What a contrast to mine, I can’t help but think. “I’m more spiritual,” I add to keep the conversation going. But I don’t feel like talking about my guardian angels, avatars apparitions and the whispers in my head. It’s too complex for a first conversation.

“My people are scattered in the world or they live under the tyranny of Israel,” Noura continues. “We call it the Diaspora of the Palestinians.”

“Are you really a PLO terrorist?” I jest, offering a little jailhouse humor, although in the back of my mind I’m thinking maybe she really is. “Is that your real crime?”

Noura laughs. “I don’t use violence for my cause. I turned to smuggling for money to help my people and educate the world about Palestine. In honor of my widowed father.”

“Where is he, your daddy?”

“He lives alone in Cairo. My mother was Egyptian but she died soon after my birth. Ours is a complicated situation, the Palestinians in Egypt.”

“I know what you mean. About things being complex.”

“Right. Gamal Nassar overthrew an oppressive monarchy and treated us as citizens with basic rights. But he died and in ‘78 Palestinian terrorists assassinated the Egyptian Minister of Culture in Cyprus and the laws of Egypt changed.”

“I thought they changed after Sadat was killed.”

“That too. After Gamal, the Egyptian government regarded Palestinians as foreigners except for those married to Egyptians. By then my father was widowed. I am Egyptian. Palestine is my birthright.”

“You’re a nomad,” I suggest. “Like I was in the desert.” We laugh, sharing a bond of kinship, it feels to me. It’s easy to do, I’ve discovered, when locked up with someone accused of a crime.

“I wanted to see the world beyond my father’s adopted country,” Noura stops combing her hair and turns off the radio as if to get my full attention. “I applied to the Sorbonne and won an Eiffel Scholarship in Law and Political Science. After three years I became a naturalized French citizen because I was a Sorbonne scholar and active in civil rights. For a while, I had dual French and Egyptian citizenship. Comme mon ami.”

“How did a straight and proper scholar from the Sorbonne end up running from airport police with a stolen shabti?”

“Mon petite chou. I met someone.”

“A man, of course.”

“Toujours les hommes. Mon ami is French Algerian. We met at the Sorbonne during a rally for a Palestinian homeland. It was just after Mitterrand stood before the Knesset asking Israel to create a Palestinian State. He outlined a step-by-step road to peace through dialogue and negotiation. It went nowhere, of course.”

“This French Algerian. Tell me more about him. I bet he has the same savoir faire of the Egyptian man I met in Venice ten years ago. The man who started my life’s quest and landed me here in the punishment cell with you.”

“Yes indeed, mon petite. Men are a favorite topic among women cellmates. Mon ami knew me by reputation. At the Arab Union Hall he approached me at the fund-raising table. I was at the rally to support Mitterrand’s two-state solution. Mon ami was there to recruit for his smuggling ring. He’s very handsome. He invited me to coffee and seduced me with his engaging eyes and a promise of money for my cause. I was all in. It turns out, we have much in common. We both had French and Egyptian citizenship, both our mothers are Egyptian, and both our fathers are immigrants. Mine from Palestine, his from Algeria.”

“Mine’s from Palatine, Illinois. Ain’t that a coincidence?” We laugh. “Seriously, I keep trying to contact my daddy. I believe he’ll get me out of this mess. That’s why I’m here in the punishment ward.”

“You’ll get there. Things take time in prison. I’m the opposite. I don’t want to worry my daddy. He has worries enough. I’m very proud of my father like mon ami is very proud of his. But our fathers are very different.”

“What’s your friend’s name? Your bon ami?”

“Jacques. His daddy got him into the smuggling business.”

“How so? It sounds like an interesting story.”

“Some twenty-three years ago his father immigrated to France from Algeria. Before the War of Independence. De Gaulle considered Algeria part of France and granted citizenship to Algerian immigrants. After WWII, Jacques’s father studied archaeology and photography at the Sorbonne. He was on Pierre Montet’s excavation team in Tanis, Egypt. They uncovered 21st and 22nd dynasty tombs. He met Jacques’s mother on the dig. She was a student at AUC majoring in Egyptology.”

“Wow small world. That’s where I was working before I took Jamal. Wonder if she knew Thomas-Bartlett.”

“Possibly. Everyone in Cairo’s heard of him.”

“I know that now. Please go on with the story.”

“Jacques’s parents married and worked together as archaeologists until they realized they could make a lot of money selling antiquities to collectors and museums around the world. Mon ami took over his father’s business and expanded his enterprise to include hashish from Morocco.”

“So many connections. The Sorbonne, AUC Cairo.”

“Mais oui. When we first met mon ami Jacques explained I could fly from Cairo to France smuggling ancient shabtis and amulets and from Paris to Cairo with Moroccan hashish. I

like to travel and always wanted to go to Morocco. I became his mule on my flights between France and Egypt. The first time I smuggled a beautiful alabaster shabti and several scarabs, I felt invincible. Smuggling became intoxicating. Like a drug itself.”

“Like your Algerian Frenchman.”

“Oui. I was infatuated with Jacques. His enterprise awed me. He owns a yacht and lives in villas throughout the Mediterranean. He retrieves antiquities from wherever they’re looted and procures hashish from the Rif region of Morocco. Egypt is a transit place for drugs and Jacques’ biggest source for antiquities.”

“How enterprising.”

“Mon ami is a genius. That’s what he is. He has connections to the Greek Mafia, the Greek Cypriot crime families, and the Maghreb Mafia of Paris.”

“No kidding? I’m impressed.”

“Moi aussi. Jacques has many friends who owe him favors or just like being on his good side.”

“Now I know you’re embellishing,” I say, wondering if I can believe anything my new friend says; if Noura even is my friend. Maybe she’s a mole. Mubarak *is* a ruthless man. Maybe the Egyptian officials think I’m an American spy or part of an antiquities smuggling ring. But this is doubtful, I reassure myself. Noura seems sincere when telling her stories and the intricacies fit together too well. I mean, my own story is way out there too.

“Non, mon petite. Tout est vrai. But it’s always about how you end up.”

I agree and we laugh until our eyes fill with tears.

The days pass and I continue to plead for help whenever the shawisha comes around for our bathroom breaks. I get nowhere until one afternoon the female warden inspects our cell for contraband and say to her, “I’m begging for your help. I need to call my father or at least the embassy. That’s all I wanted when I landed in this cell. I’m not a violent person.”

“The prison has already notified the US embassy but they can’t meet with you at this time.”

“I’ve never received a reply from my father. I even wrote him a second letter.”

“All letters are reviewed for weeks at a time before they’re even sent,” the warden says as she leaves our cell.

“It’s a waiting game between you and them,” Noura says when the warden’s gone. “They’ll break your mind while you wait for the end of your sentence. Pre-sentence in your case. In my case, before I’m executed.”

Such words jolt me from my own disappointment and distress. What can I say? A death sentence ends any conversation.

As each day passes in the punishment cell, I try to keep up my health and sanity. But by the end of my second month in prison, I feel my body deteriorating. I’m unable to bathe properly. My hair grows matted and itchy because there is no good shampoo in prison and my comb is but my fingers. I don’t want to spend my commissary on a brush when I need other thing. Like stamps cigarettes and chocolate. I have no appetite and suspect I have flukes from the Nile.

One day, during my toilet privilege, I notice blood in my stools and I vomit before returning to my punishment cell. I don't tell Noura because I feel a little better after puking and just want to lie down and sleep.

That night I dream about my son being physically yanked from my arms at the Khartoum Airport. I jolt awake in a cold sweat. "Jamal! Habibi," I scream.

Noura climbs down from her bunk and feels my brow. "You have a fever," she says. "Perhaps you're dehydrated." She hollers for the night guard with his German Shepard.

"That's useless," I mumble now feeling quite sick.

"He'll eventually hear my cry for help."

Noura's right. The guard soon arrives and takes me to the infirmary. He puts me in a room with a row of seven empty cots. I select one, lie on my side and stare at a metal cabinet with jars of colored liquids, pills, cotton balls, and swabs.

