

Ten Years Past Cairo

a novel by Teri Ekland



Chapter 1: Venice

July 26, 1972

Sarah Prentice

It's our first day in Venice. The bell tower is ringing in the noon hour and a warm ocean breeze is sweeping across San Marco Square. At an outside table, I'm eating a slice of pizza, listening to the Café Quadri orchestra play *The Blue Danube Waltz*, and watching old Italians feed pigeons swarming the piazza like tour groups. My best friend Jennifer, in her yellow Indian blouse with metallic discs, is reading *The Day of the Jackal*. My other best friend Mary practically lives in her knitted poncho. She's writing out a series of postcards to family and friends back in Chicago. Since freshman year at William Fremd High in Palatine, Illinois we've done everything together. We're practically glued at the hip. We took most of the same electives and hung out after school playing Carole King, Elvis, and John Denver albums usually in my

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

Junior year we started thinking about things to do before going to college. Like joining the Peace Corps or VISTA or volunteering in a national park. Mary suggested we enlist in the Airforce for three years but Jen and I knocked down that idea—*tout suite*. It was during French class, in fact, that I thought about traveling in Europe for six months. Maybe an entire year. My best friends jumped on the idea and our slogan became “Out the doors of Fremd and into the arms of Europe.”

At Schaumburg Mall a young travel agent named Matt Grubner suggested that all we need to know about Europe is in the guidebook *Europe on Five and Ten Dollars a Day* which has become my travel bible. Matt arranged our direct flight from O'Hare to Heathrow and helped us get passports, Eurail passes, International Student Identity Cards, and **youth hostel cards**. **He recommended we stay at youth hostels to stretch out our money. I've never been worried about stretching out money and really didn't want to stay in hostels, but my friends can't afford even two-star hotels. Not for six months! Both Jennifer and Mary had to work at a Dairy Queen to pay for this trip but Daddy is footing my bills. He even cosigned for my BankAmericard. Besides, Matt convinced me that at youth hostels we'd meet other young travelers who could recommend places to see and things to avoid.**

For me, our trip began over 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. We go where adventure takes us and so far, none of us has lost any enthusiasm. After a few days in London's terrible smog, we caught the boat from Dover to Calais and took a train straight to Paris, eager to use our Fremd High French. Because youth

hostels don't open until five in the evening, and we arrived at *Gare du Nord* in the morning, we stored our luggage and caught the Metro to the Louvre to see the Mona Lisa. Personally, I wanted to see the ancient Egyptian artifacts. During junior year English, we read Shakespeare's *Cleopatra* and Miss Carlson showed us slides of King Tut's treasures and the film *Cleopatra* starring Elizabeth Taylor. That's when I fell in love with everything Egyptian. I even asked Jen and Mary to call me Nefer-Tut. Not that they did or anything. I remained simply Sarah to them.

Once inside the Louvre, we made a beeline to DaVinci's masterpiece then Jen and Mary breezed through the Egyptian exhibits. They were in such a dither to be first in line at the Paris youth hostel just to choose a dormitory bed. "We can come back tomorrow," Jen suggested while I was gazing in awe at this stone slab funerary stela of an Old Kingdom princess named Nefertibet which means "Beautiful Lady of the East." She was a daughter of Khufu, the king who built the largest pyramid in Egypt. As I stood before the stela, I imagined myself sitting on a throne in a leopard skin gown and wearing a choker made of pure gold. I felt like Nefertibet and I were the same person although, instead of coal black, my long hair is auburn and my eyes are sapphire blue as Daddy likes to say.

When my friends started tugging my arms to get me going, I said to them, "I tell you what. This dignified lady impresses me way more than your stupid Mona Lisa." They laughed but before they 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 guidebook to look at whenever I want to feel like the dignified daughter of a great king.

I look across the piazza 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 his winged lion which is everywhere in Venice. It stands on top of a column at the harbor and is on the bell

tower's obelisk where a weather vane of Gabriel ignites Venice with magic. Or so it seems to me. Before this trip, I didn't know much about saints and angels because I don't come from a religious family like Mary does. She's Catholic and wears a St. Christopher pendant for protection during our travels. It's not even gold or silver. Maybe it's aluminum. Anyway, my religious upbringing involved my parents taking me to church on Easter Sunday. In fact, I don't remember either Mom or Daddy ever praying or talking about God.

I remove the Louvre postcard from my guidebook and decide that Nefertibet will be my guardian angel for the rest of my travels. I look at my friends and say, "You two can have the 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?" I ask. "And why not Miss Knowitall?"

Mary looks at me with her big brown eyes, touches her little aluminum pendant, and says, "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 place her back in my guidebook. Jen resumes reading her novel and Mary continues writing her postcards which say the same thing except for a few altered comments. I mean. Come on. It's like she has no imagination.

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When Ostello di Venezia opens later that afternoon, my friends and I enter with a mob of young international travelers. We retrieve our duffle bags from the storage room, claim our bunks, then freshen up in the women's bathroom. Matt Grubner recommended we travel with inconspicuous duffle bags instead of the Gucci luggage I was planning to use. He was looking at

my sapphire earrings from Daddy when he said, “You need to blend in with the other travelers and leave your expensive jewelry and bags at home. You don’t want pickpockets, thieves, and conmen to target you.”

In the hostel’s large dining hall, my friends and I sit at a table and drink orange sodas. While we’re discussing these waiters from the Café Quadri who invited us to a nightclub tonight, this young man in jeans and a white T-shirt with five interlaced rings approaches our table. I remember his short curly brown hair, green eyes, and dimpled smile from this morning when he checked us into the hostel. *Did he wink at me? I’m trying to remember. By now my friends and I are used to foreign men flirting with us. It’s nonstop sometimes. As soon as we shoo away one guy, another one shows up.*

“Where are you ladies from?” the man asks with an appealing accent I can’t place.

“Nous sommes française,” I say in gest. **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 learned about Georges Pompidou from *Time Magazine*, my main source of news and information other than the travelers we meet and my travel bible, of course. Fremd High didn’t offer courses in international politics and Daddy isn’t a reader of international news, so I left O’Hare rather ignorant of the world beyond Palatine. Europeans are amazed 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 not much I can do about it. I expect my friends to act nice while I chose 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 really quite handsome, almost dreamy, in fact.**

The man straddles a chair beside me and says with pride, "I'm from Cairo, the City of a Thousand Minarets."

"Wow! I've never met anyone from Egypt," I say and wonder if this is a coincidence, magic, or divine intervention because I was just thinking about my guardian angel Nefertiabet.

"Maybe you've met an ancient Egyptian before." The man grins at me then adds, "Your mummy."

"Clever," I say and politely chuckle.

He notices my *Time Magazine* on the table and says, "Maybe you read about me. I'm on the Egyptian handball team at the Olympic Games in Munich. My name is Amar Mohammed Thomas-Bartlett." He grips my hand in a strong and lasting handshake.

"Thomas-Bartlett?" I ask. "That doesn't sound Egyptian."

"My grandfather was British."

Jen breaks from her conversation with Mary and glares at me. "Are we going?" she asks. As if.

"I've changed my mind about meeting with those middle-aged waiters," I say and 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** away from the table.

“Have fun you two,” Amar says, looking away from me for the first time. “Your friend will see Venice with me.” He scoots his chair closer and winks at me the way he *had* this morning. “Your eyes are like the blue lily of the Nile which has a sweet narcotic effect like the one you are having on me. Allow me take you to dinner tonight 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. 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 are embracing.**

We end up at Da Mamo trattoria where a formal waiter seats us. Our table has a burning candle in a Chianti bottle on a white tablecloth. Two other couples are dining at corner tables and the aroma of fresh garlic bread fills the room. Amar orders grilled tuna and linguini for both of us and asks for a large decanter of Chianti. He leans across the table and says, “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 is mine.*”

“You’re such a charmer.” I look at his strong, well-manicured hand holding mine. I like this as well. It speaks of sophistication, of savoir fare. But then, I wonder why a man with such style is slinging bags at a youth hostel.

I ask him and he laughs. “I’m paying for courses at the University of Languages and saving up for my tuition next year when I plan to study agricultural science at Cairo University. Like my father.”

“And for 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.”

I take a sip of Chianti and think to say, “I’m also just playing around before college. Next fall I hope to study archaeology at the University of Chicago but 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.

“Daddy owns SP Trucking. He named it after his Swedish 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 chuckles and fills my wineglass.

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

“Ah, of course, 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 was about to savor another bite of tuna and pesto but I stop and look at Amar, wondering if he’s just making another mummy joke. I hope so because my mother is a topic I tend to avoid. Sometimes I get carried away when talking about her, as Jen and Mary well know. But the wine has loosened me up and my emotions pour out. “I don’t think my mother cares

about anything other than her wine collection in the cellar and the country club where she plays golf, bridge, and tennis with her rich lady friends. When I call home, she talks for a moment then hands the phone to Daddy. She was happy with her son before I unexpectedly came along and became 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. I don't want to reveal how my mother punished me when daddy wasn't around. It's too much of a downer for a first date. So, I smile at Amar and simply say, "Mummies! Can't live with them, can't live without them."**

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

His words magically break my melancholy. I giggle and he flashes his dimples. When he suggests we go to a movie I quickly agree because I couldn't possibly drink another drop of Chianti.

Amar takes me to a small cinema featuring *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston. Although I've seen the film before, I want to see it again—it's about Egypt after all. But Amar doesn't want to. "The movie's about the Jews. Not Egypt," he says. "And 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, wondering if this man could be any more amazing.

"Every Egyptian male must serve in the military. My country can still call on me but since I'm in the Olympics I'm free to be here with you, my gazelle."

"Were you in a war?"

"No. But my older brother fought in the June War of 1967."

“Where was that war?” I ask in all seriousness. “In 1967, I was in the seventh grade and not paying attention to anything that didn’t concern me. But I’m curious now. I’m learning so much about the world on this trip. In fact, this was the main argument I used when persuading my daddy to let travel before college.”

“Stanly Alan Prentice,” Amar states as if to impress me. He takes my hand and we head back to San Marco Square. Along the way he explains, “In 1967 Israel captured Sinai from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. There should be no recognition of Israel but President Sadat caters to the United States.”

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

“Let’s forget about the movie and the war between religions and enjoy our evening together.” We stop on a bridge overlooking a narrow moonlit canal. He kisses me for the first time and my every nerve and corpuscle lights on fire. I run my hands through Amar’s thick curly hair and look at the streetlamp sparkling in his green eyes. He asks if we can spend the night in a hotel because we can’t sleep together at the hostel where he also lives. I agree because I want him more than I’ve ever wanted any other guy. And lovemaking is still new to me. Amar will be only my second lover on this trip.

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 is truly a god of Egypt. Osiris, or is it, Atum Ra? I can’t remember because my head is spinning with romance.

He crawls into bed beside me and runs his fingers through my hair. “You make me happy, *ya Huthur*.”

“Huthur?” I ask.

“That’s Arabic for Hathor, goddess of making love to you,” he teases. As we embrace, I can’t help but think I’m Nefertibet falling into the arms of Omar Sharif.

For the next few nights Amar and I stay at Hotel Al Mondo and spend afternoons at the Lido on beach towels while laughing at fat tourists. In the small dressing rooms along the beach, we make love until we nearly pass out from the heat. Then we 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 greet me and I can’t understand why they’re so annoyed. I’m in love and love is far more important than mere friendship. The way I see it, if my friends are jealous of my happiness then to hell with them.

Jen and Mary finally confront me one morning and say they want to travel to Greece and see the Parthenon in Athens. **We’re sitting at a table in the hostel’s dining hall while Amar is working behind the counter during the onslaught of new travelers checking in.**

“I can’t leave Amar!” I protest. “Maybe we should split up for a while.”

“No! We’ve got to stay together. We all promised your father,” Mary insists. She has always been a go-by-the-rules friend, so unlike me. In fact, Mary is the one who wrote out the itinerary for our parents.

“Besides,” Jen chimes in. “Distance makes the heart grow fonder. And I’d feel terrible leaving you here.” She pats me on the shoulder. During our four years of friendship, Jen has tried

to keep me from getting into too much mischief and I love her for this. She knows I'm a bit quirky and more daring than most kids.

In the end, **I decide Jen and Mary are only looking out for me and** I agree to head to Greece with them with their promise that we return to Venice before traveling elsewhere.

Later that evening, Amar and I are cuddling in a gondola floating down Canale San Lorenzo. In a salty sea breeze, waves are lapping against our boat and pigeons are cooing on brick window ledges along the canal. It seems that every open window has a caged canary singing a Rossini aria like our boatman. I wanted this last taste of romance with Amar before my friends hurl me off to Greece.

As soon as the boatman finishes his song, I tell Amar that I'm leaving in the morning.

"I don't want you to go, *ya Huthur*," he says and kisses me as the shadow of an arched bridge passes over us. I wonder how I could possibly leave such a perfect man in a perfect setting. But my rational mind tells me I must go. That and my fear that Mary or Jen will tell Daddy we split up and I stayed in Venice with a man.

To keep from becoming 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 flashes his dimples, kisses me again, and I forget what I was saying. The boatman sings another song and swishes his long oar in the peaceful canal that smells like the mossy brick

walls that confine us. **I say nothing as I cling to Amar and to the thought of spending one more night with the Olympic soldier from Cairo who has savoir faire.**

On the Greek islands, my friends and I snorkel in the warm, crystal-clear Aegean Sea, relish Greek food, savor retsina pine wine and shots of licorice-tasting ouzo, and meet new travelers with new ideas. We get along better than ever before like we're keeping high school secrets once again. In very little time I'm convinced that Amar was nothing but a fling and I'm prepared to finish my travels without being "Shanghaied to Cairo" as Mary and Jen like to tease.

Everything is going smoothly until one morning when we encounter a commotion in the lobby of the Athens hostel. We learn that the Black September terrorist group massacred eleven Israeli athletes at the Olympic Games. **Of course, I immediately think about Amar and realize he must have lied about being on the Olympic handball team. He never gave me any details and seemed surprised whenever I brought it up. But mostly, I just can't believe Amar was in Munich when this massacre took place and I'm embarrassed at having so stupidly fallen for his story.**

"He's probably some leech hanging out in Venice," Mary suggests. "You can't believe anything he told you."

"Yeah," Jen adds. "I bet he couldn't find work in his own country."

As if the terrorist massacre wasn't bad enough, over the next few days I began spotting blood instead of having a regular period. At first, I'm not too concerned because an older woman in our dormitory tells me that traveling often disrupts a woman's monthly cycle. But after nearly a week of this, my friends take me to a doctor in Athens and I learn that I'm nearly two months pregnant.

Back at the hostel, I retreat to my cot, hug my legs, 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 about a Jordanian guy I had a quick fling with in Pisa shortly before we arrived in Venice. He was the only other lover I had on this trip, ever really.

“That happened only one time. And it was quick. 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 then remember Amar’s reaction to *The Ten Commandments* movie. “Who knows? Maybe he’ll marry me.” I add to avoid talking about the tragedy in Munich or thinking that Amar is evil in some kind of way.

“Now who’s being stupid?” Jen asks. “Your dad would disown you for sure and you have it good, Nefer-Tut.” I know she’s trying to cheer me up by calling me this name and 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!”

A surge of courage suddenly overtakes me as if my guardian angel or maybe Aphrodite or even Hathor is telling me what to do and say. “I want 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 magic we shared in Venice.**

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 in 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 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 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 had flirted with me whenever 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 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 run to my side and Mary wipes my face with the corner of her poncho.

“We’re going to London. Tonight!” She demands like she’s my mother.

“No,” I say, feeling another burst of determination from my guardian angel. “First, I’m looking for Amar. I know he’s still in Venice. He claimed to be 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 and I collapse on one of the beds. Jennifer and Mary tell me to rest while they look for Amar at the Venetian University of Languages.

When they return later that afternoon, Jennifer snaps me awake 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 bed. “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 a feeling of gloom, I cuddle 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 see 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.

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

I quicken my pace and when we meet, he draws me into a warm embrace. “I knew you were still in Venice,” I say, nearly in tears. Being pregnant seems to change everything about how I’ve always been.

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.”

Without saying anything 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 is 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 that I'm pregnant, so I ask Amar, who's standing at the sink, "Why aren't you working at the hostel? And don't tell me you were at the Olympics in Munich!"

"No, no, no. That was just 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 is 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 did you go to Cairo? You should have 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 shall all return."

I don't say anything because 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 retreat.

"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 because she has no other child to carry on his legacy. She's very traditional, almost twenty years older than me. Her son, my precious nephew Kamal, was only fifteen-years-old."

"Kamal?" I ask.

"Yes. He was named after his father."

"Can't your sister remarry and 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 and I worry she may take her own life. Such an act is forbidden in my religion."

"I'm so sorry. Why did you return to Venice?"

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

"Amar," I say, concerned by his behavior but then I realize 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 Amar's 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 say 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. Amar.” I pause a moment then finally say, “I’m pregnant.”

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

“A doctor checked me over.”

“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 had 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,” I admit.

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

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

Suddenly, a pounding erupts at the door and I hear Jennifer yell, “Sarah! Damn you! We have a train to catch!”

I look at Amar and wonder what he’ll do. He touches my cheek with the back of his hand and says to my friends, “Sarah is staying with me!”

I rise and Amar grabs my hand. His firmness reassures me and I'm almost hoping he'll shoo away my friends. But they would then 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 up to Scandinavia and not worry about me. "Go find a couple of Vikings in the land of the midnight sun!" I tease.

"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 he's even some kind of a 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 so we can go look for Vikings," Jen practically shouts. She doesn't even care if anyone in the lobby hears us.

I sit back on the Queen Anne chair to figure out what I'm going to do. It's obvious that my best friends are too loyal to just take off and leave me behind. We did promise our parents that we'd stick together. And we are, after all, joined at the hip. Jen and Mary won't accept that I want to stay with Amar, my baby's father. They don't like him and don't know him like I do.

"Okay," I say while 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. I think you two should take that train to London, tonight. I'll join you no later than tomorrow or the next day."

"No, Sarah!" Mary says. "I don't believe you. Your hormones are confusing you. We must all leave together."

"I promise to meet you in London. Stay at the Kingston Hostel like we did when we first arrived. You two 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 the narrow alleyway toward San Marco Square. I promise to meet them at the Kingston Hostel, we give good-bye hugs, and then I watch my best friends walk away and leave me truly on my own. I feel like 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.**

Amar hangs up and I anxiously stand. "Is your sister, okay?"

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

"What about our baby?" I ask to 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 I’m reciting a magical chant. I feel like Nefertiabet has just christened my boat and is launching me onto the Nile.

“Yes, *Huthur habibti*, Cairo, 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 because Mars was rising when they conquered the valley. Cairo is 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 look weary because of your friends,” he says and I **flop** on the bed. “Don’t let them trouble you anymore. You have a baby to think about now.”

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 he won’t be long. When he’s gone, I turn on my side, hug 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 and excitement.

As I drift asleep, images from *The Ten Commandments* and *Cleopatra* reel through my dreams. In vivid technicolor, Elizabeth Taylor becomes my Nefertiabet. She steps down from her stone slab stela and tells me the story of her dignified life.



Chapter 2: Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra

Seshet Akeru

Young mother, beautiful soul of Isis, I see your face in my relic mirror. I am your avatar Seshet Akeru, daughter of King Pepi Neferkara and priestess of Hathor, protector of motherhood. I share with you my story to give you my sekhem 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, a sky god 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 shimmered a purple hue and cast bubbles to the surface. But 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 from the sky gods to the sea gods. Over many generations, Alashiyan kings and their priests called on their gods to make the stone glow again. But it remained black as night until one day the sister of a king dared to touch this stone. It glowed a purple hue and a purple aura surrounded her. In days to follow, priests understood that the king's sister had received 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 powers. But when priests touched the stone, it remained black as night.

Now, beautiful soul of Isis, 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 of Sekhmet appeared at the rising of Ra-Horakhty, **the Falcon of Sunrise. Sekhmet was my father's patron goddess. She possessed the forces of her father the sun god Ra. The Eye of Ra gave her ferocity and strength and with her powers she protected my father and gave him his many victories.**

Pepi was a great and beneficent king with three fleets of ships to keep vigil over his vast kingdom. His river fleet sailed from the delta to the southern borders under the protection of Wadjet, the cobra goddess. Serqet, the scorpion goddess of summer nights, protected my father's Red Sea fleet. The jackal god Duamutef protected the fleet that moored in the eastern delta and sailed the Great Green Sea on trade expeditions and during engagements of war.

In the forty-fifth year of my father's reign, he set sailed on his Duamutef fleet to seize the legendary sky stone of Alashiya. Since he was a boy king and first heard about the stone, Pepi believed that Sekhmet herself shot the stone arrow across the sky into the sea and that it belonged to him and to his kingdom along the Great River.

When Pepi's ships arrived at the western shores of Alashiya, my father and his army captured the port city and the temple of the stone that hugged the sea cliffs. The chapel containing the stone was a cold dank chamber with droppings on the floor from sparrows that entered a window above the vestibule door. Niches in the stone walls burned geranium oils and in the center of the room 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 goddess Sekhmet, lion star of summer," he declared. "It belongs to me and I will take it to Sekhmet's main temple in my kingdom."

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

My father heeded the king's warnings but declared Alashiya as part of his kingdom and named the black stone "Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra." On the walls inside and outside the temple, his masons chiseled the many names of the lion goddess and the words *Hotep di nesu, King Pepi Neferkare gives offerings to Sekhmet, the divine force who gave Pepi his victory in Alashiya.*

After establishing his rule on the island, my father sailed half his fleet back to his kingdom along the Great River. He went to the city of Anu at the base of the delta where the main temple dedicated to Sekhmet stood along the western riverbank. Inside the temple's fortified walls was an academy of medicine, a Djehuti library and scriptorium, and the Orphanage of Tefnut, the lion sister of Sekhmet and mother of Earth's first children. The orphanage in Anu was the largest of its kind in the kingdom and people called its orphaned and abandoned children 'waifs of Tefnut.'

My father made endowments to the temple and gathered priests and priestesses to take with him back to Alashiya to establish a Sekhmet priesthood on the island. He also paid a visit to 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 just to receive my blessings because I possessed double sekhem powers from the lion sisters Sekhmet and Tefnut.

I never learned about my true parentage. Priestesses claimed that my birth mother came from Pe Tep in the NW delta near the Temple of Sunrise and Sunset—Per Ra-Horakhty. They

said my mother was a destitute woman who needed blessings from the lion sisters because she had no husband to help with a child. All I have from this woman is the name she left me—Seshen, which means Lily of the River.

I first met King Pepi, before he became my father, in the orphanage gardens which were brimming with yellow chrysanthemums and scarlet flamboyant tree flowers that smelled of 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 me. “They say you can heal the soul of a suffering man.”

My father often told me that my poise, beauty, and clarity of words had warmed his heart on that day. Priests had prepared me to say *My king, only you can tame Sekhmet and use her ferocity to ward off the evil and chaos of Set. You give your ka soul to the rational people of your kingdom. May you live eternally in your own divine splendor.*

In the days to follow, the king took me back to Alashiya with his priests and priestesses of Sekhmet. He wanted me to touch “Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra” so that I would possess triple sekhem powers and bring him and his kingdom triple good fortune like Sekhmet herself.

On the day I touched the stone, Pepi's priests and priestesses stood around the stone's 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 held up a torch as a priestess unveiled the stone on its golden platter. Sekhmet priests were singing *Lion goddess, daughter born of the sun and the Great Green Sea, give us your sekhem powers and open the Eye of Ra.*

Priestesses had dressed me in a white cotton tunic and adorned me with many gold bangles. When King Pepi took my hand to touch the stone, my bangles rattled and sparkled in the torchlight. I tiptoed at the altar and placed my hands on “Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra.” The stone grew warm and started to vibrate. It turned a purple hue and steam rolled from its surface. The odor of fire powder overwhelmed the geranium oil incensing the room. The sparrows flocked outside through the vestibule window and murmurs arose from under the sea beyond the cliffs. The stone’s purple hue lit my tiny hands and the veins of my arms. I recited *Hotep di nesu, I make offerings from King Pepi to Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra.*

A chilling gust of wind swept through the vestibule window and extinguished all light in the cold stone chapel except for the luminous stone and the green and orange aura surrounding me. Priests started humming with the murmuring sea and the purple hue of my veins recoiled into the stone. The room remained dark until a priest fetched a torch from the outside vestibule. Everyone knew in that moment that I had received power from the stone.

On the return voyage across the Great Green Sea, Pepi’s fleet encountered no storm, no enemy or pirate ship, nor any monster of the sea. In this way, Pepi knew I had brought him triple good fortune because of my triple sekhem powers. When we entered the eastern delta to moor on the lake, I stood at the bow with the king to view the cawing spoonbills circling our ship. “Are you returning me to the orphanage of Tefnut?” I asked Pepi.