After ten minutes, a nurse in a white kaftan and hijab arrives and helps me sit up.

"Take this," she says and hands me an aspirin.

"My stomach is cramping," I plead

The nurse helps me to the toilet where I have a bout of diarrhea. I return to the infirmary cot and collapse into sleep.

I awake hooked to an IV. Noura is sitting at my bedside reading a book. Her smile is radiant. "You have bacillary dysentery," she explains. "And I'm here to nurse you back to health. Change your bed pan, help you shower and switch the IV fluid."

"How can you be with me?" I summon the strength to ask. "Are you really on death row?"

“Someone must take care of you. This isn’t Hôpital Americain de Paris or the Anglo-American Hospital in Cairo.”

“Or Mount Sinai in Chicago,” I weakly say to be funny and bolster my spirit.

Noura takes my hand. “Don’t you think I prefer here to our punishment cell? At least I can freely use the toilet and shower.”

I try to laugh but can’t. Noura helps me sit up for the first time in perhaps days. “I don’t know how long I’ve been asleep.”

“All day and night. But the fever broke and you survived.”

I smile at Noura. “I hear you’re a terrorist and killed dozens of innocent children,” I tease my dear friend

She winks. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. My stomach cramps are gone.”

“My only crime is getting caught. Personally, I never killed a soul. That poor old man was, as they say, in the wrong place at the wrong time. And I made a foolish decision to run. What I did was nothing worse than kidnapping. And we’re both thieves of antiquities.”

“How can what I did be kidnapping? Jamal is my son, my life. Certainly, you understand this. Having a cause like you do. A homeland for your people. The right to dignity. It’s no different from my right to be with my child.”

“Perhaps not,” Noura says but she doesn’t seem convinced.

“Zenna stole my baby because he’s a boy. Do you believe me?”

She nods and says nothing.

“Not since revealing my secret to an old Cairene taxi driver, have I unburdened my heart more fully. I want your sympathy, Noura. You’re my dearest friend in the world at this time. I

want you to embrace my sorrows as only a woman can do. We are sisters of the punishment cell.”

Noura is still holding my hand. “Mais oui, I believe your story. But I also believe you shall never see the boy again. It’s probably a hopeless cause. Like my own. A futile dream. Concentrate on getting out of here. The hospital first and then the punishment ward. And at last, you can think about getting out of al-Qanater. This is my advice to you, *soeur de mon coeur*. Otherwise, this place will become your death sentence.”

These are not the encouraging words I was hoping to hear. I assumed Noura would completely understand a mother’s plight. But she’s not a mother and from the looks of it, never will be. Perhaps this is why she suggests I give up my pursuit. No matter, I think to myself, it’s enough for now to have a friend hold my hand. I lie back feeling exhausted and weak from the lengthy conversation.

The next morning, I awake to the buzzing of a fly and see the bathroom door wide open and the room empty. Noura’s gone. I don’t like being alone and uncertain of what might happen next. It’s worse than being in the punishment cell.

The bar lock clanks and the door creaks open. It isn’t Noura or a nurse to administer antibiotics and check my temperature or a trustee bringing a meal. I’m off the IV. Standing at the entry is the middle-aged Lieutenant-Colonel Muqaddam Basheem in a very stiff khaki short-sleeved dress-shirt with lots of insignia and badges. His musky cologne accosts me. I haven’t seen him since my first night in prison and his appearance concerns me. His look is wrong.

“What do you want?” I feebly demand.

“Leih?” he says. “I’ve come to check on you. My ‘agnabi prisoner. Is it any way to welcome me with such sharp words?”

I sit up as he approaches my bed. He smiles with teeth stained from years of smoking and drinking tea. He sits at the stool beside me. His breath smells of cigar smoke and his cologne is now an affront.

“Go away,” I say. “Or I’ll scream.”

The intruder laughs. “Why scream? I can help you, if you help me.” He has no appeal, no charm. He’s crass, pock-faced homely and I’m at his mercy.

“Help me call my father?” I ask while drawing up the sheet to cover my chest.

“I’m a lonely man,” he pleads. “My wife pays me no attention.”

What’s coming is obvious. I summon enough strength to yell, “Leave me alone!” I fall back on the cot, dizzy and drained. The man strokes my short, matted hair.

“Don’t touch me!” I exclaim.

“Be still, I can make you well if you cooperate.”

He slides his hand down the side of my face. I sweat and cringe. His filthy, smelly hand reaches the collar of my hospital galabia in search of my breasts. I bite his arm until it bleeds and the officer draws away in anger. He slaps me.

I struggle from bed feeling like I did after giving birth in Cairo. I reach the closed door and begin pounding.

“You foolish American woman,” the officer says. “You can die in here. I no longer care.”

Someone arrives at the door. “Muqaddam?” a guard speaks to my intruder as if his presence isn’t out of the ordinary. The guard is obviously in on the deal.

“Ayn Noura?” I scream.

“She’s no longer necessary because you don’t use the IV,” Muqaddam says. “In fact, you can return to your punishment cell. I assumed you’d rather stay here a few more days. This I can arrange.”

“No, no, take me to my cell. I’m okay now. And please, I beg you, let me call my family in America. Tell me about the letters I wrote him. I’m not Egyptian. I’m American.”

“You’re nothing but a prisoner here,” the officer remarks as he leaves the room.

“He tried to rape me,” I tell the guard hoping he’s a man of honor.

He says, in Arabic, “Who? Old Muqaddam Basheem. No, he only checks on you.”

“Liar!” I yell. “You know the truth.”

The guard gives me an angry look and leaves, bolting the door behind him.

Shortly, the shawisha enters and takes me to a courtyard near the punishment cell. She’s in a good mood, perhaps her grandson spent the night.

Noura is in the yard smoking a cigarette. A privilege. She smiles. “Welcome back to the Ritz Paris,” she says.

I kiss my friend on each cheek and Noura affectionately reciprocates. It’s an Arab thing. A French thing.

“Oh God, Noura,” I say. “That fucking magistrate tried to rape me.”

Noura’s beautiful black eyes look at me sharply. “My sister. Tears are wasted water. Listen to me. Do you think this important? What the man lusts for? Women are raped. Children kidnapped. All for the sake of God? What does it matter? The man can help you if you cooperate.”

Noura’s words astonish me. I frown at her.

“You’re a prisoner,” she continues. “All you own is your spirit and they can pillage that too in a place such as this. Your body is nothing. Look at yourself. If you want a chance to contact your father you must give that fool Basheem what he wants.”

“What are you saying?” I glance at the shawisha sitting on the stone bench in the courtyard. She seems to be listening. We’re her entertainment. “You of all people,” I continue. “Should take the side of your friend, a woman.”

“Listen to me.” Noura grasps my shoulders. “You are my friend. Mon amie. You have no choice. I would fuck Basheem myself but I’m not as desirable as you. At the very least, he’ll see you to a telephone.”

I step back from Noura, think for a moment and realize the drastic truth. I’ve very few options if any at all. I can and must use my body as a way out. Otherwise, how long will I be waiting for justice to come my way in this miserable hellhole? “I bit his arm,” I tell Noura. “And he slapped me. Called me all kinds of names.”

Noura laughs and takes my hands as the shawisha watches us from across the courtyard. “I’m sure you only encouraged him. Go and tell the guard that you’re ill and need to go to the infirmary.”

I stare at Noura, my only ally who cuts to the truth of the matter. Her advice makes perfect sense. I walk toward the guard and bend over moaning. The shawisha jumps to my aid as Noura silently laughs at my performance, I’m sure.

Back in the infirmary I’m lying on a clean cot when the nurse arrives and suggests I have internal bleeding. “An ulcer from the infection,” she says.

She’s about to hook me to an IV but I stop her. “La la, I say. “I’m able to eat and go to the toilet and don’t want the IV.” The nurse shrugs and leaves the room.

After she bolts the door, I call out, “Will no one look after me? What’s happened to you, Nefertiabet? Seshet Akeru. Isis-Huthur? Where have you gone? Why do you abandon me in my greatest time of need?”