The king told me to look into the gleaming blue waters below the hull. I placed my tiny hands on the rail and tiptoed to peer into the choppy waters. “Do you see the Eye of the Falcon on the ship’s hull reflected in the sea?” he asked. I told him I did and he added, “You are much too distinguished to live as a temple icon. I am taking you to my palace where I will protect you like the Eye of the Falcon protects my ships. Like Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra protects me and my kingdom. As my daughter you will live the life of a great queen like my mother, Ankhnespepi II”

Nefer Ba’ast, beautiful soul of Isis, thus begins 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 of Earth.



Chapter 3: Al-Qāhirah

September 1972

Sarah Prentice

When I awake early the next morning the vivid dream slips from my mind except for glimpses of a dignified lady wearing a golden vulture crown.

Later in the day, while Amar is arranging for our passage on the Adriatic Line to Alexandria, I SEND A TELEGRAM TO MY FRIENDS CARE OF THE KINGSTON HOSTEL IN LONDEN.

YOU ARE THE BEST FRIENDS ANYONE COULD EVER HAVE. I LOVE YOU BOTH DEARLY. BUT I LOVE AMAR AND HE HAS PROMISED TO TAKE ME TO A DOCTOR PLEASE PLEASE CONTINUE YOUR TRAVELS GO TO SEE THE MIDNIGHT SUN.... AND WHATEVER YOU DO DON'T TELL MY DADDY ABOUT MY SITUATION. I WILL FIGURE OUT WHAT TO TELL HIM MYSELF. I'M LETTING YOU GUYS OFF THE HOOK.... LOVE YOU ALWAYS AND FOREVER NEFER-TUT. I MEAN SARAH.

I FEEL SURE MY FRIENDS WON'T LET ME DOWN. THEY KNOW HOW TO KEEP A SECRET. I HOPE. Then I phone my father. The call does not go well. Daddy is angry at me for not calling home more often. I tell him I want to travel for the rest of the year. "What!" he roars. "I thought you'd have all this traveling 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 my dad. Why did I leave my friends? He asks. Am I traveling alone? If not, then with whom? 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," I plead. "Why should I be waiting for college in Palatine when I'm here now learning about the world?" In the end, with a little more persistence on my part, Daddy relents. What's six more months? After all.

On September 20th we set sail for Alexandria. By mid-afternoon on the second day of our sea fearing voyage, our ship approaches the port of Alexandria west of the Nile Delta. At the

starboard rail, Amar charms me with stories about the approaching resort city founded by Alexander the Great. “The Greek Pharaohs built a library here that contained all the knowledge of the time,” he tells me. I love listening to him talk about Egypt. He rarely discusses his family and I tend not to ask about them because I’ve been feeling leery about meeting his grieving sister. What will I say to her? Amar claims she’s traditional. Perhaps an unwed, pregnant American girlfriend will offend her.

I gaze at the harbor and wonder if I’ll love Cairo as much as I love my unborn child. I haven’t told Amar my thoughts about keeping the baby, in case I change my mind. But I’m increasingly certain that I’ll give up the career my father’s outlined for me and everything else in America. I’ll embrace this opportunity for motherhood and surrender myself to the handsome and romantic father of my child who will fill my life with love in the land of the Nile. Amar is now in charge of my life and I’m even considering becoming the wife of a Muslim Arab. Back in high school I supported the Equal Rights Amendment but I don’t know where I stand on that issue anymore. All I really know is that I’m swept away by *Dr. Zhivago* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, two of my favorite movies that featured Omar Shariff.

Amar points to a large castle looming in the harbor. “The Greeks also built an enormous lighthouse on that island, Pharos Island. But in the 1300’s an earthquake toppled it into the sea and the Mameluke Caliphate built the Qaitbay Citadel on top of its 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?” I ask at the railing. My hair is fluttering around my face from the hot and humid Scirocco wind that blows from the Sahara Desert across the dark green sea.

“Caesar’s troops burned it down,” Amar replies while 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.”

In the bright clear sunshine, I scan over the spectacular city and wonder what the ancients saw when they entered the harbor. The Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, Napoleon, and the ancient Egyptians like my dignified guardian angel, Nefertiabet. I glance down at the Mediterranean and see my reflection. For a moment I look over at the Mameluke fort on Pharos Island then glance back down at the sea below. My image suddenly morphs like a caterpillar changing into a butterfly. A woman’s face appears. Her dark eyes are lined, her black hair hangs in many tiny braids, and she wears a vulture crown of gold. The details are clear in my mind, although the distant vision wavers in the sea waves. I somehow know she is the spirit in the dream I had just before leaving Venice. I believe I am seeing an apparition of Nefertiabet.

Back at the hostel in Paris, I had met a traveler from Haiti who talked about the apparitions of the Virgin Mary. She mentioned Our Lady of Lourdes in France, Our Lady of Guadeloupe in Mexico, and Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal. At the time, I had found the discussion fascinating although rather incredible. I simply wasn’t brought up to believe in apparitions. But now I am feeling transformed and mystified as I stare at the vision below. “Nefertiabet,” I say aloud and then silently ask her to help me make the right decision about what I am going to do with my life and with that of the baby.

“Are you alright? *Ya Huthur habibti.*” Amar nudges me and I awaken from my deep thoughts.

I look at Amar then back at the sea but the afternoon sun is casting my own image onto the waves below. The magnificent apparition has vanished.

I fall into Amar's embrace and listen to the engines rumble as the harbor pilot maneuvers our ship into port. Seagulls caw and circle at the bow. "I just saw Nefertiabet from my postcard. My guardian angel," I say to both myself and to Amar.

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

I pull away from him. "I didn't imagine what I just saw," I declare. "Nefertiabet's image was in the sea."

Amar doesn't seem to take me seriously. Maybe he never has, I'm thinking. Since telling Amar about my pregnancy, I've been looking at the postcard of Nefertiabet from time to time and even showed it to Amar and asked him 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 nor did I want to offend his religion which I know very little about. With all this in mind, I decide to keep quiet about what I just saw and not mention the postcard again.

We spend the night in Alexandria then take the train to Cairo. At four in the afternoon our taxi enters the wrought iron gates at 16 Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street, Amar's home in Zamalek, an island in the Nile flowing through Cairo. 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 with fashionably short black hair and in a floral dress appears on the front porch. As she approaches

the taxi, a man in a red fez and blue galabia follows her. The man takes my bag from the trunk of the taxi and Amar tells me that he is Farouq, their house servant and chauffer. “And this is my sister, Zenna,” he adds as the woman warmly smiles and kisses each side of my face. Her eyes are rimmed in black kohl and she smells of rose water perfume.

“I am happy to meet you, my dear little sister,” Zenna says as she takes my hand. “Come, let’s go inside your new home. Our mother eagerly awaits your arrival.”

Inside are sitting rooms on each side of the front hall. Both have long marble coffee tables surrounded by colorful Bedouin cushions and ottomans. Persian carpets cover the parquet floors and tapestries of mosques and ancient Egyptian art decorate the walls. As we pass through the left sitting room, I notice a portrait on the wall of Zenna with a man and a teenage boy who are 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. The picture is haunting because I know the boy in the picture will soon die.

I quickly look away because I don’t want to stir up any sadness so soon after my arrival. I must get to know my new situation and sister-in-law. Amar had previously explained that his sister’s mourning period, her ‘Iddah, lasts four months and 10 days. “During Iddah,” I remember him saying, “My sister can’t wear perfume or jewelry and she can only leave the house to visit friends and family.” But Zenna is nothing like the traditional grieving widow I had been expecting. In fact, she is cheerful and seems elated to have me as her guest.

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

an armoire, a chest of drawers, and a vanity by a window overlooking the backyard. Farouq places my bag on the bed and Zenna politely leaves the room so I can freshen up in the bathroom down the hall.

I dig through my duffle bag for my toiletries and wonder if Amar will be sleeping with me. After all, he is the father of my unborn child. But this is a house of tradition I'm thinking as I sit on the soft bed. We'll have to marry first. It will 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 would be on the first plane to Cairo to take me back to Palatine. I believe my father loves me that much. I begin unpacking and start to wonder 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 and 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 then decide that I don't want to know. But I call upon my guardian angel and ask that she 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 that 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. The old woman grins but says nothing. "She doesn't speak English, so you'll have to teach her." Amar translates what he says and the old woman chuckles, amused by me, the strange foreign woman in her house. The 'agnabi.

"How do you do?" I stand by the bed feeling insecure about greeting the woman who will be my mother-in-law. "*Kayf halika?*" how are you, I ask. Amar had prepared me with a few

Arabic phrases and I doubt he's tricking me with obscene words. He has put those days behind him now that he is about to take care of a new wife and child.

The old woman seems pleased with my attempt to speak her language. Amar translates her response as Peace be with you, praise be to God.

"Should I kiss her cheek?" I say, turning to Zenna who is quietly observing from the threshold.

Zenna smiles and nods, encouraging me. I kiss the woman's soft wrinkled face then back away. The old woman firmly rubs my belly and then 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 ask, relieved to hear the news.

"Aywa," Zenna assures me. "We must be sure you are 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 then 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 in a white jacket and stethoscope over a long kaftan, are gazing at me. Nobody seems to knock. In Palatine, even my parents knocked before entering my bedroom.

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 constantly. 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, standing 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, and 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,” she says. “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 will care for you. Please allow her to check that you are 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 then speaks Arabic to Zenna. “I’m afraid Dr. Aziza speaks only Arabic,” Zenna tells me. “But you needn’t worry. I will 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 is suicidal, she doesn’t seem sad and filled with self-pity. She’s more like a modern Egyptian woman, like Jehan Sadat. Perhaps it’s the Egyptian way to accept one’s fate and quickly overcome grief, I tell myself.

After a quick examination with the stethoscope, the doctor leaves my room. Zenna later returns with a plate of broiled lamb and steaming rice pilaf and another glass of mughrat. She advises I remain in bed until the following day. “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 a bite of the kofta and tell Zenna that it surpasses even Greek food. She smiles and leaves me to finish my meal.

There is no TV in the room so after I finish eating, I thumb through the Fodor's guidebook that I bought at the Alexandria train station. The hours pass and Amar doesn't appear and I start recalling the picture of Zenna's dead son. Then I begin wondering why this doctor doesn't speak English when all educated Egyptians speak English. Even Zenna does and she's just a housewife. I throw back the covers, crawl from the bed, and wander down the stairs toward a light coming from under what I assume is the kitchen door. I open it and see Zenna, Amar, and their 'umm sitting around a table drinking tea and eating hardboiled eggs and dried dates.

I lean against the threshold and utter "hello" trying to hold back my anger toward Amar for returning home without speaking to me. I'm feeling left out of everything and I'm the one who's pregnant.

Amar looks surprised as 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 over my agitation and I pause to reign in my emotions. "Amar," I say. "Why didn't you come see me when you came home?" I rest my head against the door jamb and tears begin rolling down my cheeks.

"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 will help you sleep pleasantly." She gets up to 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 cordial smile while feeling imprisoned by my emotions and the strangeness of the Egyptian household. 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 where he tucks me into bed, helps me drink the cool, sweet milk, then strokes my hair and asks, with slight impatience, “What’s troubling you, Sarah?”

“Since we left Alexandria,” I say, “You’ve been treating me more like a child than your girlfriend. You no longer joke with me.”

Amar laughs, takes my hand, and pats it. “I’m sure that’s true,” he says. “But I will do anything for you and my son. My abni. I have responsibilities 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 so long ago at the bridges of Venice and on the Lido where Amar wore his European spandex and I had on a bikini, looking very sexy—or so I thought. Maybe I’ve been kidding myself. Now I feel fat. Not sexy at all. But I am certain Amar will work hard to take care of me and the child just like my own father took care of his family. And one of these days I believe Daddy will like my new husband because Amar is responsible and serious.

“This doctor who came to my room,” I think to say. “Who is she? I don’t like her. She doesn’t speak English and I don’t believe she’s even a doctor. In fact, it’s absurd!”

Amar chuckles, which frustrates me. Again, he isn’t 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 the time of Eve. You sleep now.” He bends down and kisses my forehead.

“Ana bahebak,” he says, touches my round belly and adds, “I love you too, abni.”

“Will you be sleeping with me?” I ask.

He pulls away and says, “We cannot sleep together in my mother’s house. Please understand. It is our custom. But I will 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 renowned midwife, I reason. *Ancient wisdom comes from women, too* I remember Amar telling me during our romantic voyage on the Adriatic line. I just need to grow accustomed to my new home.

As the weeks pass, I begin feeling more and more comfortable with my new family and am convinced I’ve made the right decision to be a mother. Whenever I have any negative thoughts about my situation, a glass of mughrat and a hot mineral bath in the upstairs clawfoot tub usually put me at ease. I remind myself that my condition is but a stage I must go through before becoming a loving mother and wife living on an island of 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. I spend much of the day in bed with the window open to allow-in fresh air. On a transistor radio Zenna provides me, I listen to Cairo stations that frequently play the poetic songs of ‘Umm Kulthum, matriarch of Arabic singers. Zenna translates some of her songs including “Amal Hayati,” the hope of my life, “Hadith al Rouh,” conversation with my soul, and verses of the Rubaiyat. ‘Umm Kulthum soon becomes as much a part of my new life as the

Egyptian cuisine and hospitality of my new family and when I listen to her love songs, I imagine myself singing the words to my little unborn child.

During early evening meals I sit at the kitchen table to 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 the aroma of grilled meat. I especially savor the desserts they make like honey-dipped baklava and crème caramel pudding. In a matter of weeks, I find myself gaining weight beyond that of my advancing pregnancy. Instead of my own clothes I begin wearing loose fitting full-length kaftans that Zenna provides me.

I regret that my fiancé is away much of the time and resign myself to seeing him 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 with the hieroglyphic transliteration of my name. “It says, Sah Ra,” he tells me. “It means, ‘the immortal soul who travels among the stars.’” The earrings become my good luck charms and more or less replace my postcard of Nefertiabet. I’m leery about looking at it in front of Zenna or Amar because of an incident that happened soon after I arrived. While sitting in bed, I had been holding up the postcard and chanting, “Nefertiabet, Nefertiabet, spirit of Egypt. See me through this pregnancy.” I hadn’t realized that Zenna was standing at the threshold peering in at me because I had forgotten to close the door.

“What are you doing?” she had asked. “Are you praying to an idol?” I said nothing and Zenna continued, “The Koran teaches that believers must put their trust in Allah alone as protector and mediator. Idolatry is a sin against your God and mine. The God of Abraham.”

I felt like a heathen and said, “No, sister, I was only singing a song to my baby, like ‘Umm Kulthum.”

“As I’ve told you many times before,” Zenna said, “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 that it’s easier to go along with Zenna while under her roof than not, but 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 that I must stay in the house to avoid complications with my pregnancy. I tend to defer to his wishes and begin to spend time in the backyard when the temperature is about 70 degrees. It’s a beautiful setting and I like to sit on a stone bench under a jacaranda tree before a koi pond with a three-tiered fountain that pleasantly 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 and their fragrance fills the air.

One afternoon, while enjoying myself at the pond and listening to ‘Umm Kulthum on the radio, I hear a loud “meow” and then a svelte orange tabby jumps over the wall and approaches me. I pet her and hold her on my lap. She’s very comforting to me and to my unborn child who 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 my mother’s allergies but now in my new home I want the cat as my pet. Over the next few days, I coax her 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 start going to the backyard to hold my affectionate cat.

One morning, when no one seems to be around the house, I sneak my orange tabby into my bedroom. I suspect that 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 it, Zenna bursts through the door, screeches something in Arabic, and nearly drops the glass of mughrat she is holding. Then, as if catching herself in anger, she sets the mughrat on my nightstand and walks away leaving the door wide open.

I of course get the hint. Zenna doesn't like the "dirty alley cat" in her house so 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 is not in the yard and I sit on the stone bench and stare at the blue lilies closing for the day, feeling distraught and lonely like I had when I was seven and my best friend had moved away.

Zenna suddenly appears 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 as she 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 then 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 ask, rattled by Zenna’s revelation. No wonder I’ve always taken a nap after drinking the mughrat. Until now I had assumed my guardian angel had been casting her magic over me to help me sleep and relax.

“La 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 diminishing 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 unborn child.

I notice the silver filigree charm Zenna is wearing around her neck; it’s a stylized hand with a blue stone on the palm. I ask her about it and she says, “It’s a Hamsa, the hand of Fatima, beloved daughter of the prophet. The charm protects me from the evil eye. Ayin Ha’ra.”

“Evil eye?” I ask.

“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 and cause harm. If someone pays me a compliment, I say, ‘Masha ’Allah,’ God has willed it. Blessings of God ward off the evil eye.”

Zenna touches my hair and says, “Such vivid color and softness. Sarah, you are very beautiful.”

“Masha ’Allah,” I say, smile, and then finish the mughrat and set it on the stone bench beside me, now feeling grateful that 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.”

Zenna smiles. “You are my family, little sister.” She touches my face. “We love you. And the child.” She hesitates a moment, then asks, “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, right?” Zenna asks. I nod and she adds, “It’s better that way. Then you’ll have plenty of time to show your father around the city of minarets. I will always be here to be amah.”

“You know, sister,” I say, feeling encouraged by Zenna’s kind words. “I would really like to see the pyramids and the Cairo Museum. Tomorrow, if we can, despite my condition. 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 on an outing 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 shall see the pyramids of Giza. And if ever you become faint during our outing, it’ll be no matter. Dr. Aziza will be joining us.”

“No,” I plead. “Not Aziza. I want Amar to come.”

“I’m afraid my brother is much too busy. But I will 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 invigorated by the prospect of tomorrow’s outing. I’m also glad I didn’t have to beg Zenna to take me on this outing because I’ve been feeling cooped-up like I’m living in a harem.

That night, while I'm trying to fall asleep, I KEEP SEEING images of the great Sphinx and the three massive pyramids of Giza that I'll be seeing tomorrow. I feel a sense of renewal and hope not to mention tremendous excitement. Because Zenna already gave me my nightly mughrat and tucked me into bed, I doubt she will suddenly burst into my room so I take out the postcard of Nefertiabet. She was a daughter of Khufu who was entombed in Giza's largest pyramid. Maybe this dignified princess was present during its construction, I am thinking as I silently call her name and ask her to reveal her life's story in my dreams and tell me about the holiest places of her spirit.



Chapter 4: Life in Pepi's Great Palace

Seshet Akeru

Beautiful soul of Isis-Hathor, Nefer Ba'ast, I see your shimmering face in my relic mirror of Khentkawes. I hear you call out to me. In her knotted dress, the winged goddess upholds the universe and makes the land fertile with her tears. I call upon her magic to protect you and your unborn child. I give you my heart and soul through my life's story.

After I left the orphanage of Tefnut and the Alashiya stone of Hathor-Sekhmet had blessed me with its powers, I lived in the harem of my father's Great Palace along with his queens and daughters, sisters and cousins, and sons under age ten. Our patron goddess was the hippo Ipet who, like the fierce mother hippo in the river delta, watched over the king's offspring and the harem. The stout and hale soldiers who guarded our quarters held shields painted with Ipet's "sa" amulet of protection.

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Harem priests will teach you to recite the wisdom texts of Imhotep, Ptahhotep, and Kagemni and use mathematics to draw the Eye of the Falcon with precision.

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My father's Great Wife was Queen Nit and his primary wives were queens Iput, Wedjebten, and the two Ankhnespepi sisters who were daughters of Pepi's mother. The queens were direct descendants of Queen MeryNit who was the Great Queen of King Djed, the fourth king of the 1st dynasty. After Djed died, Queen MeryNit became the first queen to rule the two kingdoms of the north and south until her son Den reached maturity. Queen MeryNit brought prosperity to the kingdom because she was just and beneficent. She was the great-granddaughter of Fierce Stinging Catfish, unifier of our kingdom eight hundred years before my father's reign.

King Pepi formally adopted me on the roof observatory of his Great Palace. The rite occurred at twilight when the sun was setting behind our kingdom's most sacred burial grounds--Sokar Ra Amentet--where the falcon god Sokar Ra and Hathor as the Lady of the West welcome the dead to the next world. In the southern part of Sokar Ra Amentet, Pepi showed me his pyramid which he called *Pepi is Established and Living for Eternity*.

When the sky darkened the king pointed to the Mansion of Seshat and said to me, “I give you the title Favorite Daughter of the King’s Body and the name Seshet Akeru. Because of your triple sekhem powers, I name you for the goddess Seshat and I name you for the lions of yesterday and tomorrow. At the east and west horizons, Akeru Ruti guard the gates to the next world that open at sunrise and sunset. Because you are my favorite daughter, I wish for you to marry my chosen son NeferMa’at. His name means ‘beautiful truth’ and he is 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 stars. “I cannot marry your chosen son because I have no parentage. I am not descended from Queen MeryNit. Daughters of your Great Queen dislike me because you took me to Alashiya and I touched the sacred stone. They don’t believe I have triple sekhem powers because I am a waif of Tefnut.”

“Hetepheres and Nedjeftet will be my chosen son’s first wives,” my father then said. “That I have already arranged. They are privileged and prone to jealousy because they lack your powers of mediation and voice. But you will be my chosen son’s third and lesser wife and the sekhem force behind his throne. Although you are not descended from Queen MeryNit, you are born of Hathor, daughter of Atum Ra. That is your lineage.”

Not long after I officially became the king’s daughter, I encountered Pepi’s chosen son Prince NeferMa’at. It occurred on a day of Perfect Festivals in the Waters when many celebrations are occurring at once. It was the name-day for Ipet, our harem goddess, that night three traveling stars appeared with the moon, and the day marked Queen Wedjebten’s birth.

The harem was scented with jasmine and myrrh and lively with jugglers, musicians, and storytellers. The king’s daughters and cousins were playing lutes and singing *Queen Wedjebten* *You are beloved of the goddesses Nebty and Hathor and you are a seer of both Horus and Set.*

At one point during the celebrations, I was seated beside Lady Henutsen, a priestess of Hathor and a lesser wife to my father. We were watching a troupe of agile Libyan dancers in the central courtyard. At the far side of the plaza, beyond steaming pools and the dancers, the Great Queen Nit was welcoming my father into the harem. With the king were his five heir-apparent sons who lived in the king's quarters and attended the Princes' Academy. They included Merenre, Rahotep, and Neferkare II, the sons of the Great Queen and Menka the son of Iput. The most remarkable among them was the king's chosen son whose mother was Queen Wedjebten. I had not yet seen twelve-year-old NeferMa'at but I knew him by his 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, the chosen son appeared as regal as the king himself.

When Prince NeferMa'at noticed me from across the hall, I turned away, suddenly feeling ashamed of 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 that he made speak with a movable mouth. "Is this the precious Seshet Akeru, my father's youngest scribe?" I felt so embarrassed that I hid behind Lady Henutsen.

"Don't be afraid, little princess. I am Lord Djehuti speaking words of wisdom." The prince then showed me how to move the puppet's mouth with a stick and he made the doll's cloth legs and arms dance. I had never seen such magic. At the orphanage, pilgrims presented me with amulets to kiss and bless, but 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 before us like a jackal from the red desert sands. He was wearing a

yellow shendyt and had a dagger at his waist and a pendant at his chest with his insignia as the king's eldest son.

“Violating the women's side of the plaza, brother NeferMa'at?” Menka said with the venom of an asp. His words confused me because he too was on the women's side of the harem. It was also the first time I had seen Menka up close and I immediately disliked him for disrupting the good feelings I was having 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 Soul” but he lacked any virtue.

Lady Henutsen asked both brothers to leave the women's side of the courtyard and they politely acknowledged their step-mother but 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 but it filled me with his sekhem powers as if Atum Ra himself sent the breath of life into my heart and soul.

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 and, like my father, he praised my flawless picture words and my recitals of wisdom verses. He inspired me to help other children succeed at their drawings and he 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 was opposite in character from NeferMa'at. Whenever Menka approached me, he would call me a lily of the delta swamps and make lewd suggestions. “I would taste your treasures,” he would say. For me, Menka made every occasion unpleasant. He was like a carob bean spoiled by

worms and mold. If I couldn't avoid him, I had no choice but to reply with the impeccable manners I was learning from priests in the harem school.

One bright afternoon, I observed just how different the two brothers were, like the gods Osiris and Set. I was standing on the harem terrace watching them spar with wa's scepters in an outside courtyard. In the middle of their game a yellow tabby sauntered into their arena which wasn't unusual because cats freely wandered the palace like they do in the cities and at the temples in my father's kingdom. Most rational people adored cats and believed them to be the "ba" soul of many gods who travel between this world and the next while protecting both the living and the dead. Any rational person knows that to kill or harm a cat is a death sentence of the soul and those who hate or fear cats have no soul at all.

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

My Initiation into King Pepi's Priesthood

When I turned fourteen, I became a priestess of Hathor, daughter of Atum Ra and Mother of all gods and beings. She dwells in the mansions of the falcon and has many forms. As Sekhmet, Hathor is the Eye of Ra, as Isis she is the 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.

My father's Great Queen Nit initiated me into the king's priesthood in the Temple of Hathor across the gardens from the Great Palace compound. Inside the chapel, the Great Queen and I sat before an altar with the words *Hathor, Lady Falcon in the watery abyss of the night sky, let us rest under the shade of your sycamore tree and live by the scent of your perfume*. On the altar were statues of Hathor, oil lamps, and a relic mirror shaped like the cow-headed Hathor. My father had given me the mirror for my passage into the priesthood. It once belonged to Queen Khentkawes, daughter of Menkaure, wife of two kings, beloved of Nebty, the Vulture and Cobra, and seer of Set and Horus.

Queen Nit opened the rite when she chanted and called upon dignified queens and distinguished ladies of the past and said, "We ask for your counsel and connection to the Afterworld. Come forth for Seshet Akeru. Reveal yourself to her in her relic mirror of Khentkawes."

Queen Nit handed me the bronze mirror and said, "View the face of your primary avatar." While the queen chanted the names of dignified ladies, I looked into the polished bronze mirror of Hathor not knowing who might appear. I saw my youthful face, my braided black wig, and my beaded neckless of gold shen circles and nefer amulets. My image began to 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 the face of Nefertiabet from the stela in her tomb's chapel. A few months before, in preparation for my initiation, my father and Queen Nit had taken me to pay homage to the distinguished ladies and queens near the pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkare. It was in the tomb chapel of Queen Khentkawes that my father had given me her relic mirror and said that

it possessed her sekhem powers of magic. *It is the mirror I use to see your shimmering face, young mother, and to penetrate your dreams.*

“Who do you see in the mirror?” The Great Queen asked and I realized that she couldn’t hear the voice of Khufu’s favorite daughter.

“Khufu’s daughter, Princess Nefertiabet,” I told the Great Queen.

Queen Nit smiled and said, “She comes to you from 350 years before because of your likeness to her in dignity and poise. Nefertiabet is the most distinguished of all venerable ladies. She is a Prophet of Ba’ast and of Seshat and will be a powerful avatar to help you become a dignified lady of standing. Tell me, what does she say to you?”

I looked back into the mirror of Khentkawes but saw only a smoky vision of my own face. But I heard the voice of my avatar whisper words that I repeated to Queen Nit and that I say to you now, young mother, beautiful soul of Isis.

In the darkness of the womb, we come to life. In death we travel into the womb of Nut and 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 by transgressions. You speak only words of a rational heart. You are true of voice. I am your avatar in the priesthood of Hathor and I give you the magic powers of the vulture and cobra. You are a gift from the king to the rational people of his kingdom.

Prophet of Seshat

The same year as my initiation into his priesthood, 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 known as *Pa Ka Aa Ra-*

Horakhty--where the soul takes flight at sunrise and sunset when the gates to the Afterworld open. By day, I resided at the royal estate in Anu.

During my absence from the Great Palace, my father formerly appointed his chosen son as crown prince and gave him the title and name, 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 was born true of heart, voice, and spirit.

A few months later, I learned that the Golden Falcon had wedded his half-sisters Hetepheres V and Nedjeftet, daughters of Great Queen Nit. I already knew that my father had prearranged this marriage but the news nevertheless distressed me. For ten years I had been dreaming of becoming the wife of the chosen prince and fulfilling my father's promise. I still carried hope for that marriage and nearly every day I called upon Nefertabet asking for her magic powers to intervene so that the crown prince would take me as his third and lesser wife as soon as I returned to the Great Palace.

But what I prayed for did not occur. My avatar did not intervene as I had hoped she would. After I returned to the Great Palace, I resumed my duties as a parttime priestess and became a court advisor to my father. In his receiving room, I would listen to the king and offer counsel in the form of a prophecy according to the stars so that my father would not think I challenged his authority. On occasion, I stood before his throne together with the Golden Falcon who was then the king's closest advisor. These were the only times that I was near the crown prince. He was beautiful as he stood by his father wearing his golden falcon pendant inlaid with precious stones. His speech was always flawless, logical, and befitting his high station in life. In his presence I sensed that 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 and I began to reason that he had no time for me because of his many duties and because his two pedigree wives required all his attentions. I believed they had argued against my becoming his third and lesser wife or that his mother Queen Wedjebten forbade our marriage because I lacked pedigree and parentage.

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

One day, when the Golden Falcon was not with us in the receiving room, I told my father that I wished to become a fulltime priestess. He abruptly stood from his throne, holding his flail and crook, and declared, "I forbid this! Only those with infirmities join my priesthood fulltime." He looked directly at me and out of respect I gazed downward. "You are my favorite daughter," he said. "And I command the Golden Falcon take you as his third and lesser wife!" My father then ordered his page to summon the crown prince and his high priests to immediately perform the marriage rite in his receiving room. But I begged my father to wait.

"You are now older than three generations," I carefully explained. "Sire, the stars tell me your life is merely half over. As a fulltime priestess with triple sekhem powers, I will dedicate my life entirely to you, the heart of my soul. You are my savior. When I was a waif of Tefnut you took me on a glorious voyage to touch the stone from the sky and the sea. Because of you, I gained the sekhem force of Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra. Then you brought me to your Great Palace, a place of beauty and joy, and you made me your daughter to live a life of splendor under

your protection. You spared me the fate of a tarnished soul as a Sekhmet temple priestess. Because of you, the gods will make me an akh soul in heaven. But your son the Golden Falcon has not shown me any playful intent and I cannot marry a man who doesn't share my love for him, which is the breath of Atum Ra, the morning star of Hathor, and the star flowers of night that never wilt." My words swayed my father and he agreed to my decision and called me true of voice with triple sekhem powers.

Before high waters appeared that year, I make my fulltime commitment to the king's priesthood on the same night that my father initiated me as a Prophet of Seshat, one of his astronomy priests. During the same year, the king appointed me Overseer of the Queen Pyramids in Sokar Ra Amentet because of my beautiful picture words that came from the heart of the divine. On papyrus paper I drew sacred verses and magic spells for the stone masons to engrave on the tomb walls.

One day I was standing beneath the flat ceiling of stars in the pyramid chapel of Queen Wedjebten and holding a scroll describing her journey into the Afterworld. I was listening to the engraver's chisels pounding the verses that flickered in the smokeless orange flames of the lanterns. *Queen Wedjebten is the brightest star among the mansions of night. She flies through the horizon gates and becomes imperishable in the Field of Reeds.*

In the sultry air of the chamber, scented from myrrh and frankincense, I was thinking about the crown prince and how he had 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 kept saying. But I could not dwell on my love for the Golden Falcon because of my priesthood vows. I tried not to dream about him, but I still did. Just as I still hoped that one day, somehow, he would take me

his third and lesser wife. On that day, I would gladly renounce my vows because my love for him was stronger than all the sekhem powers I possessed.

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

At first, I wondered if a spirit was toying with me, but in my heart, I knew that 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 am 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 to you."

The engravers had all left the chamber so 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. I had taken chastity vows because I believed he would never take me as his wife or clandestine lover. His unexpected visit took me into the magical heights of the imperishable stars and I knew that he loved me beyond the love for a younger sister of court.

For two years we kept our love secret because the crown prince wouldn't take me in marriage and I continued with 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. But at the time I knew that one day 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 soul of Isis, I see your glowing face in my relic mirror. I give you my story and divine magic to ease the pain of labor with the soothing breath of Atum Ra. Your journey into motherhood is the journey into life.

Chapter 5: Fleeing Cairo

April, 1973

Sarah Prentice

The next morning, I awake from a powerful dream that I cannot fully remember. But I know it involved my guardian angel the dignified lady of the east. Mostly, I'm excited about what the day might unfold during my outing to the pyramids. I believe I had dreamed about Nefertiabet revealing the most sacred places of her time.

As promised, Farouq drives the blue Audi Sedan to the plateau of Giza. 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 while catching glimpses of concrete apartment buildings, wrought iron balconies, cardboard shanties, and donkeys attached to old carts loaded with watermelons that vendors are selling where they stop 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 and then I walk with Zenna and Aziza along the dirt road between the ruins. The early morning sun is warm but a subtle breeze is keeping me comfortable. Not many tourists are present because of the recent massacre in Munich, Zenna tells me as she holds my elbow and we stroll past postcard stands and kiosks selling souvenirs.

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-orange Bedouin blankets with blue tassels. At one souvenir kiosk, Zenna buys me a filigree Hamsa keychain with a blue cabochon eye. “This will protect you and the child from the evil eye,” she says, and I hook it to my bag because I need all the good-luck I can get.

In the shade at the bottom of a 15-ton limestone block at 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 absorbs the view herself.

I take pictures with my Pocket Instamatic and think about my guardian angel, Nefertibet, who lived when the pyramids of Giza were built. I want to chant her name and call on her to surround me with the magical powers of ancient Egypt. But then I remember Zenna’s reaction when I was chanting to the postcard, so I silently recite in my head *Nefertibet, Beautiful lady of the east make me an Egyptologist one day so I can unlock the secrets of your spirit and religion.*

Zenna suddenly 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. I recall Zenna and I sitting at the kitchen table eating dates and drinking tea when Zenna told me about the nineteenth century Egyptologist who had written the book *A Thousand Miles up the Nile*.

I am feeling positive and hopeful on my way back to the Audi until the heat, the dust, the smell of livestock, and the endless hawkers start to make me dizzy and I nearly pass out. Zenna and Aziza quickly usher me back into the car and Farouq speeds home while Zenna keeps saying that the outing was a terrible mistake and that someone has cast the evil eye upon us. "We are cursed by your Nefertiabet!" she exclaims at one point. "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 and it becomes 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 but when I don't, negative thoughts start filling my mind. I begin thinking about how Amar is rarely around and when I do 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 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. During my worst moments, I start to wonder if I've made a big mistake and feel like someone's pushed me into a dark corner. How will I raise this child? When will I get my figure back and return to being a beautiful American woman?

One afternoon, while I'm feeling unusually depressed, Zenna enters my room with a sugar cane drink called Qasab. She has noticed that I wasn't always drinking the mughrat and thought I might like a change. 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 because 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 and I immediately recognize that I've made a big mistake revealing my feelings. However, after Zenna seems to gather her wits, 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'm feeling uncomfortable and am still wondering if I'm living in the room of Zenna's dead son and if it's his spirit that is haunting me with troubling thoughts and the evil eye. I never look at his picture when I pass through the left sitting room but the boy's image remains imprinted in my brain. To break away from my own depressing 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 my son's first birthday, 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." Zenna pauses a moment and touches my belly. "How the child grows day by day, *hamdulila*," she continues. "Oh Sarah, you cannot 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 us no longer dwell on sorrows. You have nothing to fear, little sister. Amar will always stand by you. I am here to see that you never suffer the unnecessary torments of life. Do you believe me?" She gently squeezes my hands. I warmly smile, feeling like Zenna is the mother I've always wanted but never had. 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.

The next evening, I decide to call home because I'm feeling uplifted by my conversation with Zenna and I want to hear my father's voice. I haven't talked to him since arriving in Cairo. 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. I show Amar what I write to my father and never reveal to Daddy the address on Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street. In his letters back to

me, Daddy voices his disapproval but says that I can travel so long as I return home for fall semester at the University of Chicago.

Before placing the collect call, I fetch Isis-Huthur from the backyard because I need the security of my cat when facing my father. The only phone in the house is in the left sitting room and I've been avoiding this room because of the picture of Zenna's dead son and husband hanging prominently on the wall. The picture haunts me and I don't even like being near it. But I need to call my father now that Amar, Zenna, and the old mother are at the Gezira Club where they dine at least twice a week. I never go with them because I don't want to leave the house, I feel so fat and uncomfortable, and they always bring me back an enormous dinner.

I sit on the cushions in the sitting room with my tabby snuggled on my lap. I rub my cartouche earrings and call on Nefertiabet to further bolster my courage. Then I dial the international operator on the telephone at a side table. I stroke Isis-Huthur as I nervously wait for my call to go through, worried that my father will be angry. When I'm finally connected with him, he is furious because he has met with Jennifer and learned about my "Egyptian man."

That traitor, I'm thinking as I listen to my father's rage while my cat is purring against my baby.

"And so, is your little apartment in Cairo a love nest with this Egyptian fellow Amar?" my father sternly asks. He even knows Amar's name.

Stunned by my father's words and my best friend's betrayal, I tightly cuddle my cat and try to think about what to say but nothing comes to mind. Deep inside I'm still harboring negative feelings about giving birth and being a mother and I'm tempted to admit my entire ordeal. It's a comforting thought. My father can figure things out for me as he has 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 had been ill and supposedly signed by my mother. But I got caught and had to tell my father that 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 had enough 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 even more queasy than I already am. 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 contrive a way to break the news. Now is not the time. I'm too upset and emotionally insecure. And I must get Amar's support. He eases 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 say. “I am in trouble. Nothing bad. It’s just that my visa expired a month ago and 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,” my father states. “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 tightly hugging my cat, reassured that my poor unborn child is hearing her purr and not the angry voice of my father.

When calm enough to reason out what I must do, I decide to call back my father and tell him the truth. *I’m about to have your first grandchild* I will holler as soon as he picks up the phone. In a way I feel relieved making this decision. Once he knows the truth, there will 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 I’m reconnecting with the international operator, I hear Farouq pull up to the house and 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, sits beside me, and asks who I was calling.

I have no choice but to admit that 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 says as he 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. But instead of growing angry, Amar pats Isis-Huthur as if there’s nothing unusual about her being inside 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 because I know she detests the cat.

“All right,” Amar says at last. “You must explain to your father that you are on your way home in a few weeks but must first tie-up loose ends, as you Americans say. The baby is due soon and you mustn’t upset yourself with pressures from your father.”

“Amar,” I say resting my head on his firm shoulder and taking hold of Isis-Huthur. “My father is a smart man. He’ll believe only the truth.” I feel conflicted like I’m in a bench vise between Amar and my father. I reach for the phone and Amar grabs my wrist, hurting me. His force is stunning. He has 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.

Amar forbids me from telling my father about the child and he 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 out 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 grow frightened and start calling Amar hateful names, the Arabic insults he had taught me during our romance in Venice when he was always joking around. Not only am I angry at Amar, the father of my child, I am trying to chase away the haunting presence of the dead boy. Then the boy's face appears on Amar's as he swings back his arm, strikes my cheek, then grabs the cat from my arms and throws it out an open window while Isis-Huthur is screeching in protest.

"I hate you," I scream. Amar takes hold of my wrists to keep me still. To calm me down, it seems, or to stifle me. I yank free from his grip and the dead boy's hold on me and I tumbling onto the cushions. The change in Amar frightens me more than his slap or the haunting spirit of Kamal. My life is in peril and I'm afraid of losing the baby. But I see no way to escape.

Zenna suddenly 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 while explaining that her brother suffers from the stress of becoming a new father and husband so early in his life. She then tucks me into bed and affectionately strokes my brow while singing my favorite 'Umm Kulthum song, *Enta Omri*, "You are my life." At first, I feel like she's singing to my unborn baby, but then I start realizing that she's really singing to Kamal who is haunting the room and I can't get his shattered image out of 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 haunting spirit of Zenna's dead son. But they have trapped me and I'm so exhausted that I begin drifting asleep hearing her singing, "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, I'm thinking, although maybe Isis-Huthur jumped

back in the window. Without a doubt, the cat wants to be with me now and I'm quite certain Nefertiabet has sent her.

"Please forgive me," Amar pleads. "I promise to never again become angry. I was afraid you would fly away like a butterfly and never return." He tenderly kisses my brow.

I sit up and take the meowing cat. Amar's soft words and sincere apology soften my heart. His slap hadn't been that forceful, I tell myself, and my visions of Kamal had merely been delusions of my mind under tremendous stress and confusion. In the vanity mirror across the room, I see only a slight pinkish hue on my face. I tell Amar that I understand that he must be anxious, too and my mind scrambles to think about a romantic Nile voyage with Amar. But instead, I think about having a life with an uncontrollably angry man. A man who is 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 out the open window onto the branches of the Jacaranda tree.

"Kitty, Kitty," I call out, although I am glad, she has escaped the haunted room. And I no longer completely 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 will regain your strength and life will bring you nothing but happiness as my wife."

"And we'll be moving from this house?" I ask, eager to live any place other than in this bedroom. "In fact," I add. "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 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 would dismiss me and my concerns. Really, I just want Amar to be tender and caring. Although I wonder if I can ever forgive him for slapping my face? *Maybe*, I think, and then decide that my condition is creating all my problems. Not a dead boy or Amar’s outrage or even my father’s wrath.

“Now, my gazelle,” Amar says, “Are you going to tell your father about the baby or are we going to decide together what we will 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. But 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 is mended,” Amar says, kisses my hand, and nestles beside me. All the while I’m wondering if I really can keep lying to my father.

April 27, 1973

It’s early morning when my water breaks and I wake up to a piercing ache in my lower back. I scream for help and Zenna appears at my bedside with Aziza and the old mother. The throbbing pain and tremendous pressure on my pelvis are more than I can bear. My thoughts are of horror, not love. The window and the curtains are closed. The room has no air. I am suffocating.

“Open the window,” I whimper while sweating in pain. My thoughts are about the “evil eye” and I’m sure someone or something has cursed me. Perhaps the dead boy’s spirit or Zenna herself. I am also saddened that Isis-Huthur had disappeared after she scratched Amar and fled my room. My cat had been my only real friend in Cairo and now I have the feeling she is gone forever. Maybe my guardian angel Nefertiabet fled with her. Maybe the boy’s spirit chased them away.

“I want my cat,” I say but nobody speaks to me. They don’t care about me I’m realizing in my torment. I am hated in this house on Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street. I am their prisoner.

Amar’s not around and I call for him as the pain intensifies. “Daddy, Daddy,” I then say and my mind reels back to my room in Palatine. I want my father. I want to go home to America where I had always been safe.

To help me through the labor, Zenna gives me a glass of mughrat strongly laced with the blue lily extract. After what seems like hours of torment, the drug takes effect and I start picturing my guardian angel, the dignified priestess of ancient Egypt. In my mind or maybe even aloud I call her name and ask her to see me through the birth of my child and to ease my agony.

Then I hear a voice deep in my mind. It becomes so penetrating that it seems everyone else in the room should hear it. But I know that they can’t.

In my relic mirror of Khentkawes, the voice says, I see your young face calling for the soothing breath of Atum Ra. I call upon Lord Djehuti to witness the birth of your child and write his biography among the stars. I call for Ipet with her sa amulet to protect you and the child at the instant of birth and to breathe the ka soul into his mouth. I invoke Isis-Hathor to spread her protective wings over you and to greet the newborn into the world of the living just as she welcomes Atum Ra on his morning boat.

When I awake the pressure is gone but I am feeling like I have just traveled across the Sahara without water. My throat is dry and my mind is a dust storm. No one else is in the dimly lit room. Did I dream about my ancient Egyptian spirit of the Nile? I question myself. Did Nefertiabet visit me and take me to another place? I then recall the worst pain of my life and want to yell for help but cannot utter a word. My strength is depleted.

All at once I remember that I've just given birth. Was it a boy or a girl? Did it even survive the wrenching ordeal? My breasts are lumpy and sore. Shouldn't I be feeding the baby? How long ago did all this happen?

I call out Amar's name and nobody comes. No one can hear me. My voice is too weak. I recall Zenna recommending a wet nurse. But what about the milk bursting in my breasts? How will I ease this throbbing? I need my baby and my baby needs me. "Nefertiabet," I call but no one answers. No one comes to my room. Not even the haunting spirit of a dead boy or the voices in my head.

I am so exhausted my muddled thoughts begin drifting 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, and earn a Ph.D. in Egyptology like my idol Barbara Mertz. I picture my father's face when I insist on this major. I miss his stern caring strength. He really loves me and would do anything for me. Anything to protect me. In my last letter to him I said I'd be home in a month. He cabled back saying he was on his way to Cairo. He'll be here any day I keep thinking while finding pleasure in the thought of a happy reunion with my father after the trauma I've suffered.

But what about my baby? I remind myself as I moan, sit up, and nearly faint from the rush of blood to my head. I am sticky and filmy as if someone else lives in my body. I eat the

bread and drink the sugar cane juice on the night table. It helps me gain some strength but when I swing my feet to the floor throbbing pain nearly knocks me unconscious. I call out to Isis-Hathor. To Nefertiabet and say, "I want my baby. I need my child." I grasp the canopy post. The small feat is a triumph. I will make it! The vanity mirror across the room catches my sight. The woman in the reflection can't be me. She looks fat in a wrinkled galabia. Then I see him, the boy. Zenna's dead son Kamal from the picture in the left sitting room. But Kamal is standing behind the shattered glass and he is staring at me with hatred because he thinks I am taking his place. Or that my child will.

"No," I say to the boy in the mirror. "You must go away to where you belong. To where you need to go. I am not here to harm you. I only want to take my baby and leave you in peace. Kamal. You didn't deserve to die at such a young age." My heart is racing as I speak to the boy in the mirror. His young face continues to stare at me and then he seems to be stepping out of the vanity mirror because he wants possess my soul.

He speaks but I cannot understand his words. Then he begins laughing at me with anger. With all my strength, I clamber for the door across the room nearly tripping in the process.

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

I grasp the handle, fling open the door, then 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 Kamal but no one is present in the dark hallway. Again, I hear crying in a bedroom down the hall. On a Persian throw rug, I walk step by step toward the crying baby with

my hands on the walls for support like I'm on the sinking Titanic. All the while I keep thinking about how I will flee for my life with my baby. If I cannot, I tell myself, Daddy and I will return with the police. I won't leave Egypt without my baby.

From behind someone touches my shoulder. I jump, sure the boy has reached me. But when I turn, I see the scrawny 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 and away from the crying baby. As I attempt to pull free the hallway lights come on and Zenna appears from the bedroom where the baby is crying. She's neatly dressed and her hair is stylishly coiffed as if she's ready to go out on an errand.

"What do you want?" Zenna asks with a stern face. There is no cheer, no sisterly love. I see only contempt, anger, and hatred. The same expression I just saw on her dead son.

"Why are you acting this way? What are you doing? It's my baby. Your son is dead. He is a ghost now and you cannot steal my child," I say in gasps as I frantically yank my arm from Aziza's grasp and struggle toward the room where the baby is crying.

"You have no baby, Sarah Prentice," Zenna shouts. "Go. Your bags are already packed. And do not even speak of my son. Ever. Now go and be gone from my house." Zenna points down the stairs to where my duffle bag is sitting at the bottom step.

This entire ordeal has been a ploy to steal my baby, I suddenly realize as if someone's just clobbered me on the back of the head. *Amar had no intention of marrying me. Zenna never loved me as a sister.* The truth is horrible but it bolsters my spirit to fight for my child. "I won't

leave without my baby! You f...ing bitch,” I scream as I struggle to pass Zenna but she knocks me down and pain bursts through my body.

“You didn’t want to be a mother!” As Zenna is screaming, the dead boy creeps out from behind her like a shadow and then, in a blink, he vaporizes as if what I am seeing is merely an illusion. But I know he is real. The dead boy, Zenna’s son, has been after my baby since I arrived. He intends to possess my child, replace his soul.

Before I can think any further, Aziza grabs my arm again and tries to force me down the stairs. I struggle to free myself so I can run into the room, retrieve my child, and flee the house. But then Zenna grabs my other arm and she and Aziza wrestle me down the stairs, out the front door, and onto the porch. I didn’t even know the time of day until I see the morning light. Aziza tosses my bag beside me on the cold brick steps where I sit sobbing uncontrollably. I feel more afraid than brave and more in need of my father’s help than to fight for my child. My spirit is wounded and 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 into the backseat and Zenna pays him to take me to the Hilton Hotel.

I helplessly slump down on the vinyl seat and think about calling my father as soon as I can. *And then I’ll clean up and decide what to do. It’s for the best, I try to convince myself, 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 they are still on my ears and that no one took them from me. I rub them for good luck and protection then 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 and I hear a woman’s voice echoing in my mind.

Young mother, beautiful soul 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 and it is I who will help you regain that child. Your life revolves in time and place. We call it 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 away and the traffic noise returns as 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 that I can know how to live mine.”