I hear no whispers in my head, no voices and curl up to fall asleep and dream about the adventures I shared with my son.

Later that night, well after the last call to prayer, Basheem enters the room dressed in full regalia. “Will you help me call home?” I sit up and ask before the door even closes.

“Akiid. Ya habibti,” he speaks like a lecherous man.

When he makes his advances, I keep telling myself, I can’t do this. The thought of no protection, of conceiving his child, of him inside me, is too repulsive and I fight him off until he forces his way with me. I have no recourse. There is no one around to help me. No person. No god. No avatar guardian angel. I’m languishing at the bottom of despair in the abyss of hopelessness.

The day after my assault, Basheem arranges my release from the punishment block. He allows me to retrieve my personal items and the novel Noura gave me to read--Yusif al-Sibai’s, *Life is A Moment*. He was the Egyptian minister terrorists killed in Cyprus.

I give Noura my cigarettes and she scrawls the name of her French Algerian friend, her ami, on a blank page in my novel. “I urge you to meet him in Paris as soon as you’re released. Jacques will help you get back your son. Mon ami can do anything. He’s master of the Mediterranean. When you call him remember to say, *Tout est vrai, the Sultan has a stash of jewels hidden in the Milky Way*. That way he’ll know you’re connected to me. It was our code phrase when we made our international calls.”

I gaze at my friend who's cast in limbo. Not knowing the date of her execution, but knowing she is doomed. Or maybe not. Her fate is uncertain. Like everyone else's. Is she really on death row? Or is it just another jailhouse embellishment? I don't know.

I hug Noura until the shawisha taps my shoulder with her baton. "It's time to go to a cell with the other pre-sentenced detainees."

Noura pulls away and climbs on the top bunk. "Allez," she says. "A small adieu between friends is enough. May we meet in paradise, mon amie." She lies down to take a nap and turns her back to me.

I spend another month in al-Qanater Woman's Prison and have a few more unpleasant encounters with Basheem when the hospital room is empty. Finally, Basheem summons me to his office where a young Egyptian man sits beside a desk. He wears a neat charcoal gray suit and brown highly polished dress-shoes, cap toed and tasseled. He has a matching leather briefcase at his side.

"This is your public defender," Muqaddam tells me. "The American Embassy has appointed him to you for all future negotiations."

The attorney offers me a firm handshake and introduces himself. "I'm Ahmed Fouad Abu el-Said, a criminal defense attorney from Yehia El-Said Law Offices." He has a look of no-nonsense. He's not the type of man who would take advantage of a vulnerable woman.

I sit before my attorney. Basheem winks at me as he leaves the room. The man disgusts me but he's my only hope.

Ahmed Fouad takes notes during our interview. He asks preliminary questions, all in perfect English. "Did you see the magistrate forty hours after your arrest?"

“I had no hearing, no arraignment, no nothing, until now.”

“This is a serious allegation. But what you want is to get out of al-Qanater. Let’s not stir up an international incident.”

I smile, feeling a ray of hope.

“Felonies such as yours are tried in a court of three judges. Egypt has no juries or lay factfinders.”

“Felonies such as mine? What do you mean, Mr. Said?”

“The Prosecutor General wants to bring two serious felony charges against you-- Kidnapping a son of Egypt and Antiquities Theft. We’re looking at perhaps twenty-five years.”

“Twenty-five years!? I need to call my father. Stanly Prentice,” I exclaim. “He’s my only recourse. And lately, Mr. Said, since leaving the punishment cell, I’ve been thinking more about Daddy than my son. Night after night I lie awake wondering if he ever received my letters, and if so, what’s he thinking. I’m sure AUC told him that I absconded. Mr. Said. My Daddy was so proud of me for getting such a prestigious job. He even accepted my course in life wasn’t to work at his trucking firm. I’ve really messed everything up!” I look at my lawyer and repeat, “Can you help me call my father?”

“He’s here,” Ahmed says. “He’s staying at the Grand Hilton. He received your letter a month ago, flew to Cairo, met with Amar and worked out a settlement. The boy wasn’t hurt. He’s back in school. Amar dropped the charges. Your father’s paying him restitution.”

“Wow. All that without my even knowing?”

“Yes Miss Sarah. Unfortunately, you’re permanently banned from Egypt. Stamped as a looter. The Prosecutor threatens to take up the charges if you ever come back to Egypt.”

I hear my lawyer's words but my thoughts are on my father. "Daddy's here. I'm unlocked from al-Qanater!"

"You're released as we speak."

"Now?"

"Yes. Excuse me while I summon the magistrate."

I watch my lawyer depart and return with a guard to uncuff me.

My father enters Basheem's office as Ahmed Fouad and the guard leave.

My heart flutters at the sight of Stanly Alan Prentice, a large man of stature and means, Dressed in a dark suit.

I approach Daddy and stand frozen before him.

"Sarah, pumpkins," he says.

For a moment our reunion seems bittersweet. I'm his baby girl and he's happy to see me. But the circumstances are rather dire. In my heart, I know he's disappointed in me and my foolishness. For Christ's sake I've landed in prison. And I'm simply not the same daughter I was when we last embraced at O'Hare many months ago. Since then, I've won over the love of my son then lost him. Again. Now I'm shattered to pieces without an amulet to hold me together. Without whispers from my avatars telling me what to do. Giving me courage of which I now have none. I have nothing at all.

Lacking the emotional make-up to formulate words, I melt to my father's arms.

"There, there, my poor baby girl. Daddy's here," he says and holds me tightly for a very long time.



Chapter 20: 34½ Bis Rue D'Aubervilliers

It's late evening. I'm standing with Daddy outside the gates of Al-Qanater Women's Prison. We're waiting for a taxi. At the street corner goats are gnawing piles of discarded fruit.

"The boy belongs to Egypt," my father scolds. "To his people. You have no claim to him. You abandoned him ten years ago and you can't reshape the past. In my day, we called them bastards."

"His name is Jamal," I argue with my last shred of dignity. I can't believe my father's indifference toward his only grandchild. "This *Egyptian boy* is my son. He's your own flesh and blood," I press. "I'm hoping you'll help me get him back. You're a powerful, influential man."

"I made a gentleman's agreement with the boy's father. Shook hands. Paid an enormous bribe," my father states. "I agreed with your Amar to keep this story quiet. None of us want an international media frenzy. Not me, not Mubarak and not Amar. He told me he wanted no publicity."

"He's afraid a mandatory blood test will reveal the truth about my son's parentage."

"Look. baby girl." Daddy places his massive hands firmly on my shoulders. "I need you to promise you'll never again speak about the child. Not to your mother or your friends. Not to anyone. If you even think about that boy, I'll disinherit you!"

"Daddy! That's harsh. Drastic."

“You have no choice. I paid for your freedom and gave my word. We signed a contract before a team of lawyers.”

“What?” I ask unable to believe my own father. But I’m forlorn and defeated, the way I felt when I arrived at al-Qanater even though I’ve been set free. “Yes Mr. Prentice. I humbly agree. I really have no choice but to obey your wishes.”

Back in Palatine I live with my parents and try to move on with my life. To please my father, I enroll in law school and work at his firm, abandoning all my ambitions to get a Ph.D. in Egyptology. I’m banned from Egypt anyway and my dreams lie in ruins. Except for the actual dreams I have almost every night, about my son.

As the weeks passed, I become increasingly depressed and despondent. I can’t talk to anyone about my epic travels and ultimate failure. Not the real story. Even if I could I doubt I would. Some secrets are best hidden forever. Nobody knows about Jamal but my father and we never discuss the matter. Nobody understands why I landed in an Egyptian prison when I was supposedly teaching English at the prestigious American University in Cairo. People assume my whole ordeal in Egypt had to do with drugs. It seems to be a fallback conclusion people are comfortable with. A logical explanation they can accept.

After six months I stop socializing altogether and keep to myself. My friends and acquaintances quit calling me anyway. One by one, they drop away like petals from a dying rose. Even Jennifer and Mary stop calling me. And I call no one.