Chapter 6: Ten Years Past Cairo

September 1983

Sarah Prentice

At the revolving restaurant “360 on the Cairo Tower” two floors below the observation deck, I am lunching on a pricy meal of falafel, grapevine leaves, and tabbouleh while taking 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 and I doubt anyone will recognize me now. My hair is short and dyed black. I am 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 believed Zenna had maliciously placed it there. My so-called sister had tainted the charm with

her own evil eye of betrayal and I tossed it into Lake Michigan. But I valued my gold cartouche earrings too much to discard them. In fact, I had rarely taken them off during my years back in Palatine. But I've left them at my parent's house along with all my other valuable jewelry. I haven't forgotten the advice from Matt Grubner the hip travel agent.

My life changed dramatically back in Palatine. It wasn't the same adventure I had been having in Europe and I could not dwell on anything that had happened in Cairo. I never called upon my Old Kingdom spirit Seshet Akeru. Perhaps I assumed that she only existed in Egypt. And although I'm certain she had seen me through my childbirth, her magic did not help me leave Cairo with my child. Seshet Akeru and Nefertiabet became part of my past and I packed away my postcard of Nefertiabet inside my guidebook on Europe. Chicago took over, until now as I am eating my lunch while rotating on the Cairo Tower. It seems I have been living in a stupor for ten years.

I had returned to Palatine with conflicting emotions. Part of me was glad to be unburdened. But my heart also grieved as if my baby had died and at times, I was furious that Amar and his family had virtually held me captive just to replace the dead boy. I could only imagine what the child looked like and I didn't even know if it was a boy or girl, alive or dead, healthy, or disabled. No, I always told myself. I had heard a healthy baby crying in the room down the hall and I knew the child was alive. However, the dead boy's spirit had won. From time to time, I considered telling my father everything so he could help me retrieve my child. But after my parents lovingly greeted me at O'Hare, I found myself desperately wanting the ordeal of Cairo over so that I could carry on with my life. As a child, my mother would severely punish me whenever I "threw a tantrum" as she called my episodes of uncontrollable emotions. She would take me into the bathroom and throw water on me until I quit yelling and screaming. She

couldn't tolerate my "bad" behavior and by the time I was maybe seven or eight I had learned to suppress and control my emotions to stop my mother's punishment sessions. And for almost ten years this strategy worked once again, after my return home from Cairo.

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 was viewing me more as a peer than a daughter. Those terrible punishment sessions of hers were something of a long ago past and what had happened between us seemed 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 as if I understood her as a person with her own difficulties who did not owe everything to me. And maybe I had been a terribly spoiled little girl. Daddy's spoiled baby girl. Perhaps I felt solace through my real mother. In Cairo, I had completely trusted Zenna as a mother-sister figure. But the bitch turned out to be a devil who stole my 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 hidden in the past. My father just wanted me to get on with my studies. He had indulged me, let me "do my own thing" and now I was back under his supervision. Only Jennifer and Mary asked me about my time in Cairo. They admitted they had slipped up and told my father about Amar, after showing him pictures from their travels which included the one of

me and Amar together at a table in the hostel dining hall. But they promised me that they kept my pregnancy a secret and I believed them and forgave them and claimed to have had an abortion in Cairo. They knew nothing about Egyptian laws and religion. I just didn't want to admit to anyone that I left my baby behind or reveal anything about the ordeal. Fortunately, my friends left my past in Cairo alone and 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 had closely watched the news and wondered if Amar had been drafted to fight in this war and if he used his Army Barretta 92 that he had shown me when I was in Cairo and claimed it was a symbol of honor for serving his country under Anwar Sadat. He even allowed me to hold it and I remember feeling safe under his protection. But as I now know, everything that had happened in Cairo was a pretense, a ruse to steal my baby.

I postponed enrollment at the University of Chicago until fall 1974 and spent my first year back in Palatine working at my father'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 go to college.

My father argued against my studying archeology, as I knew he would, and even my mother suggested a major in archaeology was frivolous. Daddy urged me to take business courses for "a practical education." He still wanted me to get a law degree and help him at the firm but I had no interest in his fleet of trucks travelling across the interstates.

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

“What will you do with such a degree?” my father persistently asked. I never had a good response. But in time Daddy relented because he knew I wasn’t overjoyed working at SP Trucking.

At the University of Chicago, I pursued my degree like an anthropologist digging up the past and I felt among good company when studying Margaret Mead in Samoa, Louis Leaky in Olduvai Gorge, Jane Goodall and the chimpanzees, and Lucy the Australopithecus. Because I had lived in Egypt and 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 had died although I hadn’t played her music since Zenna had sat on my bed and sang one of ‘Umm Kulthum’s songs to the spirit of Kamal while pretending to be singing to me.

Then something marvelous happened during my senior year--the Treasures of Tutankhamun came to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. I felt like my ancient Egyptian avatar, as I now called Seshet Akeru, had somehow worked her magic even though Richard Nixon had personally gone to Egypt and asked Anwar Sadat for the “King Tut Tour” to come to the United States. Fully re-energized to be 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 I mastered hieroglyphics well enough to draw the names of my friends in cartouches like my gold Sah Ra earrings which everyone admired. Mary was an especially 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 including the golden burial mask, a winged scarab pectoral, and a sarcophagus shrine protected by the goddesses Isis, Nephthys, Neith, and Serquet.

My favorite Tut artifact was an Eye of the Falcon pendant with the vulture and cobra goddesses Wadjet and Nekhbet. I knew my dignified avatars Nefertibet and Seshet Akeru had probably had the royal “Nebty” title to signify that these two goddesses protected them.

It was during the year of Tut Mania that I met Jake Anderson, a real estate lawyer and friend of my oldest brother Kenny Lee. We met over dinner at my parent’s house, a meeting my parents had obviously arranged. But I didn’t mind because it worked out. Jake was tall, blond, blue-eyed, and very good looking, a fine compliment to me friends would later tell me. He was a smart determined man, like my father, and serious about his profession which 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 advising me on which classes to take and what to do with a degree in anthropology. After my ordeal with Amar who had feigned to love me with a silly thing called romance, I could not 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 because I feared getting pregnant. With Jake, however, it was different. For one thing, he was not a student and he was ten years older than me which also appealed to me. But most of all, I liked the way he spoke in an elegant and articulate manner like the trial lawyer that 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 like 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 that I wondered how I had abstained from sex for so long. Fear had held me prisoner but when I freed my passion, I truly 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. He would tell me that I looked radiant and he 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 quip. 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 but it didn’t work and I wondered if I wasn’t the most fertile woman in the world. I considered having an abortion and not telling Jake but then he kept claiming he loved me and I finally confessed that I was pregnant. “Sweetheart, this is beautiful,” he exclaimed. “Let’s get married right away!”

“Are you sure?” I asked, feeling captivated by his emotion. Perhaps this time my having a child would turn out all right. My parents adored Jake, especially my father who pushed for the relationship.

To avoid the blood test requirements and quickly marry, Jake and I flew to Las Vegas. No one seemed very disappointed that we didn’t have a spectacular wedding. We were living in the era of the Equal Rights Amendment and I was happy to forgo all the symbolic hoopla. And I doubted my mother had always dreamed of her only daughter’s big wedding. Mom and I hadn’t grown that close. But Daddy, I suspected, was disappointed and had probably always envisioned walking me down the aisle and giving “his baby girl” away.

As Ms. Sarah Prentice-Anderson, I moved into my husband’s luxury condo. For a while, I was happy with my life and so was my father as if he had successfully arranged the marriage and got his wayward daughter on the right track. Then one day everything fell apart. I went to my doctor for a routine exam and learned that my body had absorbed the embryo. After some

probing, I admitted that I had given birth before. It was probably medically obvious to the doctor anyway.

“You’ve miscarried,” the doctor said. “Because you are Rh negative and your husband is Rh positive. That’s why a blood test is required before marriage.” The doctor then explained that during my first pregnancy my body had developed antibodies that attacked the Rh-positive fetus of my second pregnancy. I felt overwhelmed with guilt and wondered if my fear of being pregnant hadn’t caused the spontaneous abortion in addition to the Rh incompatibility factor.

The miscarriage left me distraught as if 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 like my idol Barbara Mertz, but Jake convinced me to enroll in a MA TESOL program at Concordia University. With my interest in world cultures in mind, Jake suggested I could teach English to students from around the world and have a “practical” career to fall back on, since I wasn’t interested in law school. I didn’t need a well-paying job anyway. Jake earned a six-figure income from the many Cook County real estate cases he disputed at trial.

Despite Jake’s encouragement and support, I grew distant from him after the miscarriage and our great sexual life waned because 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 would approach and say, “Come on baby,” his hands

reaching for my breasts. At first, he caused a throb between my thighs no matter how much I resisted but in time he failed to arouse me. I began refusing him and he would storm from the condo and drive his Porsche along Michigan Shore.

In my heart and soul, I knew my marriage was over and that 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 had fled Cairo. I had to give Jake credit for my new career because I *was* experiencing cultural anthropology first-hand especially when I attended Hmong and Mien celebrations.

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 who were astonished that I spoke Arabic and knew all about their culture, politics, and religion.

Eight years after I had 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 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Even more disturbing was how most of my Arab students celebrated the event. They viewed Sadat as a blight on the Arab World because of his visit to Israel in 1977 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 wagering peace.

Shortly after Sadat's assassination, I dreamt that I was sending my first baby adrift on the Nile like baby Moses and I began to feel tormented about having left Cairo without my child. But I had no choice, I kept telling myself. Amar and Zenna and her dead son had conspired against me. But still, I had abandoned my baby unlike Jochebed who had cast Moses adrift so he would have a chance at life. After that dream I could not stop thinking about what had happened to me in Cairo and 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, I kept wondering how 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 is one more lie? And if this was 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 was a puzzle I couldn't piece together.

Whatever the case might have been, the secrets of Cairo began to torment me and 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 that I had to return to Cairo. At least to see him or her. A ten-year-old boy, perhaps, now running through the parks of Zamalek and flying kites. *What is 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 my avatars 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 up 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 divine forces, with Isis-Hathor herself, to reunite me with my lost child.

I then decided to write to Zenna. Maybe I had become obsessed about her dead son and my mind had been playing tricks on me, scaring me into thinking this Kamal had wanted to possess my child. Perhaps the whole ordeal had simply been culture shock, I tried to convince myself. After all, I had confessed to Zenna that 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 had been so hateful when I left the house. But time has passed, I kept thinking. Perhaps Zenna will realize the importance of a child meeting his real mother. I wrote her half a dozen sympathetic letters while praying Zenna merely misunderstood that I didn't want the child. But I never received a reply until one day a letter arrived from Alexandria. It was from Amar and his scathing hateful words became 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 do not believe you are well. Stop harassing my family. Stop wasting money on your letters. I warn you, if you come to Cairo and disturb my family, I will have you jailed and deported from Egypt. You are not welcome here. Give up your crazy accusations and leave my family in peace.

As soon as I set Amar's letter aside, I knew I could not mend the past without turmoil but that wasn't going to stop me and 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 and I needed the security of a job.

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 what was a perfect situation. It seemed that my Old Kingdom avatars had interceded for me after all. And to top everything off, my father was proud of me for landing such a prestigious job. He felt that this time my venturing forth into the world, to Egypt again, was based on a mature decision and not adolescent whim.

The American University in Cairo

At the iron-grill gates off Tahrir Square, I enter the AUC campus and fall in love with the 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 which houses the department of English and Comparative Literature where I will be teaching.

It's ten-fifteen in the morning when I am walking down a long corridor to meet Dr. Asim Greis, the director of the English Department who had offered me the job. As my footsteps echo in the empty hallway, I pass a wall with portraits of university presidents since 1919 when AUC opened in the Khairy Pasha Palace. Some of the many impressive men are Rhodes Scholars from Princeton, others are from Stanford and Oxford. At one portrait, I halt in disbelief. "Thomas Alva Bartlett," the nameplate says. "Born August 20, 1930 in Oregon, president of AUC 1963–1969." It's not possible, I am thinking to myself. Amar is not 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 had believed Thomas-Bartlett was Amar's last name. I had even addressed my letters to Zenna "care of Amar Mohammed Thomas-Bartlett."

How naive I have 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 Zenna's dead 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 are bald with ringworm*. That is how I am feeling as I continue down the hallway while thinking *My task may not be as easy as I had hoped but I am 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 must not 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 find myself thinking 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 young mischievous street boys who pull at my clothes, make me ponder my predicament.

My short walks from Garden City to campus are pleasant and 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 grow to 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 my objective for returning to the City of Victorious Mars.

Finally, one morning when I have a day off, I dress in a long-sleeved floral blouse and blue skirt and begin my search for my child. Outside my apartment building I flag down a checkered black and white Toyota Crown taxi. 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 and keeps saying, “I am at your service.” He tells me he’s driven 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 ask myself and then make a silent call to my avatars to ensure 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. I remain in the backseat of the idling taxi thinking over 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 that I was not welcome. And with the hatred Zenna showed me ten years before, she will hardly embrace me with open arms. *What if Zenna hadn’t turned against me and chased me away?* I ponder. 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*, I can't help but think, *my life has been in turmoil since I left the doors of Fremd High*. My thoughts suddenly turn to the cruel way Zenna had thrown me from her house and I become furious, but I calm myself because revengeful thoughts are destructive. My only recourse is to see what my child looks like. I think that maybe my avatars are telling me this. Maybe not in a clear voice, but by guiding my thoughts toward what I must do. How I must behave.

"You like Cairo? *Aanesa*, young miss," Abdul Hakim asks, disrupting my thoughts.

I take a deep breath, don my sunglasses, and ask Abdul to wait for my return. I am not sure what I am going to do except walk toward the house and let my avatars guide 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 beholding my child. He will then no longer be an image, an icon.

A breeze rustling in the trees eases my tension and I look up and see 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 contemplate my next move by asking my avatars *How will I discover who lives inside?*

An idea occurs to me as I notice a boy delivering the *Egyptian Gazette* down the street. Or perhaps Seshet Akeru is suggesting that I ask Abdul to go to Zenna's front door and claim he is searching for his cousins--an old woman and a child. He will 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 hasten back to the taxi and explain my idea to Abdul. He laughs and readily 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. Soon, 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 immediately guess I've returned because of the letters I sent her. I imagine Zenna running out the gate and down the street to the idling taxi, screaming all the while like a mad woman. And following behind her I see the ghostly pale face of Kamal her dead son. It's an unbearable vision and I close my eyes to calm her nerves and I 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 is grinning at me 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?"

Abdul laughs and says he spoke with an old servant woman who scolded him for invading the privacy of their home. "I insisted I come from up country and know my cousins live in the area. That ugly hag told me a ten-year old boy lives in her house but he is no relation to a back-water fellahin." Abdul bursts into a hefty guffaw.

"A boy?!" I feel ecstatic and guess that the ugly woman is my nemeses, the so-called Dr. Aziza, Zenna's personal servant.

"Did you see the boy? Did you learn his name?" I want to know everything about my son all at once.

Abdul looks at me and says, “I may be old but I am 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 recall how naïve I had been ten years before, fresh out the doors of Fremd High. Perhaps I deserve to live without my son. But maybe if I learn his name, I’ll return to Cairo in eight or ten years 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 will be my life’s purpose.

The next Wednesday before the Islamic weekend, I arrange to meet Hakim at six in morning. The taxi driver had given me his address in Islamic Cairo and said, “You need only send a street urchin to fetch me. I’m at your service if you ever need anything. I know every inch of Cairo. Know 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 dress in a conservative ankle length gown and a 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 chauffeur I remember from long ago. He was also a conniving man, I reflect, because 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 backseat, a child is 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 have 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 have seen the back of my son's head. That's all. But the sight overwhelms me. "*Yalla, yalla!*" I keep yelling.

Hakim tells me we must be careful or the police will stop us. "Now we need only learn where the boy attends school," he reminds me. "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, but Hakim had 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 that Hakim holds much wisdom behind his simple manner and dress.

"*Hatha,*" Hakim says as he weaves through the traffic, passing a truck load of camels. About a mile from Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street, he 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 for Boys,” Hakim announces.

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 am certain the woman is Zenna who is now a fifty-year-old grandmotherly figure toting along a ten-year old boy. The boy pulls away and slaps Zenna’s hand. She does nothing. *He is spoiled rotten* I think to myself. My son has been pampered beyond reason. Zenna must treasure the child she stole to keep alive the name of her dead husband.

I pay Hakim handsomely and tell him he can leave me at the school. Then I stand at the fence and watch one of the men in the schoolyard blow a whistle. The shouting pupils run to the building and file inside like neat little soldiers. They are 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 am in Cairo before I even have a chance to see the boy and that they will send the police after me for harassing them. Zenna's father was a government minister and Mubarak rules Egypt with an iron fist. I worry that maybe Amar had 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 will have no recourse.

One morning while I'm standing at the fence watching the boys at play, dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved blouse, an orange tabby appears from nowhere and starts rubbing against my legs. I pet the purring cat that seems 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. But I'm thrilled it has come around. I'm thinking about taking her home with me when suddenly I begin feeling the aura of magic, the sense of my avatars surrounding me. I listen to the gentle breeze through the flamboyant trees along the berm. Then I hear a whisper for the first time since I've returned to Cairo. *Nefer, netchem, ankh*, the voice says. "Sweet, beautiful, life."

"Isis-Huthur?" I say to the cat I am petting. She smells as sweet as the flamboyant flowers. Of course, the cat isn't speaking to me, she only purrs and meows, but deep in my mind I hear her distinctly saying *I am Seshet Akeru, Prophet of Hathor-Ba'ast, the cat goddess. I see the future penetrate the past, young mother, beautiful soul of Isis. I hear your plea and I call upon the Sky Goddess who fills the universe with her beauty. Hathor-Ba'ast has taken the form of a cat. She protects you and gives you her sekhem powers and creates for you weapons and armor to fend off the blows of Set. She will heal your heart from the scorpion sting that took away 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 in my mind stops like the breeze through the scarlet flowers. I try to pick up Isis-Huthur but she scurries away from me, squeezes through the iron bars, and wanders toward the boys at play. It's a street cat, I decide, obviously unfamiliar with attention.

The cat saunters towards the boys playing soccer and some of them begin throwing stones at her. Then one boy begins yelling at the mischievous boys and picks up the cat. He looks toward me standing at the wrought iron fence, smiles, and then walks to the gate to place the stray outside the compound.

I watch the tabby disappear into a neighborhood like a lithe spirit. Then I look back at the boy who helped the cat and feel certain that he is my son. I have noticed him before among the many boys. He's the liveliest pupil, fair complexioned, and he excels at basketball and on the soccer field he maneuvers the ball from his classmates and when he scores, he raises both hands in a victory cheer. *He is a prince among the boys* I can't help but think.

A boy suddenly kicks the ball straight to where I am standing. My boy, the most popular student on the team, races after the ball, stops at the fence, and looks at me. Up close I see his eyes are blue like my own. He is beautiful. His smile gleams with straight white teeth, full lips, and dimples like Amar's. My heart nearly pounds from my chest.

The boy snickers and says, "*Bonjour Madam.*" I am speechless and dumbfounded that he thinks I am French. I smile and nod and am about to ask his name when he says, "*Parlez-vous Pompidou?*" then he roars with laughter, kicks the ball back into the game, and leaves.

It's done. Without a doubt the joke proves the boy is my son. Of course, Amar makes the same quips 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 that every day of the boy's life they've cruelly lied to him by keeping his maternity a secret. He doesn't know the woman

who gave him to 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 beholding my son, day in and day out, is no longer enough.

Over the following days my mind can never clear itself of my son's beautiful face and his charming boyish wit. The words *parlez-vous Pompidou* keep ringing through my head as I ponder my next move. *How can I bear to keep this secret?* I keep asking myself. I long to grab my son and scream, "I am your mother! You are 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 and 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 have 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 am 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 entire day watching my son. Perhaps by day's end I will even follow him to his house on Dr. Mahmoud Azmi Street for the pleasure of spending the entire day with him. Who knows? Maybe I'll make a surprise appearance in the life of my so called "big sister." Anything is 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've decided to wear my American clothes

so he can recognize me. At four o'clock school lets out and the chaos begins. The boys are no longer orderly soldiers as they run out the school doors onto the playground.

While I am 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 am so deep in thought that I jump, certain I've been caught doing something wrong or that Zenna has found me. My heart flutters as I turn to 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 am 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 are 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 and quite friendly. 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, having expected him to be angry because I've been loitering but the man is only trying to meet me, the beautiful 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 and 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 and I say with a smile, “Yes. I know what you’re talking about. I guess 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 avatars, my 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 is 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 says as he sits behind his desk. “I hope you like mint tea. If not, I can ask for coffee.”

“Shai is fine,” I say, relaxing a bit and waiting for Mohammed to begin the conversation. What does he want? I am wondering. 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 am 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 says as he 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 uncomfortably in the hard metal chair.

“I teach English, French, and mathematics,” he says.

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 as he adds sugar to his glass of tea. Before I can reply, he pulls from his shirt pocket a pack of Cleopatras. “Cigarette?” he asks.

I gladly take one to calm my anxiety and as I reach over his desk for a light, he peers at my blouse. I regret having worn anything less than a loosely fitting turtleneck. *Ah well*, I think, *perhaps I can use his lust for my own purposes*. I sit back down, inhale the harsh cigarette, and

tell the man his city is enchanting. “The pyramids alone make it one of the most spectacular cities in the world. But then you have the Nile. I don’t think any other river in the world is more beautiful or more enchanting. Just saying the name makes me feel its glory and the magic of ancient Egypt, of the priestesses who once 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 speaking in 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 say and sip my sweet mint tea while anxiously awaiting Mohammed’s reply. The idea is perfect. A blessing from my avatars. Suddenly, 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, then resumes a serious tone and says, “Yes, these boys are already quite proficient in English. But they could use grammar lessons and help with proper diction. They are 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 will 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 is 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 sparkle 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, a beautiful foreign 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 am calling out. “Amar Bin Amar,” I say and another boy answers. “Idris Hazem.” He is not my son. “Tarfuq Suliman. . . Badr. . . Mansour. . . Kazem. . .” I call out but none of them are my son. Then I say, “Jamal Marzouk,” and my son raises his arms in glee like he is scoring a victory on the soccer field. He beams so brightly the entire room bursts with light

and 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 myself would have chosen*. Marzouk is probably the last name of Zenna's dead husband, I reason.

Jamal yells, "Madam, Madam," then 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, I still have authority over them.

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 is 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 whose name means beauty and good fortune.

Over the next several weeks, I begin my hour-long lessons in my son's class with a silent prayer to both of my avatars Nefertiabet and Seshet Akeru asking them to construct a way for me and Jamal to somehow reunite as mother and son. I try not to show Jamal special attention but I end up calling on him more than the other boys who seem to accept and admire Jamal's new status as the beautiful 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. Of course, I don't discourage this behavior. It's a way to grow close to my son because one day soon, I'm hoping to tell him the inevitable truth.

The head teacher Mohammed Sharif gives me complete charge of how I spend time with the boys and I devise ways to better get to know Jamal. Roll-playing is a popular TESL method and my pupils get lost acting like detectives, spies, and heroes from adventure films such as Star Wars, Indiana Jones, and Rambo that are now featured in the 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 because I am the king of Kush and you are 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 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," I exclaim.

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 have found for my son.

Jamal increasingly dawdles after class each day delighting in our secret plan to visit Disneyland. During these times, he pretends he is Indiana Jones in Raiders of the Lost Ark rescuing Marion Ravenwood. His vast and endless imagination intrigues me but I’m still not sure how I’ll lead him to the truth and I worry that Jamal’s excitement might lead him to expose me. He is, after all, only a little boy.

I decide to consult an attorney at Helmy and Hamza of Baker and McKenzie to see if there’s any course of action I might take. What I learn is discouraging. For one hundred Egyptian Pounds, Samir Hamza, Esquire, explains that after the assassination of President Sadat the courts of Egypt implemented Sharia Law in reaction to Sadat’s concessions to the U. S. and Israel. “Sharia governs the laws of family and inheritance,” he tells me. “And these laws are strict and favor the patriarch of the family.”

I have no proof that I am Jamal's mother other than his eyes are blue and he is fairer than most Egyptian boys. The biggest obstacle is Jamal’s birth certificate. One afternoon in Mohammed’s office, while he was away fetching shai, I peeked in the filing cabinet and found Jamal’s folder with a copy of his birth certificate. And it clearly states 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 do nothing. And the closer I grow to Jamal, the more determined I become 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.

Late one night, while in bed 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 this place.*

As I am drifting asleep, the magic of my avatars possesses me and my mind soars with thoughts about taking Jamal 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. Musicians are trumpeting conch shells and ram horns and strumming lutes and harps. Crowds along the riverbank are cheering and tossing cornflowers at our vessel. They are celebrating the victorious reunion of Isis with her son, Horus, the Golden Falcon.

Chapter 7: The Golden Falcon Relic at Nekheny Heru

Seshet Akeru

Beautiful soul 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 up the river 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 and smaller boats were also 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 my time, the Scorpion kings had 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. At the north end of the hall were two ebony thrones from the time of Khasekhemwy, the last king of the second dynasty. These thrones had lion paw feet and lion head armrests, and backrests with pictures of the king receiving sekhem powers from Atum Ra. The temple housed ceremonial palettes and mace heads belonging to the Fierce Stinging Catfish and the most sacred relic in the kingdom--a cubit high, solid gold falcon inlaid with turquoise and lapis lazuli. Queen MeryNit and her son King Den had made the Golden Falcon relic during their reign.

In the great hall the Crown Prince and I held a coronation ceremony commemorating my father's second jubilee. NeferMa'at acted as King Pepi and I dressed as the vulture goddess Nekhbet, Lady of Nekhen and wore a gold vulture crown. In front of governors, ladies, and dignitaries, we sat on the ebony thrones. From a clerestory above, the sunlight of Ra was igniting the Golden Falcon relic sitting on an alabaster pedestal between our two thrones.

The ceremony began when the High Priest of the temple, Neb Khnumhotep, entered the hall's large cedar doors and the audience grew silent. His body was clean shaven and he wore a cheetah pelt over his shoulder. On his right padded arm, he upheld a live falcon. He removed the bird's eye-shield when a guard at the door tossed a live pigeon into the hall. In one swoop, the

falcon's enormous talons caught the pigeon then flew to a door guard who placed the raptor in a gilded cage and the room filled with applause.

Neb Khnumhotep then said to the crown prince, "Many centuries before King Pepi, virtuous kings from the north and south had reigned in the two lands. Their hearts were seasoned from war. The cobra and the bee protected northern kings in Pe Tep. From Nekheny Heru came the falcon kings under the Fierce Stinging Catfish who unified the north and south where Set killed his brother Osiris."

Khnumhotep then placed the double crown on the crown prince and recited the names of ancestor kings of the kingdom united.

At the end of the coronation, the crown prince stood at my throne, took my hand, and said, "By my soul and heart, I now take you as my third and lesser wife because of the child you carry." He then asked the priest to marry us in front of the audience of noblemen and ladies.

His words were unexpected. I had not revealed to him that I was with child. Yet he knew. Only a few days before our jubilee armada set sail, I had been at the tomb of my avatar Nefertabet asking for her blessings on the upcoming voyage. In the chapel, her voice whispered that I was carrying the child of the crown prince. My plan was to reveal my news after the coronation, but the crown prince somehow knew before I could tell him.

During the marriage rite, I gave the Golden Falcon a carnelian tyet of Isis, one the many amulets that I was carrying 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 then gave me the most finely crafted turquoise Eye of the Falcon that I had ever beheld. “I give you this symbol of 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 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 beside a lily and papyrus pond under the full face of the Khonsu Moon. The Golden Falcon was wearing a pleated shendyt, leather sandals laced to his knees, and his pectoral insignia. I still wore the golden vulture crown over my braided black wig. Jasmine perfumed the air and lady musicians were playing harps and singing words that the crown prince had composed for me.

*Mistress of Sweetness whose complexion lusters of gold,
Whose lips are like rose buds, whose 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 who announces the New Year.
My only wish is to be your relic mirror and see you always.
I am the ka of your heart, you are mine.*

At one point in the evening, the crown prince knelt before me, took my hand, and said, “I give you charge of the Golden Falcon relic to deliver to the king for his northern coronation at the temple of Ptah. This is a great honor I bestow upon you, my third wife.”

“But why?” I had asked although it was not proper to question the Crown Prince in such a manner. But I could not hold back my voice. “It is your honor to present the Golden Falcon relic to our father.”

He silenced me with a gesture to his mouth. “My new wife without peer and with the beauty of Nefertiabet,” he said. “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 will prosper with the powers of our love. You at my side, Seshet Akeru, my lesser wife, but my foremost love. My first love. On that day I gave you the puppet of Djehuti, I fell under your spell. But I could not act on my love until we met in my mother's tomb. My mother and first wives did not want you as my third wife. Hetepheres V and Nedjeftet may be directly descended from Queen MeryNit but they are afraid of your triple sekhem powers and jealous of your honest voice, poise, and grace. I had been happy keeping our eternal love silent and between us until you received my child."

"How did you learn of the child?" I asked. "I was waiting for the most auspicious moment to tell you. After I was certain that our baby would live."

"In a dream the crocodile god Sobek revealed that you carry my first son. And now I will no longer bend to the will of my mother and first wives. I will respect their stations, but in truth, I care only to be with you." The Crown Prince tightened his grip on my hand and continued, "I love you more than any other being on Earth. I want the harvest of our love to one day be king and possess the sekhem powers of your heart."

The Golden Falcon stood beside the lilies closing on the pond. He picked one for me and said, "Now I must reveal my intentions for tomorrow. 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 later route east of the river into arid scrubland with wadis that dwindle into amber dunes. I will make new trade agreements with the kings in the land of ebony, leopard skins, ivory, and boomerangs."

Fearing for my new husband and father of the child living in my womb, 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 and I will soon 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 yourself, 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 and he is a man afraid of cats!”

“Stir your heart no more. Let us not speak of my brother.” My husband held me tightly as we stood beside the pond. He surprised me again when he said, “I have something else to ask of you, my new wife. Keep my name alive, no matter what the gods choose for me. Etch it 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. But 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. “But I believe one day soon you shall be king and I will 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 we journey there. Sweet, beautiful, sister of my heart.”

While he held me and we listened to a priestess sing an ode to lovers, I felt protected by his love for me and by my eternal love him. I felt the vulture goddess Nekhbet above us spreading her wings to protect us as she protects my father and his kingdom.

The next day, before 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 then returned to MenNefer and presented my father with the Golden Falcon relic for his second coronation at the Temple of Ptah, the god of MenNefer who constructs stairwells and platforms to the Field of Reeds among the stars that never set.

Beautiful young mother in my relic mirror. 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 and evil of Set, the wild beast of the red desert sands.

Chapter 8: Backside Alley

February 1984

Sarah Prentice

I awake from a fantastic dream of a river voyage and a beautiful golden falcon. But that is all I remember and the meaning is unclear except I believe my avatars were revealing my escape with Jamal.

Must I hide my son like Isis hid Horus in the delta swamps? I ask but hear no answer from my avatar spirits. We can't go to an airport teeming with custom officials and police, I

decide. The crux of any plan is my son's willingness to leave with me. Everything depends on his imagination and his infatuation with me. Perhaps it's puppy love, but it's love nevertheless.

When your son knows the truth, the voice in my head returns, his feelings will transform into the love of Horus for Isis.

Ten years ago, my mind tells me, I dreamed of traveling up the Nile on a honeymoon. That was a future never meant to be. Now I've found my son. He wants to take me up the Nile, like a dashing prince from *A Thousand and One Nights*.

Go with that dream. Go with the spirit of your son the voice whispers and then fades into the early morning traffic of Garden City.

Before I crawl out of bed and prepare for my classes at AUC, I keep thinking about how I'll convince Jamal to play a game of escape and sail with me to Aswan where we will join a camel caravan to the Pyramids of Meroe and in Khartoum we will catch a plane to America, to Disneyland. If the Jamal doesn't respond, I vow to give up and leave Cairo but only after telling him the truth. I feel certain Jamal and I will blend into the many tourists and fellahin along the river. 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 had destroyed my film when she packed my duffle bag during a very confusing time.

Over the next few days, I carefully test the resolve of my son. "Will you really take me up the Nile to the pyramids of Meroe?" I ask him after class one day. He eagerly agrees and then laughs so sweetly my heart nearly flutters from my chest. "How will we get away?" I ask to encourage his imagination.

“Why. On a felucca,” he tells me. “And I’ll show you Gamal’s dam. My grandfather Yossif abd al-Kafi was Nasser’s cabinet minister.”

“And when shall we go?” I ask, restraining myself from stroking his thick brown hair. It’s an impulse I can barely resist.

“We can go now!” he says with excitement then he thinks a moment. “Maybe tomorrow is better. Mama works at Al-Azhar Mosque on Wednesday afternoons and our driver picks me up.”

“Oh?” I say, intrigued by this new information. “What does your mama do at the mosque?”

“She is secretary to the ‘Grand Imam’ Sheikh Gad al-Haq and types his letters and his *Khutba* for Friday prayer.” Jamal speaks articulately but I wonder if he is fabricating a story. The Grand Iman is famous in Cairo. He runs Al-Azhar Mosque and university and officiates over Sunni jurisprudence with the Grand Mufti of Egypt. If Zenna is really his secretary, that’s a huge privilege.

I coyly smile, proud of my son’s 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 say. Jamal loves pretending he’s Saladin, the Sultan of Cairo during the Ayyubid caliphate who fought the Christian crusaders and brought Islam into Jerusalem.

“And you are my warrior queen of Nubia, Amanishakheto,” Jamal responds, using his favorite name for me. He then mischievously giggles and for an instant my heart drops. *Is my scheme even possible? Can Jamal keep our secret? Does he love Zenna as his mother more than*

his infatuation for me? Will he be able to leave her? I worry. But by now I am willing to take any risk to regain my precious son.

Khan el Khalili

The next day, early in the afternoon, I set out to actualize my plan by revealing everything to the taxi driver Abdul Hakim. I'm hoping he will know exactly what I must do. I have plenty of money for baksheesh. God, or perhaps my avatars, has poised me with all the right armor to face this challenge. Nothing but divine intervention or 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 happens to be on the way to Abdul Hakim's apartment in the heart of Islamic Cairo where I intend to go. 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 during my upcoming quest that seems Biblical or out of the Koran or perhaps the Arabian Nights.

In the maze of the Khan's alleys, men in Western clothes and galabias are persistently hawking 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 past shops with ornate glass decanters of lavender, rose, and lily perfumes, sums with silver and brassware, tailor shops, carpet souqs, spice souqs, and antique shops selling ancient relics with certificates of provenance. I buy Hakim a shisha pipe then head for the gold souq alley where shops are ignited with displays of high-quality gold bangles, wedding rings, necklaces, earrings, amulets, and custom-made gold cartouches.

While wandering through the shops 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 eternal and untarnished rays. Their hieroglyphic word was Hathor's golden menat necklace. As I peer in the showcase of one shop at the array of gold bangles, I hear my avatar whisper that I must buy gold to use as baksheesh and gifts on my way out of Egypt.

I purchase thirty 24-carat gold bangles then hear Seshet Akeru whisper *the falcon's eye protects Isis and Horus and wards off the wild beast of the desert's red sands*. I then see an 18-carat Horus wadjet on a gold chain which I purchase, put on, hide under my blouse, and vow to never take it off during my upcoming journey.

I leave the gold souq and hire a shai boy to take me to Abdul Hakim's address in Islamic Cairo, northeast of the bazaar. It's dark when we arrive at his second-floor apartment off a backside alley near historic mosques, fountains, and old Islamic schools called *madrasas*. 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 history 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 out at me and smiles with stained and missing teeth.

“*Ahlan wa sahlán*,” welcome, she says and gestures me inside.

I respectfully reply and follow her into a dimly lit sitting-room beside 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 smelling of the lamb grilling on coal braziers in the alley below. The room feels homey. Old family pictures and tapestries hang on the walls, an old Persian carpet covers the wooden floor, and a radio is playing a male Arabic singer. The woman seems honored to have an American guest and I’m moved with emotion because 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 ask and sip my glass of *shai*.

The old woman giggles, covering her mouth, mindful of her smile. “*Abni*.” My son, she tells me and explains that Abdul will be home any moment then she 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 *fellah*. This part of the plan seems workable, but I’m not sure about 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 to me, "Whatever you may need, Abdul is at your service."

I decide to give *'Umm Abdul* the shisha I bought for Abdul. It seems like 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.

My gift pleases the old woman and she fetches from a back room a packet of el-hennawy strawberry tobacco. Together we toke on the shisha and I'm feeling more at ease. Obviously, *'Umm Abdul* mixes a bit of kif with her tobacco. I begin to worry Abdul won't go along with my kidnapping plan. Maybe his sense of honor will betray me. To quell my anxieties which are possibly exacerbated from the kif, I ask *'Umm Abdul* how many children she has. She smiles and shows me an old leather album.

As I'm looking through the album of black and white photos from perhaps when the old woman was a child, Abdul enters the flat and stands at the threshold to the sitting-room. He beams with delight, immediately recognizing me, his wealthy patron, although I'm wearing a hijab. "My friend," he says and then firmly shakes my hand, "Welcome. How did you manage to find my humble abode? You will stay for dinner of course." He glances at his mother.

I admit that I've come to discuss business. "For as much money as you believe fair," I quickly add. My heart flutters in anticipation of Abdul's reaction. As an accomplice Abdul could jeopardize his own wellbeing. And he has nothing but his taxi to bail him out. But Abdul is my only hope.

"Well, well, *ya aasana*," Abdul says. "You have 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* she has cooking in her kitchen.

While she is away Abdul sits on the cushions opposite me. He offers an Egyptian cigarette and I accept, feeling quite comfortable, 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 is 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 around 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 near Luxor with my five sons. I send her money. My mother takes care of me."

"Five sons? You are an honored man, Abdul," I say while thinking that this 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 yourself 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 is amazing. We sit on the floor near the balcony where I can hear the voices and clatter from the alley below.

When the meal is over, I decide it's time to 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 makes me tremble 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 purpose.

“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 up in my eyes. I feel emotional and high from the shisha kif. For the first time in ten long years, I am telling my secret and the dove is taking flight.

Abdul calls his mother who fetches a cloth to wipe my tears. “This man dishonored you by breaking his promise. Scoundrel! Son of a dog.” Abdul seems furious.

“Yes,” I say and wipe my mouth. “This man’s sister wanted my child. They drugged me. Stole my baby before I ever 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 not 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 the school."

For a moment Abdul remains silent then he laughs with delight and says, "Abdul will help you. But how can this boy simply leave by his own free will? Especially if he doesn't know you are his mother."

"Yes, this is the crux of the matter." I explain Jamal's playful enthusiasm for the adventure and 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 the details. Yes, the price shall be very high but we shall 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. But then I tell myself that the old woman is a mother and certainly understands the hope of being reunited with a lost child.

A few days later, a street urchin knocks at my apartment door. He tells me that Abdul Hakim is waiting in his taxi a block away. When I meet Hakim, he hands me Jamal's American

passport, which looks authentic, then suggests the cost of my upcoming journey. I tell Abdul I will pay with gold bangles and he agrees it's a good plan. To throw-off Amar and the police, he advises that I purchase two air tickets from Cairo to Europe.

Abdul then takes me to a deserted stretch of the riverbank in Garden City where 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.

Abdul introduces the boatman as Majid bin Al Mohammed. "He speaks English," Abdul tells me. "Because he takes tourists from Cairo to Luxor and Luxor to Aswan. In Aswan, my friend Majid buys fig and date jellies to sell in the souqs of Cairo."

For several gold bangles Majid agrees to take me and my son to Aswan where he knows camel traders who can arrange for our trek out of Egypt. I give him money to buy bottled water, rice, fava beans, and spices for the voyage. Majid then tells me that he'll buy fresh fruit and bread from villages along the shore on our way to Aswan.

After everything is agreed upon, Abdul informs me that I must never leave the boat during the river journey.

"What about going to the bathroom?" I ask. The two men laugh and Majid suggests I will bathe behind a blanket on the deck or behind bushes on the riverbank.

"But I want to see the ruins of Luxor. I'll need to walk around," I protest. "How can I stay on the boat under such limited conditions. There's not even a cabin or a chair."

"The police will be looking 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 the boy will want to see the temples as part of our adventure. He is the reason for this whole undertaking and 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,” I say, feeling satisfied with the compromise. At least I’ll see the temple of Hathor, the goddess of Nefertiabet and Seshet Akeru. Perhaps at the ruins, Hathor herself will bless me and my son with success.

The next day I purchase two airline tickets to London, to throw off the police, and I ship home my camera; it would be too conspicuous to take an SLR on my fugitive run and besides, I don’t want to document my crime with photographic evidence. 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 had 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, 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 will punish him for mischievous behavior. But his expression changes when I smile and fondly stroke his soft brown hair because 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 and I whisper close to his ear, “Jamal. Are you ready to sail to Aswan?”

“Really?” He looks at me as if for the first time he senses the game we are playing is real. To my relief he seems quite pleased. “Are we really going to Disneyland?” he asks.

“Yes, Jamal.” I can scarcely manage my own excitement. To soothe my nerves, I rub the gold wadjet around my neck and make a quick prayer to my avatars, for success, 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 his hand and lead him to the door where I crouch to whisper, “Jamal, you must now quietly 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 beautiful 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 right behind me with an expression of delight.

“*Yalla! Yalla!*” Abdul whispers through the window. I open the backdoor, usher my son inside, then 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 veil 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 and knew my son would like. By the time Abdul parks at the deserted riverbank in Garden City, Jamal and I are disguised as rustic fellahin villagers who came to Cairo to sell produce, relics from ancient tombs or fish from the Nile. No one will find us suspicious.

“Here we are,” I say to Jamal from behind my veil. The felucca’s sparrow-wing sail is unfurled. Everything is ready. Everything is in place. With delight 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 it would probably cast the evil eye upon him and me, anyway. Besides, I rewarded him well for his help and if the police catch me, I’ve promised to claim that I had just flagged down his taxi and never saw him before.

“God be with you,” I say and hand my friend another bangle. “For your mama,” I add as I get out of the taxi and close the door.

“God’s protection,” I hear Abdul call as he pulls away.

I run down 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 swallow-wing 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 soul is now immortal in the flames of your sekhem power when Mintaka touches the horizon and marks the east and west.* ”

Chapter 9: The Mintaka

March 1984

Sarah Prentice

Jamal joins me on the deck under the canvas awning and we watch Majid align the rudder and pull the ramp onto the boat. I tell my son about the star Mintaka, recalling what I had learned during a star-gazing class at the University of Chicago. The course had captured my imagination and now I want to capture my son's. "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. Mintaka is a multiple star system 1200 light years away and it's nearly 100,000 times more luminous than the Sun and about 20 times more massive. At the end its life, Mintaka will explode in a violent supernova."

"Can we watch the stars each night, ya Sarah," Jamal says. "I want to see one explode. I want to see a supernova!"

"One day you will," I say. "But I can't promise you when. For now, let's quietly watch Cairo pass by. We are secret spies, 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.

For me, the hardest part of my plan is over and the adventure now begins. I have kidnapped my son. Because the journey is against the current, Majid tells me it could take as long as two weeks to reach Aswan. Everything depends on Jamal who has never sailed 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. On one occasion, Jamal had related during class, he went on a trip to Greece with Amar who was playing on a 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 is reacting 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,” the boy whispers in Arabic. “Won’t Mama be surprised?”

I put my arm around him and say, “You are a brave little man to bring me on this wonderful 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 I believe that soon he’ll be calling me Mommy.

“When can I sail the felucca?” he asks.

“Soon,” I say drawing him nearer, bursting with enormous love for him. “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, but I pull him back and whisper, “Not yet. We must first outwit our enemies and hide. Tomorrow, I promise, when we are far from Cairo, we will both learn to sail the Mintaka.”

“You?” Jamal looks at me quizzically. “Sailing is a man’s work. You must cook and wash dishes while I master the ship.”

“Aywa. You are right,” I say, not wanting to interfere in the boy’s fantasy. “Sailing is a man’s job. And you are 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 am eager to share all I know about ancient Egypt with my son but I don’t plan to tell him about my two spiritual avatars, my guardian angels who are protecting our venture with their 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 Muslims.

“Khasekhemwy was father of Djoser,” I continue. “His son, King Sekhemkhet of the third dynasty, is also buried in Saqqara, along with kings and queens of the Pyramid Texts, and the tomb of Ptahhotep, 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 are sailing 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 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.” He laughs; his red fez is snug on his head. I join in the laughter about my warm and billowing disguise. Fortunately, the wind that sails Mintaka keeps me refreshed. Besides, any discomfort merely encourages my hope for success. *If there is no suffering*, I can hear Ptahhotep advise me, *the venture is too easy and you will never make it to the Promised Land*.

I retrieve my duffle bag from under the bow and give my gifts to Jamal. He is 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 water slapping against the boat. Just being on the river eases my anxieties. How is it, I wonder, that this is my first voyage up the Nile? And I'm an Egyptologist at heart. I have never taken advantage of seeing the wonders of Egypt.

It's evening when Majid determines we are far enough from Cairo and no one is following us, he anchors Mintaka near a west bank village. At the stern by the rudder, he sets up his brazier and heats a pot of ful mudammas. We eat from the pot with the aish baladi Majid buys from a village vendor. The dish is cooked to perfection with just the right amount of spice. For the rest of the voyage, I know this dish will be the mainstay of my diet.

By the time we finish our meal it is dark and Majid lights a lantern on the mid-deck and then brings out a red clay doumbek with a goatskin top. He slaps the Egyptian goblet drum in a rhythm fitting the lapping river, plays until midnight, then he smokes on the middeck where he sleeps. Under the canopy, my son and I lie on woven matts and cushions beneath a woolen blanket while 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 that 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 and as he drifts to sleep. I wonder if Zenna, Amar, or any wet-nurse, ever held him with so much affection. But 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 so he won't 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 near the west bank by acacia trees and pampas grass that is wavering in a breeze. A few row boats are fishing for tilapia, perch, and catfish, I imagine, and women are filling large plastic jugs and aluminum pots with river water. What I'm seeing could be a scene from five thousand years before.

I would love to go swimming as a purification rite for the journey ahead. But I merely dabble my toes in the cool murky water. Even this behavior is probably abnormal for a fellahin boatwoman. *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.

But the image remains only me, the veiled fellahin. *You cannot force an apparition to appear*, I remember the Haitian woman at the Paris youth hostel telling me.

A breeze suddenly blows as the sun strikes the Nile and a voice in my mind whispers *Hathor, open the way for Isis and Horus. Close the door to the followers of Set, the instigators of harm and chaos. Sleep on the Milky Way boat and sail in the boat that keeps growing stronger through the day.*"

The breeze fades away with the voice. Herons begin making calls and Majid suddenly appears at the felucca carrying a basket of oranges and fresh bread. He says we will set sail after *iftar* then he begins preparing Turkish coffee over the brazier. Jamal rubs his eyes as if wondering if he's just woken up from a dream. His youthful 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*. Now he behaves like a disoriented little boy and I fear he has 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 had forgotten about the basics of life. Motherhood is new to me; I've only touched it in my womb. I smile as Jamal pees into 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 such 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'm alive with my son.

As the days of sailing up river 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 born sailor and he 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 and furl or unfurl the sail. When he's not busy sailing, Jamal plays with his action figures or reads his comic books or draws pictures of desert jinn while listening to cassettes or 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 will ever see the inside of an ancient Egyptian tomb.

Chapter 10: The Selection of a Tomb

Seshet Akeru

Beautiful soul of Isis, I see your reflection in the river and hear the songs you sing with Horus your son. Every good thing you command will be done for you as you sail over the walls of Shu. You must prepare for yourself a Temple of Life, a place for your soul to receive offerings from the living. If the ka has no place to return, it will restlessly wander in darkness. The selection of a tomb is as important as having children and as life itself.

I continue with my story and 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 my father and relinquished my vows as a fulltime priestess. Since then, I had been patiently waiting for the safe return of my husband and the safe arrival of my firstborn--my wepem khat. Each day I was teaching royal children on the

harem terrace which overlooked the gardens, the river, and the pyramids of the western burial grounds 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 were sitting cross-legged 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 on the terrace teaching them how to draw the picture words of the gods.

“Atum Ra created Shu to uphold the sky and Tefnut to house the king’s star,” I said. “Shu and Tefnut gave birth to the Earth god Geb and the Milky Way goddess Nut who gave birth to Earth’s first children—Osiris, Isis, Nebet-Het, and Set, 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 away from the children who were chattering in confusion over his abrupt presence.

“Beautiful sister,” Menka said to me, “You are free now to marry me.”

What could he mean by this taunting? I had asked myself as I freed myself from him. Then Menka revealed that my husband, the Golden Falcon, was a mummy in Abu. “A band of Medjay warriors killed him,” he said without any emotion. “I will be king and marry his widows, the first wives of the royal lineage. And you will be my lesser wife now that you are free from your priestly vows.”