Edith Prentice, my mother, urges me to seek professional help. At first, I’m reluctant to undergo psychiatric treatment; it has such a bad stigma and I can’t talk to anyone about what

really torments me. But in time I take my mother's advice and see a psychiatrist. I'm afraid if I don't, my head will explode and I'll fall completely and permanently apart.

Dr. Bennett is a polite, engaging middle-aged black man who makes me feel comfortable when we meet twice a month. At moments, during the sessions, I ache to mention Jamal and reveal what really torments me. But I hold back always remembering my promise to Daddy. I can't reveal the secret and unlock the Nile's flood gates.

I tell Dr. Bennett about my travels to Egypt and my visions of the Old Kingdom priestess and how she whispered to me and served as my guardian angel. My avatar. I even reveal her name.

"I never made any conclusions about Seshet Akeru," I say during one session. "I don't know whether she was real or from a past life." Then I stop myself because I can't get into the story of my kidnapping Jamal. And I don't reveal that my avatar was a Prophet of Ba'ast, a protector of mothers and their newborns. This would cause me to bring up my son.

Dr. Bennett begins to focus on my childhood and draws out memories I had suppressed for many years.

"I threw tantrums and was moody when I was little," I tell him early on in our sessions.

"What would your parents do when you threw tantrums?" the doctor asks.

"Mom punished me. A lot."

"Tell me about your mother's punishment sessions."

"When I was growing up, I believe Mom was jealous of the attention Daddy showed me. Whenever I started crying, she would yell 'Stop it!' or 'No Sarah!'"

"Go on Sarah. You have to face your past. Accept it. And let it go before you can move on with life. To a promising tomorrow."

“Okay. Doctor. I remember her spanking me with a forsythia switch from the backyard.”

“Spanking was a normal parenting technique in the sixties. It wasn’t her fault.”

“Maybe. But then when I was six or seven, she started taking me to the bathroom and throwing water on me. As if this would calm me down. Tame the wild animal in me. I don’t remember Daddy around when she did this. If he was, he never threw water on me. If he did, I don’t remember.”

“Tell me what the little girl does. Let’s press deeper into your memory.”

I look at Bennett for a moment trying to see if he’s serious.

“Go on Sarah. Try to remember these punishment sessions. Be that little girl. How do you feel?”

“The little girl keeps fighting, crying. Her spirit wants to survive. She doesn’t understand.”

“What did that little girl do? What do you do, little Sarah?”

“I rip my clothes. That’s all I can do until Mom finally stops, turns off the light and closes the bathroom door. She doesn’t want to hear me cry or see what’s she’s done to me.”

“And what do you do in that dark wet room? How are you feeling?”

“I’m cold. Shivering. I lie on the tile floor because I’m exhausted.”

“Sarah. Do you know why you had seizures?” Dr. Bennett asks.

“I felt possessed. Unable to control my feelings. Perhaps I needed attention from my mother. I hardly moved her. Barely got her attention.”

“Sarah,” Bennett tells me during one of our final sessions. “You were born with a strong manic mind, quick to think, quick to react, quick to emote. Your quirky mania has driven some people away, including your own mother, a woman who may have her own mental health

issues. The visions and voices you saw and heard in Egypt were figments of your psyche brought on by childhood trauma, by your mother's punishments sessions. I believe you became delusional because of the trauma you suffered as a child. You developed dissociative personalities. An Old Kingdom priestess was your safe place to be."

"My goodness. All that. Why am I depressed?" I ask then remember I know why and can't really tell Dr. Bennett.

"Because you're manic depressive. I'm going to start you out on a prescription of Librium. It'll help with your depression and impulses. We'll meet in a month to monitor how you're doing."

For several weeks Dr. Bennett's words haunt me. I question whether my magical experiences in Egypt were authentic visions or just "a hill of beans" as Daddy would say. I don't like Dr. Bennett's diagnosis of my having "multiple personalities" and decide not to see him again. I also toss out the Librium. The drug has too many side-effects anyway and I prefer to think clearly about myself and what's happened in my life.

When no longer stifled by medication, my self-doubts begin to disappear and so does the despair. I conclude I'm not a "mentally damaged" person and that a spirit enchantress is a healthier explanation than psychotic episodes brought on by childhood abuse. I see myself for myself and become my own apparition; my only cure. The only medicine I need is Jamal back in my life. After fifteen months back in Palatine, I pack my bags and fly to Paris to meet Noura's *bon ami*, Master of the Mediterranean Sea.

In my room at a pension in Saint Germain, the operator connects me to Jacques Richards Lemach. “I’m a friend of Noura,” I say over the black rotary handset. “She nursed me back to health in the prison infirmary.”

With a gruff sexy voice, the man asks me where I met Noura. “Al-Qanater,” I say, knowing he’s verifying my credentials, feeling me out. “Tout est vrai, the Sultan stashes his jewels in the Milky Way,” I add and the man seems more at ease. We have a lengthy conversation.

“I’m impressed with your Arabic and knowledge of the Maghreb,” he says at one point. “Many Parisians view North Africans as beurs, wogs and violent criminals. Even Algerians with French citizenship are considered non-French.”

“Noura told me how you met her at the Sorbonne during a Palestinian rally. She gave me a note with your phone and address. She said you could help me with a problem I have.”

“Did she? Well then, Alors, can we meet tonight at the address in Noura’s note. 34½ Bis Rue D’Aubervilliers. It’s best we’re not seen together during the day,” he adds.

At eight o’clock that night, in the cold drizzle, I grab a taxi along rue du Pont Neuf and head to a Maghreb section of Paris in the 19th Arrondissement. My taxi pulls into a rundown neighborhood, not the sort of place a woman should walk alone at night. I pay the driver to wait beside a tenement building that resembles projects in Chicago’s Southside. It gives me a sense of freedom, in a way, to be so unconcerned about my welfare. If some goon kills me, my epic battle is over. But I’ll never commit suicide, I tell myself, not with the chance of seeing Jamal again.

I enter the unlocked front doors and climb a metal stairwell lit by bare lightbulbs. With each clanking step I anticipate meeting Mr. Lemach.

Off the third-floor landing, I see “34½” posted on a door. Before I can reach for the knocker, a man says, “Qui est?”

An eye appears at the peephole. I tightly hold my fringed handbag containing enough money for my taxi fare. My cache of savings is locked in the hotel safe, for now. I plan to do my bartering first and make payments later. I’m hoping my savings won’t run out. It’s all I have left from my divorce settlement and I’m certain my father will never again help me out.

“It’s Sarah Prentice for Jacques Richards Lemach.”

I sense the eye scrutinizing me. Then a lock unclicks and the door creaks open. Before me stands a strikingly handsome man with dark whiskers. He could be Arab or French, but not American. He wears polyester unkempt slacks and an untucked T-shirt with “Chris Evert and the French Open.” His salient eyes are blue-gray like many Egyptians I’ve met.

“*Entre vite vite alors.*” The man takes my arm and pulls me inside. I’m nearly overcome by the aroma of cooked meat and all the spices of Khan el Khalili.

In the front room three Arab men dressed in hooded Moroccan djellabas with embroidered necklines are sitting on tapestried rugs. Before them is a clay conical tagine. The men gaze at me for a moment then continue eating with their right hands while speaking Arabic. There’s no furniture in the room and the drapes are closed. Wall posters are of Tina Turner and Tom Jones. Against one wall is a turntable and speakers amplifying Maghreb music.

“*Asseyez-vous s’il vous plait,*” the man says as he takes my coat and sets it on a Bedouin cushion. I sit where he gestures, on a cushion opposite the Arab men.

“Manger,” one man says. He hands me a piece of baguette and indicates the tagine between us. Another man gets up and fetches me a glass of goat milk from the kitchen.

I dip my bread into the communal pot of meat stew and cuscus feeling a bit uncomfortable.

“*Bon goût?*” a man asks.

“Very good,” I say. “Are you Jacques?” I look at the man who opened the door.

“Correct. And you know my Noura?”

“She’s a sister to me.”

“And these men are my brothers from Rabat. They work at the Renault factory six days a week. They don’t speak English. Only French and Arabic. He’s Abdula.” Jacques indicates the tall handsome Arab who extends his greasy hand and lightly shakes mine. “He’s Smokie,” Jacques refers to the shorter fair looking man with a grin of terrible teeth. The other man he introduces as Abdullatif has a homely, unfriendly face. He reminds me of Naguib, the camel broker in Aswan who betrayed me to Amar.

“You’ll sleep here,” Jacques declares.

“What!?” I ask, surprised by the suggestion. “I can’t. I have a taxi waiting for me.”

“Go pay the cab and send him off,” Jacques tells Smokie.

I say nothing but wonder about Jacques’s intentions. I sip my goat’s milk and think how it’s always the same thing with foreign men. Maybe with men in general. I’m somehow beholden to their whims and negotiations. Yet again, it seems I have no choice but to go along. Jacques seems to be my only hope to get back my son. I’m feeling quite desperate as if my life depends on the bon ami of my cellmate.

While Smokie’s gone, I decide to bring up my business. I’m too pressed for time to worry about cross-cultural sensitivities. “Can we discuss my proposition?” I ask Jacques.

“*À present*,” he replies as he pulls from his wallet a picture of Noura and him in a photo booth. “*Ma belle amie*. Noura. She loves France. It’s a second home in her heart. First Palestine, always Palestine. She’s a brilliant woman, such a downfall of magnificence.”

The Moroccans clear away the meal and serve coffee in small copper cups, Abdulatif lights a beautiful hookah made of pink Moroccan glass. The aroma of hashish and tobacco with an exotic flare of persimmons and clementines instantly fills the room.

Jacques takes on the hookah and offers me the pine wood smoking stem.

“No thanks. I want a clear head when negotiating,” I say, but the truth is, I don’t know these strange men in the ghettos of Paris who want me to sleep over. “Has Noura given up?” I ask, returning to the conversation. “She never talked about her appeals. She seemed very guarded, but positive.”

Lemach sips his coffee. “What did she tell you? About her crime? About her sentence?”

“That she was sentenced to death for manslaughter during a felony.”

Jacques snickers and tells his Moroccan friends, amusing them too. “She’s a strong woman. *Mon petite chou*. Perhaps that’s why you’re sisters. *Malheureusement*, the police caught her smuggling, that’s all. A terrible set back but she’s not under a death sentence. In a few years they’ll release her and she’ll spring back on her feet. As for her career as a smuggler. *Pas encore. C’est fini*. She can’t even return to France.”

I sip my coffee. It’s as savory as the coffee my Beja friends made every day of our caravan across the Nubian desert. I can smell and taste the fresh pepper, cinnamon, cloves and cardamon. “Why can’t she return to France? She said she had French citizenship.”

“She’s lost her citizenship. She’ll never be a lawyer fighting for her cause. Mademoiselle, I waylaid Noura’s dreams and am forever in her debt. To make amends, I send money to her father.”

“She treasure’s your visits. She told me this.”

“Mais oui. Noura’s always happy to see me. Still filled with much desire to make right what is wrong. She is my wife and together we will make money for her cause.”

“Your wife?” I ask. “She never mentioned she married you.”

“Bien sur. She is discreet, mon petite.”

“Noura said you could help me get back my son.” I speak directly now, sensing this is what I must do.

“*Ton fils?*” Jacques seems surprised. Certainly, Noura told him my story. Unless their time together at the prison is limited and they have many other matters to discuss.

The door creaks open. Smokie joins his brothers around the pink glass hookah and I tell my story from the birth of my son in Cairo to my capture in Khartoum.

Jacques tells me to speak English and occasionally he translates my story in Maghrebi Arabic. Derja. The men laugh at unexpected points, evidently finding the ‘agnabi’s desperation and obsession greatly amusing. They all do. It bothers me and I say, in careful Modern Standard Arabic, “If I were a man, you’d find my story more suitable?” The men become silent.

“Miss Sarah, Mademoiselle,” Jacques says. “Please excuse my friends. They lack manners. They are crude men. They don’t see women enough. Viva la femme. And you are a beautiful vision.”

The three Moroccans, with serious expressions, gesture their sincere friendship. A gesture of the heart.

“A friend of Noura’s is our friend. Our sister,” Jacques says. “And we’ve never heard such a powerful story.”

“I can’t return to Egypt.” I explain my legal situation then add, “Will you help me get my son back? At your price.”

“Gold bangles?” he asks.

“Of course, Noura did tell you my story. The gold bangles were her favorite part.”

“Peut être, I want to hear the story from you.” Jacques’ face becomes serious as he takes another hit on the hookah. “Human smuggling is not an easy matter,” he continues. “Egypt is filled with police under Mubarak’s tight-fisted rule.”

“The police are corruptible,” I suggest, drawing a smile from Jacques.

“I’m not a religious man,” he says. “I’m not really a very goodly man. But my efforts are often to right a wrong. Have you not wronged this Egyptian family? You’re a rich American girl who can buy hundreds of gold bangles. Why do you trouble yourself?”

Lemach’s words throw me off track. I’m angry, in fact, but poised when I say, “Why do you care?”

“True, I care only for the money. N’est pas.” He gruffly laughs. “I only tease you. If I take on your cause, as I took on Noura’s, I must know your heart.”

“Please don’t toy with me. I need to know if you’ll help me. I hope your price will be within my means.”

Jacques chats a moment with the Moroccans, then says to me, “D’accord. Tomorrow, we discuss a plan. Tonight, you sleep safely as our sister. We have two bedrooms. You have one to yourself,” he assures me. “No one will harm you. Me and my brothers must think about your

story. *Pour maintenant, fumer.*” He hands me the hookah smoking stem. “It’ll help you relax and have sweet dreams. Put your mind on the project. Bring focus to the plan.”

I relent and take a small toke and cough. After I recover, I tell my “brothers” that I wish to retire for the night. Jacques takes me to the bedroom where I’ll be sleeping.

Tired, and swooning from the effects of powerful Moroccan hashish, I gratefully lie down on the sheepskin on the floor, my bed. The hashish sends me into a restful sleep undisturbed by dreams.

When I awake the next morning, I find beside me a tray with a thermos of coffee, a can of condensed milk, a baguette, pat of butter and brie, and a note from Lemach saying he’ll return at four in the afternoon. *Fais comme chez toi* the note reads. *Mais, please remain in the apartment. Ça va bien? j. r. l.*

For the next three nights I stay at the tenement apartment leaving only once to retrieve my luggage and money from my hotel. During this time, Lemach procures a new U. S. passport for Jamal using the only picture I have of my son when he was ten; one I had fortunately sent home while teaching at Kalifa Bin Oman Primary School.

Each day Jacques leaves me breakfast and food for lunch. While waiting for my hosts to return in the evenings, I listen to Tina Turner’s latest album, “Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome,” to Tom Jones’ “Tender Loving Care,” and to Maghreb music that compliments the tagine pot, pink glass hookah, and dates stuffed with almond paste and orange water that the Moroccans bring home after work.

I’m not sure what Jacques does during the day or where he goes late at night. He claims to work at the Renault factory with his Moroccan brothers but that’s unlikely. Preposterous, in

fact. He probably says it in jest. I believe he lives someplace else in Paris, possibly at a luxury apartment near the Eiffel Tower where he secretly conducts his business.

While enjoying the evening meal the Moroccans prepare, and when drinking coffee and smoking the hookah, Lemach, his friends and I work out details for smuggling my child from Egypt. I assume the three Moroccans work for Lemach in some capacity. But they never talk about that. Lemach is not a man of frivolous discourse and he keeps the focus on my plan, his business at hand

“The crux of the plan,” I say to Lemach soon after we begin strategizing. “Is to convince Jamal to embark on another adventure with me, his American mother. If he refuses to leave Cairo with you, the endeavor will fail. I won’t allow anyone to capture my son like a victim, knocked him out with chloroform as Abdullatif suggests.”