The king’s eldest son behaved at his cruelest on that day and my blissful life dissolved into the Great Green Sea of misfortune. But the gods were not through with me. Set himself

unleashed his evil upon me like 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 tomb near our father's pyramid. But that 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 that of his father and ancestor kings. But he had died before he fulfilled the measures of his life. What distressed me most was that my husband's mastaba neighbored Menka's tomb. Menka was the Golden Falcon's greatest rival and I knew that such an arrangement would displease my husband's ka soul. I also believed that Menka somehow instigated my husband's death in order to become the crown prince. But I could not express this concern to my father because I had no voice in the matter. My husband had two other wives who were above my station and I doubted that I would even be buried in my husband's tomb. I was merely his third and lesser wife of no parentage.

The final decision concerning my husband's tomb belonged to our father and 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 had become inconsolable because the greatest hope for his legacy had vanished.

During this time only I could console my father and he often summoned me to his receiving room. As he sat on his throne, I would hold his hand and speak about his many victories and tell him that he was a great and beneficent king. Just and true. That his subjects adored him. I would sing about climbing the platforms and ladders of Ptah to reach the Field of Reeds where his sekhem powers would never diminish or perish. “You made your son a man as noble as Horus, the son of Isis. He is now Re-Horakhty, defeater of chaos and harm and he lives with Osiris among the stars that never set.”

When the floods began to subside, the funeral armada arrived in MenNefer with my husband’s mummy. Small boats and skiffs decked with streamers and flags wove among the funeral vessels and along the shore and loyal subjects shouted the name of the Golden Falcon. They call him Kawab, son of Khufu. They wailed and lamented that the promise of their kingdom was dead.

The king placed the mummy in his private chapel, the Sa Step where it was to remain until workmen finished the mastaba tomb. Day and night, four guards with spears in their hands stood vigil at the wooden coffin, one at each corner, and a fifth guard stood outside the chapel door. The scorpion goddess Serqet protected the priests who prayed over the mummy every sunrise and sunset.

The sight of his son’s mummy and beautiful death mask revived my father enough to overpower his grief. He began refusing the lily potion and started making decrees. While everyone awaited conclusions from vizier Nemty Hotep, concerning my husband’s death, my husband’s principal wives remarried their half-brother, the king’s eldest son. Menka had always desired them for their pure lineage and the elite sisters believed that the eldest son was first in line to the throne and 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 of the crown prince. He also decreed that they would not be buried in the tomb of his favorite son.

When Menka began declaring himself the new crown prince, my father held court and decreed that there was only one crown prince during his kingship. “I gave that title to my favorite son,” he said. “May the best son win the crown after I am gone. But 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 ruled that I, Seshet Akeru, as the king’s favorite daughter, would be the Foremost Wife of the Golden Falcon and that I would share his Temple of Life. He then appointed me to write my husband’s autobiography for the walls in the sarcophagus chamber.

I was grateful for my father’s decrees but the fact that Menka’s tomb neighbored my husband’s continued to plague 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 not to say anything so I put my heart and soul into my husband’s story for his stone mastaba wall. On papyrus paper, I also composed many letters to his ka. I wrote about his first wives remarrying Menka and about his daughter Hetepheres VI, “She is beautiful and skilled in her studies,” my letter said. “A king’s prodigy. I am very fond of my step-daughter.” In one letter I explained that I retook my vows as a fulltime priestess. “The king has appointed me as High Priestess of the Palace and has gifted that I will spend eternity in your tomb. I will 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 so that I may intercede for other young mothers and their children.”

While masons were carving my picture words on the stone walls of my husband's mastaba tomb, 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 had told me three days before messengers arrived at the Palace? I pondered this for many days but I 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 for a sign in the stars of what might happen. Then 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 my husband's beautiful death mask. It was golden and the eyes were inlaid with blue lapis lazuli and the lips with red carnelian. Priests had used cartonnage to make an exact impression of my beloved's face so that his ka soul would recognize his mummy when it came to visit his tomb. I was glad that these priests had placed my wedding tyet in his wrappings. The garrison generals had found it on his body. I prayed to Isis that her tyet amulet was protecting 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 wasn't present. I cautiously pushed open the chapel door, upheld my torch, and entered the dark chamber. Someone had extinguished the torch inside but my torchlight quickly revealed the five guards sprawled out on the floor. Someone has slit their throats. Horror struck me and I quickly turned to my husband's mummy. The world fell into darkness when I saw that his beautiful funerary

mask was 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 and my other hand was touching the defiled death mask of my beloved husband.

My father was inflamed. By destroying the death mask someone had 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 determined that followers of Set had poisoned the guards and that they had been unconscious when these same evil men slit their throats. Vizier Nemty also concluded that there was no connection between the murder of the crown prince and the desecration of his death mask. He also refuted the rumors of a palace conspiracy concerning the murder because his commission had found no evidence. No soldier on the expedition betrayed any source of sedition. No one in the palace surrendered a name. The official story held that a hostile tribe of renegade Madjay warriors had killed the Golden Falcon in his sleep because of a trade dispute.

My father formally charged Nebwenenef, the high priest of Ptah and Prophet of Serqet, of masterminding the crime in order to advance his position and undermine Pepi's legacy by destroying his chosen son. My father had made Nebwenenef the Overseer of the Royal Mummy. No one else was permitted inside the chapel except for my father, Queen Wedjebten, myself, and the priests who prayed at the coffin and provided the guards with food and water.

Standing before my father in the throne room, Nebwenenef wore a cheetah skin draped over his shoulder as a symbol of the cat goddess Mafdet. My father upheld his wa's staff and declared, "I am a 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 do not know who wanted to kill my son but I judge that you are accountable for the defilement of his death mask. Nebwenenef, defend yourself.”

“I am no mankiller,” the priest declared. “I am blameless by the judgment of Mafdet. My only crime is that I am Overseer of the Royal Mummy. By my ka, Set himself toppled my position and put in motion the forces of chaos and evil.”

Enraged, my father proclaimed, “You have no defense. Kagemni in all his wisdom declared *Sharp are the knives against those who transgress the road and desecrate the dead*. And you dare invoke Mafdet, cat goddess who dwells in the Mansion of Life. She protects my justice. You will throw yourself in the scorpion pit at Per Serqet. In the pit you will call for Mafdet to protect you from the poison. But Mafdet will rip out your heart and eyes for your transgression. I order your name erased. You will have no house of eternity. My soldiers will cast your corpse in the red lands where jackals will rip apart your flesh. Your soul will forever perish.”

Shortly following the execution of Nebwenenef, my father summoned me to his chambers to tell me about a dream he had in which robbers pillaged his favorite son’s mastaba tomb and erased his name. In the dream, Djehuti told my father to make his son’s tomb inconspicuous because someone from the palace had plotted to kill the Golden Falcon.

“For many years,” my father said. “There hasn’t been any trouble in Medjay and Yam. This is why I authorized my son’s expedition after he took you as his third and lesser wife.”

I suggested to my father that he entomb my husband in the rock-cut cliffs on his royal estate outside Bastet where I would officiate as a Prophet of Ba’ast. “Although his tomb won’t be near your pyramid,” I told my father. “The Golden Falcon will be hidden from followers of Set who desecrate and pillage what is most Holy. No one will know about the tomb except your

majesty and the queen, myself, and the priests who make votive offerings. It is where I would like my husband entombed.” I dared to boldly reveal my own wishes because I felt Hathor herself whispering what I should say.

My father took pause and I thought that maybe the idea appealed to him. But I could never be certain because my father’s eminence often hid his intentions.

“I have 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 and 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. It was an honor for the general to surrender his tomb to the king. For eternity, his name would be chiseled on the tomb of one of the greatest crown princes 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 when the goddess Ipet failed to cause my son to take a breath of life and the god Sobek failed to protect my husband in Medjay and Yam. For a moment in time, I believed I would be a queen and 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 call upon Isis-Hathor to spread her wings of protection over you and your son as you sail the greatest river on Earth into the stars that never set. Akhakh Shen en Pet.

Chapter 11: The Hathor Temple at Dendera

Late March 1984

Sarah Prentice

After two weeks of sailing the Mintaka arrives at the village of “Qaryat e Abdul” near Qena, 285 miles from 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 has probably slaughtered a goat for a special occasion. At a café, men are playing backgammon and smoking a shisha with apple tobacco. They stare at me as we pass them 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!” and a woman appears at the door draped in a black abaya. She kicks the dog aside then smiles when she sees Majid. “*Marhaban ahlan wa sahlán*,” welcome, she says.

“*Alsalam ‘alaykum*,” peace be upon you, I politely reply and offer my hand. The woman’s grip is modest.

I follow her into the house and am reminded of the spice souq of Khan el Khalili. Abdul’s wife gestures we sit on a sheep skin in the front room. She and Majid then rapidly speak in a dialect I can’t fully understand. Jamal rests his head on my lap and before long I begin to realize that we’re spending the night in Abdul’s hut and 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 sleeping son and try to fall asleep. But 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. But I soon fall asleep until the following morning when I wake up to the adhan.

I nudge Jamal. He tells me he's hungry and wants to see the temples. "Majid," I call out, feeling helpless in the strange house. No one answers. I cover myself with the hijab and am about to look outside when Abdul's wife appears from the back kitchen and gestures me and Jamal to 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 is when camping in Wisconsin. It seems I'm growing accustomed to the simple life of a fellahin.

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.

It's mid-morning when Majid hires a donkey and cart that takes us down a bumpy dirt road to a river ferry. We cross the Nile and then take another donkey cart to the temples of Dendera where hawkers and touts have gathered. Except for the 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 pious Muslim 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 token of this time with my son. Although I am always afraid of somehow getting caught, this will be the only picture I'll have of this journey with my son. Besides, I don't see any tourist police around. I remove my veil for the photo and Jamal and I stand before the large boxy temple of columns. The capitals depict Hathor with cow ears. Centuries before, zealous Christians had chipped away many of the Hathor faces rather like the Muslims had defaced the Sphinx. Or was it soldiers of Napoleon Bonaparte? It's a riddle of the Sphinx.

I offer the tout a gold bangle, feeling the picture is worth the price. He is elated and runs to show a nearby man. His father? His Bassha? 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. But then he suggests we play hide-and-seek. "You are Marion Ravenwood, ya Sarah," he tells me. "Evil Nazis hold you prisoner in the Temple of Doom." To keep him amused I agree to play along although I'd prefer to always have my son beside me and quickly end our little sightseeing tour of the Hathor Temple so that we can continue with our dangerous escape. But I must keep Jamal entertained and enthusiastic about what we are doing. My biggest fear, even more than getting caught, is for Jamal to grow bored with our journey and want to return to his so-called mother in Cairo.

Jamal and Majid head to the pylons and I enter the temple's enormous hypostyle hall to hide among the stone pillars of Hathor holding up a ceiling of Zodiac constellations--the spectacular pronaos.

Chirping sparrows are flying among the pillars and the phrases of English, German, French, and Arabic tour guides are echoing through the great hall. *You're looking at Nut across the sky giving birth to Ra at sunrise and then swallowing him at sunset. . . Follow me, I want to show you the Eye of Ra in a mirror reflecting the subconscious journey into consciousness, 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."*

As I walk around the temple grounds, I become so overpowered by what I'm seeing that I forget about the game with Jamal and unleash my Egyptologist mind. I can feel the presence of my avatars and believe that they both had traveled to this sacred House of Hathor. Their presence is so strong I can almost see their auras in the stone statues and reliefs surrounding me.

I pass by a wall carving of a woman giving birth then stand before an etching of the last ruler of Egypt, Cleopatra VII Philopator who is with Caesarion, her son by Caesar. Together, mother and son are 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."

I return to the Hathor Temple and climb the worn spiral staircase to the roof to view 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 representing the solar eclipse of March 7, 51 BC.

I suddenly remember my son's game of hid-and-seek and make my way to an inner courtyard on the temple roof. Pillars and their capitals are scattered around the stone floor. Some of the wide-faced cow-headed Hathor 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.

I recall the words of an Arab tour guide *The Sky Cow Hathor carries the solar disk between her horns and sustains life with her sweet milk*. No one seems to be around and I sit on the ground before the stone face and gaze at the perfectly carved mouth, eyes, and cow ears. *Religious fanatics haven't killed your spirit*, I am thinking when I call upon Hathor to ensure me and my son make our way home to America. Suddenly, the statue's eyes seem to blink, its nose flare, the perfect mouth upturn a twitch, and its ears wiggle. I pinch myself, squints my eyes, touch my gold wadjet charm and pray in a quiet voice, "Goddess of motherhood, my life isn't so different from that of an ancient Egyptian. The world strips me until I am left with nothing but love for my child. I call upon your spirit, Isis-Huthur." I touch the cool stone face and continue to say, "We need your divine protection and guidance, my son and I."

A breeze blowing across the courtyard 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, the Mistress of the Divine Pillar. Adoration to you. Bring failure to those who cast evil upon Earth and would steal Horus from Isis. You are a fiery force against evil. You are Hathor, protector of mother and child. Heqaf Heqaf Heqaf Henenhenenhenen, Shen en Pet.*"

"Hathor protect me and my child," I say aloud the words ringing through my mind feeling under the influence of the blue lily.

A sudden flash of light jolts me from my trance. A tourist has just taken my picture because I look like a fellah before a Hathor capital, like a relic of ancient Egypt, perhaps. Then someone whistles and further awakens me. I turn and spot Jamal standing outside the courtyard gesturing for me to hide. I am spoiling his game because it isn't yet over.

Worried someone might become suspicious of me and notify the tourist police, I wave Jamal back and set off to hide in the hypostyle hall once more while growing weary of the game. When can I end this pretense? I keep asking myself as I wander under the pronaos.

At the entrance of the great hall, I scan the front plaza and notice two uniformed guards walking toward me. My heart pounds as one of them glares in my direction at the temple façade. I can't budge. Where is my son? I am thinking and want to shout his name. If the police catch me, I must reveal my identity to Jamal.

The policemen talk to each other as they continue nearing me. I nearly die inside. I've got to flee, I'm thinking. But where? I can't run far in my voluminous garb. I slowly walk in the opposite direction, looking downward, wondering how I can feign fluency in Arabic with a village accent. It's simply impossible. I can do nothing but 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 dare look back.

After reaching the pylons I impulsively 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 is 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 still approaching me. "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 with armbands that say River Police.

“Salam,” one replies, adding in standard Arabic, “Are you from nearby?”

“My village is down the river. But I am 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, “the boy”. I understand the question and resign myself to my fate. I have the urge to quickly tell Jamal the truth about me but I keep silent and call upon my avatars asking for a miracle.

“She is my second wife,” Majid says. “We married in Cairo. And he is my son. Abni. We have stopped on our honeymoon to see the temples. Is there trouble?”

“La, la, not at all,” one of the policemen says. I sigh with relief although I’m skeptical of their actual intent. “We are merely talking to local villagers,” he continues. “Several tourists have complained that their cameras and purses were stolen. But I can see you carry no bags and since it’s your honeymoon,” the man coyly winks, “we bid you a good day.”

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 the distant police.

“My yes, my little Saladin,” I reply as I shakily stand. “We are all master spies at the Hathor temple. Now please, let’s get back to Abdul’s house and have something to eat before I faint.” Although I’ve become accustomed to my billowy attire, the afternoon sun is unmerciful.

That night on the Mintaka moored near the village of Abdul, Jamal is nestled beside me, exhausted from the day’s adventure. As the gentle waves are rocking the boat and lulling me like

a baby, I listen to the lapping river and dream about crowning my son king then voyaging in our own vessel among a fleet of royal ships traveling to the southern border. I hear my avatar whisper *Hathor draws you up the steps into the Milky Way and the Golden Falcon guides you on the path to the imperishable stars.*

Chapter 12: Abu at the Southern Frontier

Seshet Akeru

Beautiful soul of Isis, young mother, you have received the powers of you own diadem. You are the falcon perfumed. My story now continues when I myself journeyed to the southern border during my father's third jubilee.

My father's Wadjet fleet moored for ten days at the piers of Abu, the main town on the first 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 had erected shrines in Abu and his father King Huni had 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 and muscled soldiers from Medjay and Yam were patrolling 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 the foreign exporters for gold, frankincense, ivory, cheetah and leopard skins, ostrich feathers and eggs, live monkeys, giraffes, and even pygmies who performed for governors and noblemen and for the king himself.

The main temples of Abu belonged to Khnum the Ram, his consort Satet the Gazelle, and Anquet 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 was plaguing King Djoser's kingdom. Without the flood waters, his people could not grow food to feed themselves. 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 and said that if Djoser repaired the Khnum temple in Abu and build shrines for Satet and Anquet, the river would rise again and end the famine. King Djoser then traveled to Abu and restored Khnum's temple and erected temples to Anquet and Satet beside the gurgling caverns at the south end Abu. Then Satet in her white crown with antelope horns upheld her ceramic bowl, caught the tears of Isis, and poured them into the river so that Khnum could open the cavern gates, release the flood waters, and restore the kingdom to prosperity.

While I was in Abu, I paid homage at the Satet and Anquet temples on behalf of my father then embarked upon my own private mission with my father's blessings. To help make the 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 which to me indicated his trustworthiness.

"I am looking for a mason scribe," I told him. "An etcher of stone who travels through the wadis of Medjay and Yam."

Taharq suggested that I would find such a man at the night market in a borough near the Satet 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 all sorts of untaxed bounty passing hands. I couldn't help but think that I had been 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 that they must have looted from their enemies. Senet is the game of life and death and making it into the Afterworld of Osiris. The player who passes the test of 42 negative confessions and proves himself to be true of voice, wins the game.

We arrived at a group of scribes sitting cross-legged on the bare earth beside red granite boulders. By torchlight, they were busy drawing scarabs, djed pillars, and ankh amulets 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 that of 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 added.

"They call me Dag," the dwarf said without looking up at me. "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. Then I 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 adventure to keep a little man amused. Now I am awaiting my next expedition," he peers up at me for the first time and quickly adds, "Old Woman."

"Can you chisel such a fine Golden Falcon on a wadi cliff?" I asked with hope.

"Dear lady, I have spent ten years chiseling divine words on stela and tombs and at the temples of Isis-Hathor in Iunet and at Per Satet here in Abu. I am a master carver and a dedicated follower of Hathor, Horus, and Osiris, among other things. I may be small but I am a pious man."

I handed him a papyrus scroll and said, "I want these words chiseled onto a wadi cliff in the mysterious land of Medjay and Yam. Particularly along Harkhuf's later routes from Wadi Halfa east of the river into arid scrubland with rocky wadis that dwindle beyond the river."

The dwarf studied the words on my scroll then said, "Old Woman, 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 conductor."

"I will reward you to enlist these ten men and extend the length of time you travel. If you undertake my commission, you will 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. Then he said, "I know who you are, Daughter of the King. I saw you during the procession through the city. I am keen at remembering distinctive features. I must say, you disguise yourself quite well. You are Seshet

Akeru, Seal Bearer of the king himself. Without your signet rings and fine jewelry, of course.”

He chuckled.

“Quiet dwarf,” 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.

I took from a pouch Taharq carried a turquoise winged scarab, an ankh, and the four sons of Horus. The scribe examined them and agreed to their quality. “Tomorrow, I will give you these amulets plus gold, after you arrange for ten master carvers of divine picture words.” I then took another amulet from my pouch, a dark turquoise Eye of the Falcon magnificently crafted and mathematically proportioned. It was not the translucent wadjet that the Golden Falcon had given to me on the day we wed because embalming priests will wrap it 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 beloved husband the Golden Falcon. And if you do not fulfill this contract, these amulets will become Sekhmet as the Eye of Ra and she will take vengeance upon you. Your heart will grow heavy from grief and misfortune. You will never enter the double gates to the imperishable stars. This is preordained by the High Priestess of King Pepi, a Prophet of the Stars and Prophet of Mothers and Children.”

“By my ka, sa, and ib, and by the ka of my father’s tomb, Daughter of the King, I swear to fulfill our contract.” The dwarf placed his fist at his heart and continued, “Although I am a

small man, I am honorable. I am Dag the Dwarf master scribe of the king. All caravan generals seek my service. It is true, my royal Lady, a dwarf is trustworthy and a bringer of good fortune.”

And now, young mother, beautiful soul of Isis, I have come to the end of my story. Now I am telling you what I told Dag the Dwarf long ago. The priestess of Isis-Hathor and Satet gives you her powers and blessings. Prepare for your journey to the wadi cliffs beyond the southern border.

Chapter 13: Sailing to the Southern Border

April 1984

Sarah Prentice

I awake just before sunrise the next morning with Jamal beside me. I feel reinvigorated and know my avatars and Hathor herself have penetrated my dreams to give me the power to finish our journey.

When Majid sets sail for the camel market near Aswan, the sunlit river reflects the shore where an ibis makes a nasal croak and several magpies caw from tamarisk trees. I call Jamal to my side at the bow. I am not wearing my veil or hijab and am feeling enshrouded with serenity. I somehow know that the day will be filled with meaningful memories.

Jamal is holding his Chewbacca and I say, “Let’s play Star Wars,” to encourage his imagination. I am always trying to keep him engaged and active so that he doesn’t become homesick or worried about what we are doing. After nearly two weeks, Jamal has never uttered one word of protest and he only mentions his so-called “Mama” when he proudly brags about telling Zenna about his grown-up travels. “Mama will be jealous,” Jamal suggests. “She’s never done anything like this. Women never do. Except for you, my very best teacher.”

“Do you want to be Darth Vader or Chewbacca?” I ask and take hold of his action doll.

For a moment Jamal peers pensively into the river. He then says, “You know Sarah, I sure wish you were my mother.”

His words make my heart patter. I haven’t yet told him the truth because the right moment never seems to happen and I haven’t wanted to disturb my son’s joy by shattering his reality. *Perhaps now is the right time*, I am thinking. Then I wonder if my avatar is telling me this. Has her magic prepared my son for this inevitable 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 and I take him in my arms.

This is the right time I am now certain. Then I hear a soft voice telling me *Soon he will tire of this game and begin to ask questions. But you must tactfully reveal your true self*. “Jamal,” I begin, “I cannot marry you.”

My son draws away with a puzzled look and takes back his Chewbacca. “You can. You are Amanishakheto! By God, you will be my wife!”

I think for a moment to carefully chose my words and then say, “Let me tell you a story.” The boy nods in anticipation. He loves hearing my adventure stories. “A long time ago,” I begin. “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 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 that 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. 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 am that American girl in the story and 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 have never seen Jamal grow so concerned. So serious. How far will his

emotions take him? In the end, my avatar tells me to finish my story. *You have gone this far; it is time to go all the way.*

“Jamal, my little Sultan Saladin,” I hug him. “If you want me to be your mother, don’t you see, I can be. Why? Because I *am* your mother. You are that baby in the story. Zenna is not your real mommy. I am.”

Jamal jumps up, throws Chewbacca mid-deck and points at me screaming, “Liar! liar!” He insults me in Arabic then says, “My father is dead. Zenna 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 will leave the boat and flee Egypt on my own while Majid anonymously leaves him 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.

I ask Majid to stop then plead with my son to behave. “I love you, Jamal. You are the life of my heart. We will go to America and see Disneyland like I promised. I will 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 Mama.”

“Jamal,” I say while slowly approaching him. “The picture. Look at my eyes, my skin. They’re like yours, not Zenna’s. Please believe me. I will never hurt you. I am your real mother. Zenna is not. *'Ana al'umm*. I am mommy.”

Jamal glares at me for a long time as if trying to make sense of the shocking news. Then 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 are 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. It has gone too far. Jamal is playing a vile game now and I must stop it at the risk of destroying all hope of our escaping together. I slap my son’s little hand as teachers do naughty boys at the elementary school. “*Kifaaya!* enough. *'Ana al'umm*. I am your mother. You are a part of me, Jamal, no matter what you do or think, that 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 just 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 is my happy little son. A perfect cherub. My entire world.

He is Re-Horakhty, falcon of the rising and setting sun my avatar's voice whispers in my ears. *You do not 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 and then we reach our destination, the Daraw camel market 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 have a sudden urge to see Aswan and convince Majid to sail twenty miles further up the river. I have traveled this far and reclaimed my son. Now 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 last time. Jamal is eager to ride a camel across the desert with his beautiful mommy but he is equally excited about exploring the temples of Philae, the Rameses monuments in Abu Simbel, and the dam Nassar built in the 1960's. My son has 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 and 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 have reached the frontier passageway into the unknown where our escape will proceed.

As we pass the sand dune of Qubbet el-Hawa, Jamal points to the rock-cut tombs and exclaims, "The Generals!"

Previously, I had stirred Jamal's anticipation with stories about the Old Kingdom generals of Pepi II who had led military caravans into Nubia and blazed new trade-routes while battling nomads with swords and maces. My relationship with Jamal has been delicate since he learned the truth. He is quieter and sometimes I think he is contemplating his situation. But he seems happy and I believe he is accepting this new reality although he doesn't call me "Mama." I think it's still 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 certainly 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 seems to pass anyway and we continue with our adventure sailing up the Nile on the Mintaka. I am always trying to keep him engaged and entertained so that he doesn't waver into becoming homesick and concerned for Zenna, his fake mother and the villain who stole him from me.

"On Governor Harkhuf's tomb," I tell my son as we sail past the tombs high on the cliff edging the river. "Is a letter Pepi II wrote when he was a little boy king like you. He asked Harkhuf to bring him a healthy pygmy, a little man about your size."

“I am not so little anymore,” Jamal exclaims with excitement. “I am a boatman.”

“You’re right. Sultan Saladin. And you are 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 blue flowing Nile. Feluccas, dahabeyas, rowboats, and ferries are navigating the river around us. 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.

“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 that the Earth has a tilt?”

“This is my first visit to Aswan!” Jamal exclaims.

“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 was no 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. Opposite the Nilometer, high on a steep bank, stands the red brick

Old Cataract Hotel opened in 1899 and made famous by Agatha Christie. “I wish we could stay at the Old Cataract,” I quip to Majid. “I’d have a broiled steak, a glass of Chardonnay, and 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?” The idea seems unlikely but I’m hoping he’ll agree. And if he does, I’ll jump at the chance. It’s worth two or three of my bangles. But Majid merely chuckles at my foolish talk and continues manning the rudder.

As we near Elephantine Island, Jamal joins Majid at the rudder 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 upon our escape out of Egypt, I call upon Seshet Akeru and ask for her powers to make our border crossing successful. Suddenly, out of the flapping sails I hear her whisper *O Satet, goddess of the seasonal flood, protector of childbirth and motherhood, guard the southern gates into the unknown as Isis carries her son across the border.*

Young beautiful mother. You are the archer Satet ‘She Who Runs Like an Arrow.’ Already your name is written among the never setting stars. You catch the tears of Isis in a ceramic vessel and shoot arrows at the river’s source to bring lifegiving waters to the kingdom of Earth.

“Now,” I say to Majid, feeling filled with strength and spiritual powers. “Let’s get to the bartering table in Daraw. I am ready to meet with whatever the gods throw before me beyond the southern border.”

Chapter 14: Across the Desert

April 1984

Sarah Prentice

Under the sweltering noontime sun, far from a refreshing river breeze, the odor of manure, fresh alfalfa, sweaty fur, and urine accosts my senses. Before me is the Camel Market of Daraw where camels from the Sudan and Somalia are traded for meat, racing, riding, and breeding. Some camels are tied to wooden fences, some kneel in repose, some are asleep while standing, many are hobbled. There are light-tan, dark-tan, and white camels, baby camels, cows, and large bulls. Birds alight on their backs to eat ticks and mites. With driving sticks, camel masters are forcing their beasts into paneled pickup trucks for transport to the Birqash Camel Market near Cairo, a two-day drive. A few goats, cows, and dogs are roaming the souq along with tourists taking pictures with SLRs. Arab and Nubians in galabias stand or sit among the beasts, many are smoking hookahs around braziers roasting greasy camel meat that wafts through the air. Men gesticulate and yell above the groans, snorts, and murmurs *hamdulila . . . too expensive . . . too scrawny, too old . . . finished!* Flies are everywhere.

“My goodness!” I exclaim as Majid leads me and Jamal to a mudbrick structure beside one of the many corrals. He is carrying our duffle bags on his head. 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, I meet Majid’s friend, a camel trader named Naguib Mafid. He is a small, middle-aged man, unshaven and shady looking with a patched eye, a tan galabia several days worn, and a Yasser Arafat red checkered keffiyeh turban. After being introduced, I reach to shake his hand but quickly discover that the man has no right arm below his elbow.

Seeing my embarrassment, Majid explains that Naguib's arm was crushed when loading crates on a pickup truck. "His arm had to be amputated," Majid says. "He lost his eye in a squabble with thieves. But he knows all the camel masters from the Sudan."

Inside the scantily furnished hovel, we sit on mats and drink sweet mint tea in small glass cups. Majid explains to Naguib what I require and that I am not just a sightseeing tourist.

Naguib knows a Beja man from the Red Sea Hills who has come to the market with his two sons and younger brother to trade their camels for money and grain. He explains in Arabic, "They breed Bishari Kiliewau camels, the best racing camels in Egypt. Only males are used for racing. Females are more dangerous and are strictly used for breeding. The Bejas ride young bulls on their caravan treks so the camel can prove its strength. Only the best males become Bishari Kiliewau breeding studs."

"Can we go meet this Beja man, now?" I impatiently ask, anxious to leave Egypt with my son as quickly as possible.

"Naguib and I go speak to the camel master," Majid suggests. "He will meet you here later, *inshalla*. Understand?"

As Majid and his friend walk out the door, I patiently nod realizing my journey out of 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 and Majid and Naguib return with a tall lean African man in his forties who is counting black prayer beads with his right hand. He wears a white galabia, black vest, a curved sheathed dagger in his leather belt, and he has

distinctive vertical scars below his eyes that I presume are tribal markings. The African man is followed by a younger man similarly dressed and two boys Jamal's age wearing blue galabias with vests. Each of them has an ornately carved wooden comb in his long fuzzy "afro" hair and wears sandals made from tires. Their feet look as hard as a camel's. The boys brightly smile at me showing big front teeth and beautiful faces. I imagine them to be the sons of Amanishakheto. I am pleased to watch the boys go straight to my son and fall into play with his action figures and Walkman.

The two Beja men sit on the floor across from me and Naguib offers them tea and cigarettes, hummus, and bread to eat. I grow impatient and ask, "What's happening?" No one responds. The men drink their tea, smoke, and talk among themselves. I sigh and smile to show I'm not angry but deep inside, I keep thinking 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 is Sharaab Abu Bahrin of the Abu bin Ali tribe of the Beni Amer Clan," Majid finally introduces the African man to me. "His brother is Hamlab and his sons are Bashok and Samarr. They came early to Aswan because there is no rain on their land this season and they fear drought may be coming soon. Inshalla, they will endure."

"Sarah. I want to see the camels," Jamal eagerly exclaims, breaking from his play with the Beja boys. Although he has been to the Birqash Camel Market near Cairo, he has never ridden a camel. "Can we ride camels to Nabta Playa?" He looks hopefully at me and Majid as he asks about the ancient astronomical site discovered in the Nubian desert the year after he was born. It's a site Jamal and I have talked about on the Mintaka.

“La La,” Majid scolds. “You cannot. Sometimes the Bisharin pass by the Pyramids of Meroe but this year ya Sharaab is traveling in the eastern deserts to Port Sudan where you can take a ship to some far away port.”

This is the first time I’ve heard about boarding a ship the Port of Sudan and I find it’s an intriguing new escape route. Back in Cairo, when I was planning this venture at the AUC library, I assumed I’d find a caravan straight to Khartoum where Jamal and I would catch a flight to freedom. I just didn’t know. My life hung in serendipity back then, as it does now. But at least now I have Jamal. “Yes. Port Sudan sounds perfect,” I remark to the men.

“Okay, you must barter with him, 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 is fair,” I exclaim. “We need to get to Port Sudan as soon as possible and find a ship that takes on passengers.” Now I feel certain about this new idea.

Sharaab stares at me in seeming wonder as if he’s never seen an ‘agnabi woman before, at least not so close-up. I’m not wearing the niqab. Only my abaya. He is handsome, I am thinking, a rugged Marlborough Man from the Sudan, but he is not the sort man I’d feel romantic about. He’s not Omar Sharif or Jamal’s father in Venice.

“Do you have a husband?” Sharaab abruptly asks me in Arabic.

“Aywa, he is meeting us later,” I give my standard reply. Everyone chuckles as is often the case. Sometimes it seems that my every move is an ‘agnabi event.

“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 ask, surprised. I had assumed it would take one week, or 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 to the Beja men. If they don’t accept it, I intend to give them whatever they ask.

“And you give me three gold bangles,” Sharaab says. This surprises me; it seems Majid told this Beja man about my secret cache and this makes me uncomfortable but I can do nothing but agree to the price.

“It's 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 and to my relief the bartering has ended. I go to the back room to take off my bangles then return and hand them over to the men. “How can I learn to ride if I’m hiding away?” I think to ask. “I don’t see any fellahin women riding or selling camels.”

The men talk among themselves and decide that I will dress as a Beja woman in a thawb, a long synthetic wrap like a sari, and Jamal will dress like a Beja boy with a turban. Although the Bejas are Africans and Jamal and I are quite pale, we will have scarfs to cover our faces. Hamlab assures me that they don’t expect to encounter any patrol and if they do meet an intruder, Sharaab will claim that Jamal and I are his son and wife.

“Today I buy your supplies and Sudanese clothes in the Aswan 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.” Everyone laughs.

“Or maybe one year,” Naguib adds to further amuse the men and boys. Clearly, I’m outnumbered.

By the light of a gibbous moon that night, Majid and Naguib leave Jamal and I in the Beja camp at a desert watering hole outside of town. It suddenly strikes me that I will never see Majid again and I am sorry he won’t be guiding me and my son through the desert mountains to the Sudan. For several weeks he has been our trustworthy boatman and friend but he’s not a camel driver. I pay Naguib with 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 before? But I simply have no choice.

The Beja camp contains only what the pack camels and donkeys can 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. They look like Basenjis, a breed found etched on tomb walls in ancient Egypt. In one famous scene, a Basenji sits at its master’s feet, in another a Basenji is biting the neck of a gazelle.

As 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 chirping and the wind rustling the surrounding date palms and

white acacia trees. I am worried about our upcoming trek and that a snake or scorpion will creep inside the tent.

The next morning, Bashok and Samarr show Jamal and I our two riding camels. Mine is called Asfar for its light pinkish color and Jamal's camel is named Tai Basshir. It is a magnificent brownish Bishari Kiliewau dromedary with a well-rounded hump and matted wool at its throat. Both camels have small pointy ears, split lips, deep wide chests, long legs with thick gnarly knee pads, and large black eyes with long lashes. They stand about two meters at the shoulders and weigh about 1200 pounds each, the Beja boys explain in Arabic.

After a lunch of sorghum porridge and goat milk, the Beja men and boys saddle the riding camels with mahlufas, wooden camel-hump frame saddles with red woven blankets. Bashok and Samarr adorn the long necks of their prized riding beasts with blue and red tassels and they dangle "magic stones" between the camels' eyes to protect them from desert jinn.

Over the next few days, Bashok and Samarr teach Jamal riding techniques while Jamal teaches them English words. The Beja boys sit tall on their camels, highly skilled and adept. They don't wear sandals when riding so that they can curl their toes at the camel's girth.

"Look Sarah," Jamal yells in glee when he sits atop Tai Basshir relishing his new experience as much as he had sailing on the Nile. "I am a grand king of Kush."

Hamlab instructs me how to climb on Asfar by taking hold of the reins, placing my left foot on the camel's knee, swinging my right leg over its back, then sitting atop the crude mahlufas. My orange thawb hikes up a bit but I'm wearing long cotton trousers underneath. To shield me from the hot sandy wind, I cover my face with the thawb. Hamlab takes the rope and leads me a few paces while jokingly calling me "bedawi woman" after the women of his tribe. "Each camel different," he says. "You must know your camel. Like a woman must know her

husband.” Hamlab explains that in his language camels have many names such as “camel too young to ride,” “camel ready to ride,” “female ready to breed,” “nursing calf with pregnant cow,” and so on.

During my training sessions, Sharaab is usually nearby sitting high on his camel watching me. He often speaks to his brother Hamlab 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 and I’m thankful when he rides over to the boys and listens to Jamal’s Walkman. I decide that I will give Sharaab my Walkman and try to win him over. It served its purpose during the Nile voyage. Besides, now the Bejas make their own fitting music around the camp fire every night.

After a few days, I am managing my camel well enough, Hamlab tells me. I hardly need to become an expert camel jockey from Dubai. For the most part, my camel will follow the caravan on its own. Jamal is better than I am at riding. He struts with his camel’s rhythm and runs Tai Basshir across the desert keeping up with his new best friends Bashok and Samarr.

At dinner one evening, around the camp fire, Sharaab suddenly declares that we will begin the trek the next day before the upcoming meteor shower that he calls *haiyuk serar*. I understand he’s referring to the Lyrid Meteor shower due to occur in April. I imagine the nomads know dates and time by the movement of stars, the temperament of the desert, and the position of the sun on its journey north to south. But times are changing. While in Aswan, Hamlab bought an instamatic camera to take pictures of his prized Bishari Kiliewau racing males

and Sharaab bought a Casio watch which he wears like it's a tribal ornament. I happily show him how to set the calendar and date and he seems grateful. "*Shukran*," he says but he bears no warm smile.

Before setting out on the trek early in the morning, the men and boys meticulously check the goatskin water bags for leaks and then fill them with the murky well water. Although camels and goats can go without water for three days, Hamlab tells me, people, dogs, and donkeys cannot.

While the camels snarl and roar in the growing light, the men roll up the tents and the boys gear up the donkeys and camels with saddles and packs. At last, Bashok and Samarr unpen the goats 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.

From Bir Abu Hashim, we ride fifty miles in two days. Along Wadi el-Anid, we pass stunning sand drifts, low-lying hills, and many wide vistas of the barren desert. We rest for two days at the Bir Abraq watering hole, then we cross the border unnoticed. Hamlab simply says, "Sudan." There is nothing but the stark expanse of desert wadis and hills. No lookout towers. No border patrols. No other nomads in site.

While trekking through the desert, Sharaab sits tall on the lead camel while his companion dogs are scouting for prey. The basenjis are hunters that feed themselves. They are not herding dogs and Sharaab easily takes quail or rabbits from their mouths. He is alpha of the pack. Following Sharaab, Bashok and Samarr ride their camels 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 and as happy as a boy can possibly be. Some mornings, my son wakes up before dawn and is ready to get going. I live off his enthusiasm.

For me, it's enduring work to ride a camel especially under the blazing sun while wearing synthetic garb. Each day I'm sore, dusty, and often riddled with camel fly bites. I suffer from a dry throat and the water in the sheep skin tastes of minerals and soot. My lips and hands are dry. Hamlab gives me lamb grease to soothe my skin but it stinks so I don't use it much. My hair under the thawb is a virtual rat's nest. I can do nothing to keep it tame in the hot breeze of the desert. I wash it at the watering holes but I've quit trying to brush out the tangles. Yesterday, my gold wadjet got tangled in my mass of hair and I had to cut it free with Hamlab's dagger. But I'm getting used to conditions I never thought possible to endure. Mostly, while riding, I'm filled with the energy of hope, the magic power of optimism, possibly from my guardian avatars helping us on our trek. The desert can be a peaceful terrain when I ease into the rhythm of Asfar's stride. 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 then write in my journal. 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 grows angry and reprimands them for their mischief, including Jamal.

By dusk the caravan stops at a grove of dry shrubs and trees or boulders along a wadi or at a watering hole, so long as it's not a jinn infested place. 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 and Jamal always helps them. From his new best friends, 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 is a lion cub. Jamal also teaches me some Beja words and phrases. When I first say good morning *shibo mha* to Sharaab, he grins at me for the first time and then returns the greeting. Everyone in camp watches my interaction with their tribal headman. To the Bejas, I am probably something of a desert waiflike jinn.

Each night, while the flickering flames from the camp fire dances on the hard faces of the Beja men and boys, we eat sorghum porridge, roasted rabbit, dove or quail. After every meal, Hamlab plays his rabab, a guitar-like instrument well weathered and worn and probably passed down several generations. Then they tell sing and tell stories about the jinn spirits of the desert. Hamlab explains that God created both good and bad jinn from a smokeless fire and that the desert jinn are always among us, enjoying the cool evenings, listening to what we say, and watching what we do. The good desert jinn ensure our caravan's safety but evil jinn are also roaming the desert and changing their shapes into scarabaei beetles, wild dogs, stinging wasps, and horned vipers that spit their venom in the eyes of their prey. The Bejas avoid certain ravines and mountains because of these mischievous jinn who make boulders fall off cliffs or make their camel sick or cause them to stumble.

One evening the men talk about how the four Beja tribes--the Hadendowa, the Amarar, the Ababda, and the Beni Amer have lived in Nubia for more than 4,000 years. "We descend from the Madjay warriors and archers," Sharaab claims. "From the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet and Noah's grandson Cush, son of Ham. 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, the men and boys celebrate their heritage by dancing around the fire with their prized long bladed swords called badad sulimanis which have two half-moons on the tasseled handles. Hamlab's sword has Koranic inscriptions on the blade to give him the power of Allah. They all name their swords. Bashok calls his Emehai, their name for Orion, Samarr calls his sword, Shorkaor, after the king of Meroe.

Of course, my son wants a badad sulimani. His boyhood adventure has no bounds. Hamlab says we can buy one in Port Sudan but it costs half as much as camel. I tell my son that I'll buy him one for his birthday which will occur during our trek. I regret that back on the Mintaka I gave him all his gifts at once not thinking about saving one for his birthday. I assumed we'd be at Disneyland by then.

Jamal is satisfied with my promise and declares, "I will call my sword Tai Basshir after my Bishari Kiliewau camel."

"And I'll name my sword Gegi after the pole star," I quip and everyone laughs.

"Women don't have swords," Jamal says what seems to be obvious and he resumes dancing around the fire with his sword bearing friends.

The Lyrid Meteor Shower, Haiyuk Serar

During my summer course in observational astronomy, 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. At 41 degrees latitude, Chicago is much farther north than the Tropic of Cancer. Now I'm where the sun appears directly overhead at noon and the night skies include the Southern Cross, Alpha Centauri, and the Magellan clouds.

On the night of haiyuk serar the first quarter moon is overhead at sunset. After dinner and coffee, Hamlab plays the rabab and the Bejas sing about great warriors and spirits falling from the sky. By firelight, the boys play with Jamal's action figures and I point out Saturn, Venus, and Mercury. Orion sets while the first quarter moon still shines and Hamlab says that Emehai is their guide, like the moon, Tirga, the sun, Yin, the Big Dipper, Elulena, and the pole star, Gegi."

When the moon sets at midnight, the men watch the meteor shower beside the hearth and smoke their pipes. I'm not sure if it's an auspicious or inauspicious event for my caravan hosts. They must have superstitious beliefs about the magical shooting stars. Hamlab tells me meteors are jinn spirits. At two AM the Bejas retire to their tents having counted enough jinn for the night. Jamal and I stay up another hour counting meteors as Saturn crosses the sky behind Spica. By three AM, when cool air enshrouds our camp, we retreat to our tent. Jamal instantly falls asleep with his mind filled with stars and their Arabic names. I had emphasized to him that he too, has a proud heritage.

My scratchy blanket barely keeps me warm and I can't fall asleep. My mind is still counting meteor jinns and replaying all that I've been experiencing on this caravan trek. I am so thoroughly impressed with my son and with our African warrior hosts who seem to know every inch of this terrain. I wonder how people can be so in touch with their environment, so tied to their place of birth. I have no such spiritual 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 son of Noah. I'm not tied to the ancient Egyptians! At least not by blood. Then I start thinking about where my son and I will end up. Lately I've been considering California where I could get a teaching job and take Jamal to Disneyland every week. He won't even miss his childhood in Egypt, I tell myself. 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 call upon Seshet Akeru asking that each shooting star we saw tonight offers me a promise that my son and I will find our way to a new life together. Then, through the chirping crickets and rustling acacia trees, I hear my avatar's lulling whisper saying *You any your son will prosper with stability, health, beauty and gladness of heart, and live lives of contentment forever.*

Haboob, the Desert's Fiercest Jinn

The day after the meteor shower, the mid-afternoon heat grows nearly unbearable. Sharaab wants to reach the next watering hole near the Red Sea Hills before evening and at one point he urges us to quickly pass by a jinn infested wadi of ill omen.

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 ground. I melt into the rhythm of my camel and feel entranced by the unbroken horizon of amber gleaming under the sun, in all directions. Dry and desolate thoughts drift in my mind with the gait of Asfar. I think about the kingdom of Meroe, the Nubian warrior queen Amanishakheto, and the Beja kings Shorkaor and Nakakamani. Nabta Playa and the pyramids of Meroe seem to form images in the blue sky that arches the day. Sand blows over perfect crests on curved dunes with dark shaded sides. My mind drifts into thoughts about how I'm going to shampoo my tangled hair in this place of harshness and desert jinn.

Suddenly, Hamlab shouts, "Helas! Helas!" and my mind awakens and becomes alert. The dogs begin barking and all the animals are stirring 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 and rising like an ominous genie a mile high and as wide as the desert plateau. I hear a crisp howling roar like growling camels. Panicked, I shout for my son. Jamal skillfully rides up to me as his boyhood friends race to contain the animals. They know the drill.

Across the plateau the burgeoning wall approaches like a locomotive from Lawrence of Arabia. Sharaab gallops over 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. He believes our caravan has agitated the mischievous jinn of this wadi because we dared pass by without paying a toll. But there is no other sheltered place for us to go.

The formidable storm is upon us smothering the ground. I can see only a few feet before me where Sharaab and Jamal appear like ghosts with chalky white faces. "Keep moving or you are buried in minutes," Sharaab yells.

At a cliffside mound of scree, Sharaab kneels our camels and in the tawny atmosphere, Jamal and I dismount. I reach for my wadjet to call upon my guardian avatars but torrents of windblown sand rip it from my neck as if the demon jinn from the cursed wadi have 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 clashing howling storm crackles around us like a battering cat o' nine tails. Against the camels, I huddled with my son under the blanket. The temperature feels like an oven. Darkness falls upon us like a solar eclipse. I can taste the sand and grit. It penetrates my skin beneath the thawb and blanket and stings like millions of biting ants.

Embracing my son, I listen to the savage shrill of the devil. "Are you afraid, Jamal?" I ask, but Jamal cannot hear me as he bravely faces another amazing adventure with his beautiful teacher from America who happens to be his mother. My only thought is that if the desert sands bury us alive, then my son and I will become mummies entombed together forever. I call upon my avatar and hear her whisper *Isis and Horus. When Set appears, I propitiate the violent spirit.*

The sandstorm lasts an hour, maybe two; it is difficult to measure the expanse of time. After it passes, everything is eerily quiet. Jamal and I survived but sand is covering us as we nestle together beside the kneeling camels. We both stand and brush off the grit and dust. Then I tell Jamal to help me search for my wadjet and gold chain. It's an impossible task, I realize, but I don't want to lose my good luck charm and my connection to ancient Egypt and my avatars.

Sharaab and Hamlab ride up to me and ask if we are all right. "We must go," Sharaab exclaims, anxious to move far from the wadi cursed by jinn. Then Jamal gleefully runs up to me bearing something in his hands, "Hatha, Mama, Hatha."

It is the first time Jamal has called me his mama and I am so overwhelmed with emotion that I almost disregard the object he is holding up to show me. When I catch my breath and touch his beautiful face whitened from the sandstorm, I see that my son is holding a translucent turquoise Eye of the Falcon and I take it from him. "This is old," I say. "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 in repose partially covered by sand.

Above the camels, high on the stone cliff that was previously hidden by the swirling haboob are ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs etched in the stone and clearly readable if the haboob had scoured them clean. Before Sharaab can insist we leave, I buy the instamatic camera in Hamlab's camel bag for two of my gold bangles. With Hamlab's last roll of film, which I buy for

one more bangle, I record the words on the cliff. It's an unbelievable discovery and I wonder if anyone has ever beheld these hieroglyphs since the time of the Old Kingdom. I recognize the cartouche of Pepi II and the votive formulas.

I try to reassure my anxious Beja friends that the inscriptions come from the time of their ancestor Sekhmet and I say that I must recite the words aloud to pacify the evil jinn that caused the haboob. The two men believe me and patiently wait on their camels as I read aloud the picture words on the wadi cliff.

"In the reaches of Madjay and Yam, praise the ka of Crown Prince the Golden Falcon, Great Seer of the Night Sky, chosen son of King Pepi Neferkare and Queen Wedjebten. I am his Foremost Wife. I give to him the Eye of the Falcon to hold in the abode of Osiris."

"O ye who are living and pass this wadi, the Golden Falcon was caravan Lord when enemies of the king released his ka beyond the eyes of man. He is not overcome. Your hearts will stop beating when his troops make their war-cry 'Wadjet-Khepri-Ra' Mighty is the punisher of misdeeds."

"A curse be upon you who pass this wadi 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."