“Don’t worry, Mademoiselle,” Lemach assures me. “No one will harm your son. My friend merely jests.” He gives Abdullatif a glance and the man makes another gesture of the heart. But his eyes look shifty.

“All right then,” I say. “Jamal is now twelve and in secondary school. I pray he’ll have the spirit he had when ten. Nineteen months have passed and I don’t know if Jamal still dreams of Disneyland and a life with me in America.”

“What did Jamal say when this Amar took him from you?”

“I can never remember if he called out my name when Amar snatched him away at the Khartoum airport. That memory is as blurred as a Nubian haboob.”

On the third night of planning, Lemach reaches a conclusion. “Bien,” he says. “Here’s the plan. I’ll bring Jamal to Cyprus.”

“Cyprus?”

“Oui. Cyprus. It’s 350 nautical miles from Egypt and is as prime a place as Egypt, Turkey, and Greece for trafficking antiquities and selling hashish. I know the island well. It has a remarkable history. During the Old Kingdom in Egypt, Cyprus was known as the kingdom of Alashiya. The Persians overran Alashiya, then Alexander the Great overthrew the Persians. Mycenaeans, Assyrians, Ptolemaic Egyptians, Romans, Arabs, the Ottomans, and even the British left ruins and relics throughout the island. There are so many ancient coins and artifacts buried on Cyprus that it’s illegal to own a metal detector. I launder my profits on the north end of the island.”

“Why the north end? Is it more remote?” I ask.

“It’s an autonomous region Turkey’s occupied since 1974. Only Turkey recognizes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. It’s also rich with antiquities and no one cares if you take them.”

“Guess that’s why I never heard of it. Will my son be safe? Will you bring him to this no-man’s-land?”

“No. I’ll bring Jamal to Cyprus proper.”

“What’s foremost on my mind is how you’ll bring him to me.”

“Bien sûr, Mademoiselle. Your boy will have the adventure of his life. He’ll travel across the Mediterranean in my Ferretti motor yacht christened *the Rif*. I usually moor on the Karpas Peninsula in Northern Cyprus –no-man’s-land--but when I bring you your son, I’ll moor at Paphos Marina and we’ll rendezvous at the Rock of Aphrodite. Appropriate, don’t you agree?”

“How will you meet my son?” I ask. “I had to take a job at his school to meet him. We don’t even know where he goes to school now.”

“You know his name and the date of his birth. That’s enough for me. I’ll find him, Inshalla. Now that I know you, I have a feeling your son will want to see his true mother.”

“But how will you isolate him? To show him my picture?”

“*Mademoiselle, mes amis, bien sûr. Comme toujours.* We’ll call his school from the Anglo-American Hospital and claim his mother, this Zenna you talk about, had an accident and is in the hospital. I have many friends in Cairo; some are my brothers. I know a nurse at the Anglo-American who deals prescription drugs and my hashish on the side. My friend will go to the school to escort Jamal to the hospital. In the taxi, I’ll show your pictures to your son. The rest is up to him, n’est pas?”

“I believe it’ll work. No wonder Noura calls you Master of the Mediterranean Sea.”

Jacques merely nods at my remark. “Now. Mon amour, tell no one about your trip to Cyprus. Not even your family or friends.”

“You needn’t worry. My family connections are already severed and my only friend is Noura.” I take a hit of hashish and think to say, “I’ll be just as guilty as you, Mr. Lemach. If you get caught.”

“Mon Cherie. You must trust my judgement. I’ve been in this business most of my life and I’m nearly forty. Never think about getting caught. It casts the evil eye on the job.”



Chapter 21: The Rock of Hathor

By noon New Year's Day, I'm sitting on a blanket in the shade of a boulder outcropping on the pebbly Petra tou Romiou beach. The blue Mediterranean glimmers before me under a bright clear sky. Aphrodite's Rock prominently stands in the rolling surf like the Pillars of Creation in outer space.

It's Hathor's Rock, I'll tell my son when he arrives with Jacques at any time. I'll tell him the rock is the legendary birthplace of the Lady of Cyprus. She's the daughter of Atum Ra, not Zeus. She came ashore in a wake of seafoam. Aphrodite is her name in ancient Greece. To the Romans she was Venus. But for me, she is Isis-Hathor.

Because it's winter, not many tourists are on the pebbly beach. A few people are swimming around the rock perhaps wishing for Hathor's magic. I know what that's like.

For the past week I've been staying at the nearby Almyra Hotel in Paphos waiting for word from Lemach. Yesterday, a cable finally arrived at my hotel. *À bientôt, see you Petra tou Romiou. Afternoon New Year's Day.* Lemach had convinced Jamal to meet me, his real mother.

“*Hamdulila!* “I’m not vanquished. *Je ne suis pas vaincu.*” I yelled in the hotel lobby, overcome with joy.

A warm ocean breeze tousles my shoulder length hair. I’ve dressed comfortably in canvas mule scuffs, gray parachute pants and a loose-fitting white blouse with a golden chain belt and leopard buckle. On my beach blanket is a duffle bag of gifts for Jamal, a lunchbox cooler containing Orange Fanta and a picnic basket with the best foods of Cyprus--stuffed grape leaves, lamb kababs and moussaka.

An hour ago my taxi driver helped me bring everything to the beach and promised to return this evening when I’m together with my son. I don’t doubt this. My mind and emotions, my very spirit, won’t have me thinking otherwise. My every breath anticipates Jamal’s arrival. I keep glancing down the beach toward Limassol and at the stone underpass behind me. I don’t know when or where he’ll appear.

Back in Chicago, after I decided Seshet Akeru was not a figment of my battered mind, I started asking for her help again in my quest to gain back my son. Now I believe my Old Kingdom avatar has made this reunion possible. In Cairo, she used her magic on Jamal.

I call her name to help calm my nerves but don’t hear her whisper. I question whether her magic reaches these shores across the Great Green Sea. Had either Nefertiabet or Seshet Akeru ever set foot on Cyprus? I wonder. The Egyptians traded with civilizations on the Mediterranean, including Alashiya. But perhaps that was centuries after either of my avatars had traveled the Nile. Hathor must have been here. This is her rock.

I look around and see no one at the underpass or down the beach toward Limassol. A shearwater runs across the round pebbles that tumble in the surf as they have for millions of years. Cyprus is an island reprieve for many bird species that migrate from Africa to Europe like

the Sicorro wind. People on the island catch these birds for a traditional Cypriote dish, perhaps one as old as ancient Egypt.

I start asking myself hundreds of questions while feeling jittery with anticipation. Will Jamal and I stay in Paris a few years before establishing a new life in America? I can teach English anywhere in the world. It doesn't matter where Jamal and I go, as long as we're together. Maybe we'll stay on Cyprus or the Greek islands and hide out a few months. Years? Dare I dream of possibilities when I'm not even sure how Jamal will react to me. Nineteen months is a long time in a young boy's life. But he must have agreed to meet me. He must have wanted to see me again. This is the deal I made with Jacques and with Seshet Akeru.

I attempt to read my Elizabeth Peters novel *The Mummy Case*. It's no use. I can't concentrate on more than a sentence or two about Amelia Peabody, Elizabethan Egyptologist and sleuth. Not long ago, I hoped to earn a Ph.D. in Egyptology at the University of Chicago, like Elizabeth Peters, aka Barbara Mertz. Now I'll never get that chance. That hardly matters anymore. Only one thing matters to me and that's reuniting with my son.

I look down the beach and back at the underpass. A boy suddenly emerges from the dark tunnel. He looks American, I'm thinking. Then I recognize my twelve-year-old son in the T-shirt, jeans, and Nikes I gave Lemach so Jamal could change from his school clothes.

Behind Jamal, Jacques appears unshaven. He's wearing a T-shirt with the logo of APOEL, the most popular football team in Cyprus.

I stand, brush sand off my pants, and try to tame my emotions. I don't want to lose my composure and upset my son. I can't become a blubbing wreck although this is what I am.

For a moment, Jamal stops at the stonework underpass as if hesitating. He's grown at least two or three inches and looks less cherublike. He's a young man but still my little Saladin, Sultan of Egypt and the Sudan. Madjay warrior of Kush. Grandson of Noah and son of Sekhmet.

It's apparent he recognizes me. I haven't changed much over the months, at least not appearance wise. Although I'm weathered in spirit. My hair's a bit breeze blown now but it's not the botched cut I had when we last saw each other in Khartoum. And I'm not hiding my face behind the niqab or an orange thawb.

Standing in the sun and out of the shadow, I wait for Jamal and Lemach to arrive. Jamal must make the first move.

He walks up before me. We eye each other for a moment. Then he embraces me and says, "Mommy. I missed you."

There's nothing more to say between us. My son accepts me as his mother. I wonder if he suffered under the pretense of Zenna as his al 'umm. Had Jamal protested and rebelled, asked for his real mommy? My head is filled with questions but now is not the time for emotional recollections. Child psychology is a delicate plateau, I well know. I must tread lightly. Besides, Lemach is standing nearby in need of his final payment made on delivery. He's a man of business like Stanly Prentice my dad.

I pay Jacques in American dollars. "What no gold bangles?" he jests and kisses me in friendship on each cheek. Then, to my astonishment, he sensually kisses me on the lips, pinching my shoulders in the process. It's a long and passionate kiss, in front of my son. "Bonne chance, mon amore," Lemach says. He turns and walks back to the underpass.

"He's probably off to cruise his Ferretti to North Cyprus," I say to my son.

“Is he your boyfriend? Mommy,” Jamal asks as I tightly hold his hand. “I hope he is. I like Jacques. He knows a lot of interesting things. He told me he’s Master of the Mediterranean Sea.”

“That he is.”

“Your boyfriend?”

“No. Jamal. I mean he’s Master of the Mediterranean Sea.”

“Why’s he going to north Cyprus?”

“Probably to launder money and acquire antiquities for the next harvest of hashish from the Rif.” I say bluntly. I want to be completely honest with Jamal as we make our new start.

“Cool,” Jamal says as we watch Jacques disappears into the tunnel.

I look at Jamal. He smiles with a gleam in his eyes. “It’s over. I’ve won you back forever; I know this in my heart.”

“I’m here Mommy. Where are we going now? A camel adventure or another sea voyage with Mr. Lamach?”

“I’m not sure, Saladin. Maybe we’ll travel to Greece for a month. Then go to America. I’ll get you a birth certificate, somehow. I’ll work my own magic and accomplish the impossible. Perhaps with the help of Hathor. That’s Hathor’s rock standing in the surf. Go run and throw pebbles in the sea. I want to watch you shout and play.”

“I’m grown now Mommy. I’m too old to play. I want to climb to the top of Hathor’s Rock.”

“It’s too dangerous to climb such a huge boulder.”

“Mama, I still want to see Disneyland.”

“Habibi, life of my heart. We’ll stay in Paphos a while, if you like. For now, I have a picnic feast for you. And gifts. Open the canvas bag.”

Jamal excitedly unzips the bag and removes a pair of Nikon binoculars.

“For gazing at the night sky like we did during our camel trek,” I say. “Or for seeing the migratory birds on Cyprus.”

“Cool Mommy. I like these binoculars.” Jamal then takes out a Sony Walkman and tapes of Michael Jackson, the Bee Gees, and Diana Ross, a Canon T90 SLR camera and a Texas Instruments digital calculator watch.

“Like Sharaab’s,” I say. “Remember how happy you were with your new badad sulimani?”

“I wish I still had Tai Basshir,” Jamal says as he examines his gifts with an adept engineering mind. “I miss Bashok and Samarr. They were the best friends I ever had. Sometimes, I wonder what happened to them with the civil war going on in the Sudan.” He clicks a picture of me with his new camera already loaded with Kodak film. “And I have nothing for you, Mama.”

“Yes, you’ve grown, my Saladin.” I touch my son’s face and stroke his hair.

Jamal begins eating the picnic food like the growing young man that he is. “Why didn’t you come for me sooner?” he asks.

“We’re you waiting for me, hoping I’d return for you?” I take a bite of grape leaf but am too overjoyed to eat.

“Every day.”

“My dear son. We were hopelessly kept apart. From your birth. But that’s all behind us now.”

“Look Mommy.” Jamal points out a magpie on a nearby boulder with a lizard in its mouth.

“It’s New Year’s Day, 1986,” I say aloud. “A new beginning for us, Jamal.”

“Not for the poor lizard,” my son jokes. We laugh and I hug him while feeling enshrouded with an aura of promise. I’m as happy as I’ve ever been and am hoping Jamal shares these feelings.

For the rest of the afternoon, Jamal takes pictures, looks through his Nikons and listens to his Walkman. I believe he *is* as happy as can be. Or maybe boys need only be content. When he sits with me at our picnic spread, he tells me about his new school, El Zamalek Preparatory & Secondary School for Boys. “It’s a good school in science and math. Prepares me for college. I’m going to Stanford or Yale.”

“I am so impressed with you,” I say while thinking that at least Zenna did something right. Still, I can’t help but wonder if Jamal struggled emotionally during our separation. Like I had during my difficult childhood.

I tell my son about my time in al-Qanater. We laugh at my enormous discomforts. Then I talk about Jamal’s grandfather, Stanly Prentice. “He’s a good man. Like your other grandfather, the minister under Gamal.”

“That’s right Mommy. He was a Minister of Agriculture like my uncle will be, one day.”

“Your other grandfather, my Daddy, made his own fortune. If it weren’t for him, I’d still be suffering in al-Qanater. I never lost sight of you, Jamal, since Amar grabbed you from me in Khartoum. Since your birth in Cairo, when I dreamed, you were born to do great things.”

“Mama,” Jamal takes another picture of me. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save you when they took you away. My uncle has always been strict. I never doubted you’re my mother from

America. All my friends at school envy my travels. Most have never sailed a felucca or ridden a camel. I have done both. And now I've sped across the sea on Jacques's Ferretti yacht. He let me steer from Alexandria. He taught me the basics of yachting. Like Majid did on the felucca two years ago. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember everything. And now here you are with me, again. You've changed from a ten-year-old boy to a charismatic and chivalrous young man. Before, you wanted to protect me as part of your imagination. Now you really do want to protect me, your real mother, and see us on our way to a new life in America. Even your voice is an octave deeper."

Jamal stops a passerby and asks, "Please take a picture of me and my mother? She's Amanishakheto, the beautiful queen of Kush."

When the stranger hands back Jamal's new camera, my son sets it aside and picks up his Nikons. "Mama, tonight we can stargaze."

"We'll do whatever you like. That's why you have the Nikons. But now, we must return to the hotel, Saladin. We have so many possibilities to think about. The sun's nearing Hathor's Rock. Atum Ra's about to kiss his daughter. What time is it?"

Jamal proudly looks at his new watch and declares, "It's 4:45."

"Let's start packing up. We must carry this stuff to the highway on the other side of the underpass. Our taxi will be waiting for us by six."

As Jamal takes sunset pictures of the rock and I'm packing up, I glance toward Limassol and notice a solitary man in a white T-shirt and black slacks. He's walking toward Hathor's Rock where people are taking pictures of the setting sun. Sunbathers are gathering their towels and bags. Some people are already leaving through the underpass. Nobody is heading up the beach toward Limassol. And this lone man has the stride of someone on a mission.

He's vaguely familiar I think while feeling an urgency to hurry and leave.

"It's my uncle!" Jamal looks at the man through his binoculars. He hands them to me.

I gaze through the lens. Amar's face becomes clearer as he nears us. "He must have come from the highway on the road to Limassol. How could he know? Where did I slip up? Using my own passport perhaps. But how did he find me on Cyprus? And at the Rock of Hathor right when we meet?"

I look around me. Most people have left the beach. Atum Ra is now on the horizon of the mystical sea ready to sail his **Mesektet** boat through the perils of darkness.

I look back up the beach. Amar clearly appears just as he did years before in Venice and Cairo. I motion my son beside me. He carefully places his camera, Walkman, and binoculars in the canvas bag. He hugs me and says, "*Habibti Mama.*"

I see the gun Amar carries, a semi-automatic pistol he smuggled onto the island. It's his Barretta 92 from his days in the Egyptian Army. The very gun he brandished with pride when I was pregnant in Cairo.

I tightly hold my dear son. Fear consumes me. *Are we completely helpless?* I ask myself. *Has Father Zeus forsaken me? Father Ra? My own father Stanly Alan Prentice.* I tighten my grip around my firstborn, my falcon son, my only child. I may die at any moment. Amar *is* the evil god Set and he wants me gone. Out of the picture. I call on Hathor and my guardian avatars but only in my mind. I want to shout but am too stunned to utter a word.

The surf rolls the pebbles ashore as Atum Ra enters the western horizon on his voyage into night. The lions Akeru Ruti welcome him. A purple glow surrounds the rock in the surf and casts the sky with colors as iridescent as a scarab beetle.

In the fading light I glance at the underpass to see if we can escape this impending danger. This dread of doom.

A black cat with white paws appears from the dark tunnel and walks up the pebbly beach toward the evil uncle.

This is my shadow cat Min Tep Sheut I hear my avatar whisper. *The shadow is always at play. It's part of the spirit. Hathor is the cat. She calls for the powers of jackals, leopards, and scorpions. They will destroy Set like Ammit destroys the depraved at the gateway to the Field of Reeds.*

"Look Mommy," Jamal jolts me from my thoughts. "It's Mr. Lemach on the Rif."

I look toward the sea. A large speedboat is approaching with lights illuminating the pebbly beach. Hathor's Rock appears like a white glowing apparition.

The sun has set and the beach is empty of people, except for me, my son, and Amar.

"Come with me, Jamal." I hear Amar's sinister voice, not the playful voice of the man I knew in Venice.

"No, uncle," my son yells, taking my hand as the idling speedboat nears the rock. "I want to stay with my mother!"

"Go away Sarah. I'll shoot you," Amar stops twenty feet from us. He's pointing his Baretta at me.

I stand frozen, afraid to run while I squeeze my son's hand. "No never," I scream so loudly my throat hurts. "You and your sister stole my son from my womb!"

The Ferretti's searchlight shine on Amar, lighting his face, blinding him and nearly blinding me. Amar's expression is filled with anger, hatred, determination, and destruction.

"Jamal, come to me," Amar shouts. He seems so near I feel the earth shatter.

A gunshot rips through the air like thunder, like an explosion. It knocks me to my senses. I tighten my grip on Jamal's hand and run toward the Ferretti illuminating the Rock of Hathor. The light is so bright I stumble and nearly fall.

"My things, Mommy. My gifts from you," Jamal exclaims along the way.

"Leave them," I shout as we quicken our pace like we had at the Khartoum airport. "We can replace them." I'm nearly out of breath and can barely talk.

Another gunshot rips through the air. I hear more shouting. I think Amar is yelling threatening words; I can't be sure. The words and the voice are blurred in the chaos.

At the surf, we wade to idling Ferretti, the Rif. Lemach stands at the bow holding a Glock pistol. He waves it gesturing we go to the back of his boat.

Jacque directs the yacht's spotlight on Amar. Jamal and I are in the dark surf. Set can't see us. He can't take aim and shoot me.

In a soft wake of foam, my son and I reach the rear of the speedboat.

The humming motor grows louder. I see the metal ladder at the back deck of the yacht. It's difficult to reach it in the churning surf.

I can't see Lemach but I hear him shout, "Come on! Hurry aboard."

I push Jamal ahead of me to climb the ladder. I feel like we're about to board the boat of Atum Ra, the Mesektet boat of gold inlaid with amethyst, jasper, turquoise, and lapis lazuli. I imagine Atum Ra himself has arrived at the sandy shore before the boulder outcropping to rescue us from the perils of Set.

Suddenly, the boat's brightness exposes me. I fear Amar will aim his Baretta and kill me.

A gunshot sounds. It rushes past my head and penetrates the fiberglass like the blow of a hammer.

Jamal is on deck. I worry he too is in the line of fire. Amar could miss me and hit Jamal, his son. His nephew.

“Climb aboard Mama,” Jamal shouts in the chaos.

I grab the cold metal bars of the ladder and pull myself from the surf. Jamal takes my hand and helps me off the ladder, out of the sea, onto the yacht.

I hear more shouting, another shot. This time it’s from the Ferretti’s bow. From Lemach’s Glock.

Jamal runs into the cabin.

Amar is no longer shouting, only the engine roars. I don’t look toward the beach. I don’t know if Jacques killed Amar. It’s probably too dark anyway to see a body lying on the pebbly sands. I don’t want to know what’s happened.

I enter the cabin. Jacques is at the cockpit standing beside my son. They’re at the steering wheel before the control panel illumined with blue, green, and yellow instrument lights that look like jewels on the boat of Atum Ra. Jacques is powering up the engine and pulling the Rif away from Hathor’s Rock

I stand behind my son and place my arm on his shoulders.

“Mommy,” Jamal says with excitement. “We’re safe. I know how to run the engine.”

“Yes, you do my Saladin. You are master of the sea.”

Once we’re far from the shoreline and the Rock of Hathor, I hug my son. “I don’t know where we’re going but I know it’ll be some place safe.”

“Jacques’s Master of the Mediterranean Sea, Mommy. I’m his second mate.” Jamal cheers and raises his arms in victory.

I look at Jacques steering the Rif. “I thought you were headed to Northern Cyprus,” I say. “To launder money and find more antiquities.”

“That *is* where we’re heading,” Jacques says as he adjusts settings on the engine control panel. “The police won’t reach us there. After a few days, I’ll take you and Jamal to Greece, if you like.”

“But how did you know we were in danger? How did you figure it out?” I ask as I collapse on the padded sofa near the cockpit, exhausted from the events of this New Year’s Day. “How did Amar know where we were? What went wrong?”

Jacques looks over at me. “My friend in Paris, Abdulla, radioed me and warned that Abdullatif had contacted your son’s father in Cairo. For the reward money. He betrayed our plan. *Connard! Tas de merde!*”

“Just like Naguib’s betrayal in Aswan,” I say. “Amar, or is it Set, is a powerful force.”

“Was, you mean, mon amour,” Jacques lights a cigarette. He appears calm and relaxed. As if killing a man and rescuing a mother and her son from the clutches of death, is just another run of the mill day. Nothing out of the ordinary. “But one thing is certain,” he adds. “It won’t be long before Abdullatif is swimming with the fish.”

I slump back on the padded cushions, close my eyes, deeply inhale the salt-sea air, and listen to the engine.

“Jamal and I are safe and secure at last. A divine force has pulled me and my son from hell and has kept us together. I know that force is my avatar spirit, maybe it’s the power of Hathor. Or maybe it’s just happenstance and good luck that Abdulla alerted you Jacques. You’re my true hero. you rescued us and now my son and I can carve out a path together as we should have done when Jamal came into this world.”

“Another day another adventure. Life is good,” Jacques says while keeping his focus on steering the Rif.

I gaze out at the vast and dark sea under a gibbous moon and see a woman standing on the dark waters. Her golden vulture crown shimmers in the moonlight. Her long white gown flows around her like moonbeams. A green and orange aura encircles her. She holds her hands out before her, palms up, inviting me to embrace her essence.

As the Rif speeds along the apparition grows more vivid. I know she’s Hathor as the dignified lady Seshet Akeru. She whispers to me *The Eye of Ra gives you your victory at the eternal Temple of Life. Awake in peace, beautiful spirit of Isis. Set has no power over you. All that you speak is true. Every good thing you command will be done for you. You will pass over the walls of Shu like a gander escaping its toils. And with great flourish you now live with the Golden Falcon among the imperishable stars that never set.*