After I finish reading the hieroglyphic text and use up the roll of film, I look at Hamlab and Sharaab to see how they're reacting. From their camels, they are passively staring at the hieroglyphs on the cliff as if under a spell. I take hold of the wadjet in one hand and hold Jamal's hand in the other. I'm about to make a prayer to my avatar and ask for Hathor's blessing for a continued safe passage to the Red Sea Hills when suddenly an apparition appears before our kneeling camels at the cliff wall of hieroglyphs. It is a woman in a long white gown that flows

around her. She wears a golden vulture crown over black hair with many tiny braids and a green and orange aura surrounds her. She is holding her hands out before her, palms up, as if she's inviting me to embrace her essence.

I know the dignified lady is Seshet Akeru, daughter of King Pepi II and Foremost Wife of the Golden Falcon in the hieroglyphic text. My spirit avatar has led me here to show me the text and give me the wadjet to replace my gold charm. I am mesmerized by the vision but am not sure the others are seeing her. I ask Jamal and he says "What, Mama? I see only the beautiful pictures on the cliff walls."

The apparition stands clear to me and I hear her whisper *young mother, with your son you have survived the torments of the red desert sands. I see your face and hear your voice. I call upon Hathor to fill you with bravery and 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 15: At the Tomb of the Golden Falcon

Seshet Akeru

My story continues during the ninety-first year of my father's reign. On the last month of the year, my father held the three-day Grape Harvest Festival in Bastet, the City of Cats. During the festival the people picked grapes on the royal estate and stomped them to make wine. Pilgrims had sailed to Bastet from afar to celebrate the cat spirit of Isis-Hathor and pay reverence to my father the king. At the plaza before the Temple of Ba'ast, my father had provided his subjects with a feast of roasted geese, pig, and cattle, loaves of bread, and vats of beer. Priestesses were strumming harps, priests were beating drums, jugglers were entertaining the crowds, and storytellers were reciting legends about the gods and 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 wore my golden vulture crown and opened the festival at the temple’s pylon gates. Before the crowd of revelers, I upheld a chalice of wine and said, “We honor the beautiful cat soul of Isis-Hathor. Daughter of Ra, we entreat you to light our path.”

For thirty years, I had been traveling to the City of Cats to pay homage at my husband’s tomb 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 my way to my husband’s tomb, beyond the copper gates, I would stop at the hillside where subjects buried their mummified cats as an offering to Hathor-Ba’ast. People would leave small cat sculptures, catnip, and raw meat for the cat mummies and for the living cats that wandered the estate killing scorpions and rats. I had entombed my own beloved cat, Min Tep’s Shadow on this hillside. The black cat with white paws had comforted me for many years. I would take him on river voyages and carry him around the palace and into the king’s receiving room. During the season of sowing one year, my vessel had been moored in Abdu. While I was away, Min Tep had escaped from my cabin and a jackal near the pier killed him. A soldier retrieved the corpse and I give Min Tep a lavish funeral at the catacombs near my husband’s tomb. Lamenters had wailed and priestesses sang *Lady of Compassion, Ba soul 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 be reunited 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 grew grape vines on columns and stelae markers etched with words from the dead to the living *Hotep-di-Nesu, a voice-offering from the king of every good and pure thing upon which god lives for the ka of the deceased deemed 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 and a stone bench overlooking 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 and the other had a closed lotus capital to represent the cycle of time. By the light of a lantern, I would enter the tomb while 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 stone lid. Over his face was a golden mask with red carnelian lips and blue lapis lazuli eyes. But it was not his death mask and I prayed to Hathor to help my husband's ka recognize the beauty of his face. Next to his mummy priests had placed 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 general Intefi who had escorted his body back to the kingdom and the general who had surrendered his tomb and the words *to the children yet unborn, to you who are alive on Earth, I am the Golden Falcon, the King's Hereditary Son, and Overseer of the Prophets of Seshat. More than anyone, my father desired me to be with the dignified lady Seshet Akeru who joins me in my hidden horizon. I respected my parents. I have spoken only the truth. I never repeated anything evil against anyone lowly. 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 heart of the gods and accomplished what they asked of me.

At the west wall of the chapel stood a stone altar before a carved rectangular door made of recessed stone slabs. Through a narrow opening in the ka door, I could see a small hidden room containing life-sized statues of my husband and myself seated beside each other. My father had commissioned these statues when 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 and 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 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. And no one knows who is 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 as if Set himself tests my station in life. I would die by cobra poison, a scorpion sting, 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 began to waver on the stone walls. Suddenly, 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 always 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 then 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 his counsel, and then 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 and to find peace, comfort, and happiness, read my autobiography etched at the end of his.

Although I was an orphan of unknown parentage, King Pepi Neferkare adopted me as Daughter of his Body. I wedded the Golden Falcon and with my father the king, I caused that I shall be buried in my husband's tomb to be with him through the cycle of eternity. The Sahu soul of the Golden Falcon travels with Osiris-Orion on his Milky Way boat. He is an Akh star in the house of Hathor, the Finder of Souls who lifts the true of voice into the imperishable stars.

Chapter 16: The Bravery Dance

April 27, 1984

Sarah Prentice

After a peaceful night's sleep at a watering hole far from the cursed wadi, everyone seems recovered from the harrowing experience of yesterday's haboob and no one even mentions the hieroglyphs on the cliff wall or says anything about seeing a jinn spirit and I don't ask Hamlab or Sharaab if they saw my vision because I don't believe they did. I give the camera back to Hamlab and pack away the film and the ancient wadjet in my bag strapped to one of the pack donkeys. I would carry it in my pocket and rub from time to time, like I did my gold charm, but my cumbersome orange thawb has no pockets and I don't want to lose it or my film evidence of the ancient hieroglyphs.

The sun is nearing the Red Sea Hills by the time our caravan arrives at the rocky ocean shore of Mohamed Qol. The glimmering sea before us is aqua marine with dark patches of coral reefs. Beside me at the frothy surf Jamal is sitting on Tai Basshir like a brave Beja warrior. The air smells of camel sweat. "The Red Sea stretches from the Suez Canal to the Gulf of Aden," I tell my son although it's something he could have told me.

I kneel Asfar, dismount and then deeply inhale the hot and humid air. I am spellbound by the expansive wonder before me. *This is why we worship God* I am thinking. Jamal also seems overwhelmed by the beauty surrounding us. On the horizon a ship is traveling north. *Take us away*, I whisper as the vessel disappears in the haze where the sky meets the Red Sea. I imagine Moses parting the waters on his escape from Egypt and feel like we're living in Biblical times. We are in the presence of the God of Moses, of Rameses, of Nefertiabet and Seshet Akeru, of Jamal and his Beja friends. My son and I have escaped from Egypt and I'm grateful to all the gods. But we still have a long way to go and I have a lot of praying to do. My biggest prayer being *when will we make it to the promised land?*

Suddenly, Sharaab shatters my tranquil moment by shouting, "*Sauwar willa Sauwar!*" He then begins ululating as he grabs hold of his reigns, tightens his knees at the mahlufa saddle, leans back, and smacks his camel's rear with his driving stick. Sharaab's prized Bishari Kiliewau then rips down the beach with its tassels flying around its neck. The other Bejas follow their headman, shouting and ululating. I watch their camels splash through the surf with their powerful split feet kicking up the pebbly sand and their long legs propelling them ahead in expansive strides.

"Mommy, can I race with them?" Jamal exclaims.

“No!” I yell, thankful my son asks me before acting. I am fully his mother now. But no matter how much I want to indulge him, it’s much too dangerous to race on a camel. Jamal is just a little boy. “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 circumambulate the Kaaba and then they return to where Jamal and I are facing the sea. Jamal cheers and raises his arms in victory as Bashok wins the race.

The sun begins setting in the hills behind us when the men and boys remove the mahlufa saddles and then release their camels onto the seashore grasses where their goats and donkeys are already grazing. They unroll saddle blankets on the beach and face Mecca across the sea. Jamal joins them in their evening prayers.

I had seen Hamlab pray a few times before and Sharaab more often, but this is the first time I’ve seen all my Beja hosts praying together. 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 and 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.”

Planets and bright stars begin to emerge in 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. I feel enchanted. My avatars have seen me through a difficult journey and Hathor has blessed me. Jamal now calls me Mama.

I face toward Mecca. Toward the Qibla of God. I think about the haboob when my avatar's magic protected me and Jamal. I had a dream that the vulture goddess was spreading her enormous wings over Jamal and I as we hovered by the wadi wall. She had kept the red sands from burying us alive. Silently, I pray for that protection again because our journey isn't yet over and it won't be until we safely reach the Magic Kingdom.

The Settlement of the Abu bin Ali Tribe

May 2, 1984

Near sunset on a new moon night the caravan returns to the permanent settlement of the Abu bin Ali tribe, of the Beni Amer Clan, on the outskirts of Port Sudan. The settlement has no electricity or running water. Goats, Basenjis, and chickens wander among the concrete dwellings, acacia trees, doum and date palms, and guava and mango trees. Sharaab and Hamlab tell me that when they travel to Aswan or the pyramids of Meroe and the souqs of Khartoum, their parents, wives, and daughters tend to the livestock and work in the outlying fields of sorghum wheat and animal fodder.

By the time our caravan arrives, news has already spread to neighboring camps and settlements that Hamlab and Sharaab have returned with goods and gifts from Aswan. In the main dirt plaza, clansmen are roasting sheep over fire pits burning dry acacia wood and camel dung.

My son and I return Asfar and Tai Basshir to Sharaab. I give him gold bangles for his daughters Ahok, LaLa, and Aesha who greet their father at the camel pen. The three girls are wearing colorful thawbs and have coppery unblemished complexions, dark eyes lined with kohl, and black hair in tiny braids adorned with beads and coins. They smile at me with bright white teeth but their expressions are more serious than the mischievous gleam in their brothers' eyes. I can't help but wonder if they are shy because as little girls, they were painfully circumcised and have learned to live under strict rules about what they can or cannot do. They are 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 concrete one room dwelling I meet Sharaab's wife Wilad. She wears a maroon thawb, has a gold nose ring and the same tribal scars as her husband, vertical lines below her eyes. She is Sharaab's father's brother's daughter, a traditional arrangement that keeps wealth within the tribe. Wilad warmly greets Jamal and then limply shakes my hand. Most likely she hasn't heard from her husband for nearly three months and she hardly expected him to bring home a foreign woman clad like a Beja woman. *Could she be jealous?* I am wondering 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 all around like a camel souq and my orange thawb is soiled and ripped after a month of constant wear.

I give Wilad two bangles, which she happily puts on her tiny wrist, then I turn to Sharaab and say, "I really need a hot bath. Can you take me and Jamal to Port Sudan's best hotel?"

“La la,” the headman exclaims. “Tonight, we have a big celebration. A 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.”

Jamal also insists we stay for the festival. He wants to participate in the bravery dance with his best friends. Once again, I am outnumbered and left with little choice but to camp for one more night. And I’m weary of camping no matter how much my son relishes it.

“But I desperately need to wash and change my clothes,” I say.

Wilad smiles and offers me a green thawb for the night’s festivities. I would prefer to wear my own clothes that are stuffed away in my duffle bag but I want to please Sharaab’s wife and make the woman warm up to me like her husband eventually did.

It’s dark when I’m following Wilad across the settlement lighted by the roasting pit fires to the communal washhouse, another concrete building. Wilad carries a kerosene lantern while I carry the clean thawb, my 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 side has a trough for the toilet. There is a slight breeze entering the one open window but it doesn’t flush out the rank smell of urine and waste that accosts me as much as the bull flies. Crickets are chirping and I have a ghastly fear of scorpions, tarantulas, and spit bugs lurking in the dark corners. Since leaving my apartment in Garden City, hygiene has been a cumbersome affair. It’s no problem for my son, or men in general, but it 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.

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 we arrived at 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 used o.b. trash and I 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, protocol and decorum are nonexistent. I quickly change my o.b. and without hesitation 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 then 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 that night hundreds of men, women, and children are feasting on sorghum and roasted sheep with coffee and goat milk. The tribe then gathers around a central bonfire in the barren land outside the settlement to watch dozens of their clansmen dance in a semi-circle. The crowd cheers 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 as they 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 sons participate in the dance held in their honor. Jamal joins them in his own rendition of acting out the phenomenal virility of being a Beja man, a Medjay warrior, a descendant of Sekhmet and the grandson of Noah.

At the sideline, I watch the dance feeling uncomfortable in the green thawb; the sponge bath barely washed away the grit and dirt from a month of caravanning. I listen to the music and songs of an exotic tongue that is now somewhat familiar and I think about the next step in my own bravery dance. *I need to jump up and down with a sword on my brow* I quip to myself. In my gut, I feel intense pressure to move-on. The biggest problem I now face is my own appearance. Jamal can dress as a young Arab boy but I can no longer disguise myself as a Beja woman. A few Sudanese women wrap the thawb around their heads and faces but I am much too pale to run around town in a thawb. I'd look ridiculous. 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. In the end, I reason out that my best disguise is to dress as myself and pretend I'm an American relief worker with her son on R&R from a border refugee camp of Eritreans seeking asylum in their battle for independence from Ethiopia. I somehow doubt the Sudanese are looking for me and Jamal. I gaze back at the dancers and their swords shimmering from the bonfire flames and pray that Amar fell for my ruse and believes I took Jamal to London.

Port Sudan

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 then Sharaab, his sons, and brother head to the docks with our passports to get the necessary entry stamps from the port authority and to ask their Amarar Beja friends who work at the docks about passage on one of the ships in port. I take a hot bath, shower, and then 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 with my hair wrapped in a towel and read from my guidebook to Jamal who watches 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.

I reassure him that we’ll head for the souq as soon as our friends return. Then I start thinking about a new problem I’ll be facing. 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 already gave his Walkman and action figures to Bashok and Samarr. Without such constant adventure and entertainment, I worry that my son might become restless and that he’ll start missing his home in Cairo and the woman he thought was his mother for ten years. And worse, that 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 successful escape. I don’t know what else I can do.

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 and tells me it was a simple matter with my gold bangles. He also tells me about a cargo ship that will take on passengers but it isn’t leaving for a week.

“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 suddenly realize that my Beja friends have done all they can do for us. Jamal and I are now on our own and I must clearly think out our next

move. But first things first, I quickly decide and ask, “Can you now take me to get my hair cut? And to buy my son his badad sulimani?”

My caravan friends take us down a few streets to “barbershop alley” in the Deim Arab Market, the main souq of Port Sudan. Dozens of galabia clad barbers have stools beside mirrors hanging on concrete buildings edging the alley. I sit at the first stool I see and the barber begins cutting away my tangled hair using large cast-iron scissors probably forged in the neighboring blacksmith souq. The grinning barber sings as he holds up a hand mirror and I view myself with short, choppy hair. But at least it’s clean and out of my face.

Sharaab then takes us to the sword market. In small open shops swordsmiths are forging their swords over charcoal fires that they stoke with antique looking bellows. The smiths display their wares at the front stoops of their shops. Much of what they make is commissioned, Hamlab tells me. In neighboring workshops craftsmen are etching swords and daggers with geometric ancestral symbols and words from the Koran such as “Allah intervenes between man and his heart,” “Allah has power over all things,” “I succeed by Allah’s will,” “For those who fear Allah, He will make their path easy,” and “Allah’s mercy embraces all things.”

From one shop I buy the sword Jamal selects and a dagger for myself. Then we head to a leather shop to have the sheaths made.

That night, while Jamal is asleep, I stay awake wondering how we’ll leave the Sudan without delay. Waiting for a ship may take weeks and it appears we are in a country on the verge of a coup d’état or a full-scale civil war. Maybe Gadhafi’s Libya would have been a better escape route or a trek through the Sinai to Israel. No, I decide, it had to be up the Nile on the Mintaka and by Bashari camels into war-torn Sudan. Think positive, I keep telling myself while

remembering that my son danced around the room this evening with his Tai Basshir sword. I have never seen a happier boy.

While my unsheathed and brandishing thoughts continue dancing late into the night, I decide that we must travel to Khartoum as soon as possible although 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 resort to riding on the roofs. The real problem is that few foreigners are in the Sudan and an extradition treaty with Egypt probably exists for wanted criminals. For all I know Amar has discovered where I've fled with Jamal and there are probably check points along the way to Atbara with my wanted poster. And a taxi to Khartoum would stop at the same checkpoints.

The next morning, I call the airport while Jamal, dressed in his new Western clothes from the souq, plays with his sheathed Tai Basshir in front of the television. I learn that 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 where Jamal and I can fly directly to Istanbul then 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 I silently call out for the help of Seshet Akeru. But I don't hear her whispering voice and haven't since the haboob. I sense that she is no longer with me because I'm far 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.

That afternoon, with the sword and dagger packed in our new luggage, we catch a taxi to the airport. I'm dressed as an American Muslim traveling with her son, wearing a hijab to cover

my awkward haircut and in my pocket is my good luck charm, the ancient wadjet from Seshet Akeru. I plan to always keep it with me so I can rub it now and then for its magic protection.

When on the Sudan Airways flight to Khartoum, I feel like I'm smuggling drugs or smuggling a child out of Africa which is what I'm doing. At times the reality of my situation is overwhelming especially when sitting high over Africa in an old Fokker F-27 with a turboprop engine.

I touch the wadjet in my pocket and pray for success by the will of Allah. "*Hamdulila*," I keep repeating in my head. At least Jamal is enjoying the flight. This is his second time on an airplane; his first was during a trip to Greece with his uncle/father. He sits by the window and watches the passing Red Sea Hills and the dry desolate Nubian desert scattered with outcroppings, amber dunes, and endless arrays of wadi ravines.

Khartoum

May 19, 1984

At the Khartoum Airport I make flight arrangements to Istanbul with Turkish Airlines for the next evening. Then we spend the night at the Airport Hotel and in the morning, I hire a taxi to take us to the Turkish embassy to get our visas. By mid-afternoon, we check-in our luggage with the sword and dagger then go to an airport food stall to eat Kak chicken and enjoy our time together before yet another amazing adventure.

"What about Tai Basshir?" Jamal asks as we are eating 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't brandish it before Hagia Sophia. In a bravery dance." I wink and my son winks back. "Son, *Habibi*," I then say. "We still must play like we are secret spies. It's called being discreet."

The loudspeaker suddenly bellows, “Turkish Airlines flight TK681 to Istanbul, now boarding at gate 9.”

My heart leaps. I thought we had plenty of time. *I must try harder to relax*, I tell myself and 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. Boarding gate 9 lies across the terminal.

As we rush down the corridor, hand in hand, time seems to be crawling. I am so close to making our escape from Africa, yet the gate seems miles away. I hasten my pace, pulling Jamal along. He seems nervous for the first time. His hand is sweaty. He misses his badad sulimani sword of bravery.

I stop in my haste, bend to his level, place my hands on his shoulders, and say, “What is it? *Habibi*.”

“I’m afraid for you,” he tells me.

“Why? You are 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 am 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 a Westerner. An American. I stand out in the crowd.

As we arrive at the gate the loudspeaker calls, “Turkish Airlines flight TK681 to Istanbul, now boarding at gate 9.”

“We’ve made it,” I exclaim while standing with Jamal at the boarding gate to freedom. *Gate number nine. Mother and son. Together as we should be.* I say to myself, 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, the largest market in Africa. And then we will be on our way.”

Suddenly I hear a man yelling my name. “Sarah.” The voice is familiar. I turn to see if someone is calling for another woman with my name.

All at once I see Amar running toward me. Customs and airport police dressed in gray camo-fatigues and blue berets are following him.

Shock consumes me and I shout to Jamal to run to the plane. To leave on his own. I’m not thinking clearly. I had become too sure of myself. Too complacent. Already convinced we were on our way home. I hand the steward our boarding passes and try to run onto the plane while holding my son’s hand.

“Stop,” a warning shot is fired in the terminal. Unbelievably.

Amar runs to Jamal who is beside himself with confusion. Then his uncle-father leads him away from the boarding gate. As a crowd of mostly Arab and Sudanese men gather around, an airport police frisks me and takes the ancient wadjet from my pocket then he forces my hands behind my back and places cuffs on me.

“No, no,” I scream. “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 stole him from me,” I scream as the police take hold of my arms to lead me away.

Amar stands with Jamal at his side. The boy seems unable to react. “You’ll never get him. You are a criminal. Sarah Prentice. We shall prosecute you for kidnapping. You’ll get a death sentence. The boy is not yours. You didn’t want him.” He spews out such hateful venom I no longer hears his words.

“Jamal,” I plead, “I’m your mother.”

My son turns to see me once more but Amar pulls him back and leads him down the corridor away from me.

“Jamal. Jamal,” I scream, unable to see my son anymore as the police take me from gate number nine. The tweaking fans overhead don’t alleviate my sweating brow as police force me down the corridor tightly gripping my arms. Crowds and voices surround me as I glance out the corridor windows and see, beyond the jumbo jets parked on the tarmac, the eastern sky at twilight when the gates to heaven open. *Heaven is out of my reach* I can’t help but think. *They’ll bury me in a hidden tomb forever and I will never see my son again nor the light of day.*

Chapter 17: Al-Qanater Women’s Prison

May 10 – August 1984

Sarah Prentice

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 and a matron guard in a stiff gray overcoat escorts me to a large shabby office that reeks of stale cigar. My hands are cuffed behind me, my sticky body smells of my own sweat, but I know worse things are yet to come.

I stand before one of the three desks in the room, exhausted and sore. A lit cigar teeters on the desktop ashtray before me. Behind the desk sits a man looking out the window; his back is to me. The matron guard has left and no one else is present.

I'm in very big trouble, I keep thinking as the man slowly turns his swivel chair and then his small pointy eyes glare at me without a trace of sympathy. He is pock-faced, middle-aged, and has a thick black moustache and a military haircut. He wears Egyptian army greens with epaulets and a full eagle over a star. Lieutenant colonel, I assume. 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. It's well past midnight according to the clock on the wall.

Then I notice a "page a day calendar" on the man's desk turned to May 10th. Today is my 30th birthday. Not that it matters to anyone here, including myself. I have no control over my situation, no recourse, and am completely beholden to the official behind the desk.

The man empties my personal bag of toiletries on his desk, including my remaining o.b. tampons. Fortunately, there is no baggie containing a used one. Still, it's very humiliating. On the other two desks in the room are the two suitcases I bought at the Deim Arab market. They are 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, my only photo of our adventure together. And I don't know what happened to the ancient Eye of the Falcon the police took from me. But I doubt I'll ever see it again. And I doubt my avatar will come to me anymore probably because I lost the relic amulet. I just don't know about anything anymore I feel so abandoned.

"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.

But I have no words to offer.

"You are charged with kidnapping and antiquities theft," the man continues. "Here in Egypt, we protect our national treasures. You will 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 am 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 is our heritage. And you wanted to take that from us?" He sounds angry.

I say nothing.

"We have confiscated your valuables but you'll get them back if you ever leave this prison," he chuckles. Then, as if to ease the severity of my circumstances, he offers to make a small stipend available to me for commissary. "Then you can manage your life in al-Qanater. You see, young Aanesa, I am not a man without compassion."

“Shookran,” I humbly mutter.

The Lt. Colonel then places a call on a black dial phone. Shortly, another heavy matron guard enters the room and grabs my arm. I yank away and protest, “I demand a phone call to my father!” The guard ignores me.

“In due time, Miss Anderson,” I hear the Lt. Colonel say as the guard leads me out the room. She takes me down several stark corridors lit by bare bulbs dangling from cracked ceilings. We reach a dim hallway with the ambiance of 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 and mildew. I gag but I’ve grown used to peculiar and unpleasant things. The matron locks the door with a clunky bar latch. By the hallway light, I see that all but one of four metal bunks against the far wall 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. Exhausted, I lie down hoping that sleep will ease my discomfort. But the thin mattress is as hard as the raw Nubian desert and I can taste the unpleasant smells in the cell. Nevertheless, I try to sleep on my back but soon I’m feeling bedbugs biting me without mercy. Fresh fish. I leap up and crawl onto the concrete floor finding it cooler and unburdened with bugs. I curl up and try to imagine Jamal on the felucca and with his Beja friends and I start thinking other thoughts of self-preservation. *Tomorrow I’ll clean up however I can. Someone will let me phone my father. He will help me out. Maybe Jake will prove Jamal is my son and soon Jamal and I will leave Egypt forever.*

Without such basic hope, I feel nothing but forlorn and broken and incapable of surviving. I try calling for Nefertiabet and Seshet Akeru hoping they will magically intervene. I keep repeating their names but before I ever hear them whisper back, exhaustion drives me to sleep.

Through a barred window morning light streams into the twenty by twenty-foot cell and someone greets me in Arabic and asks, “Min ‘ant? Who are you?” I sit up on the floor and notice that the seven other women in the cell are dressed in galabias. They looked like fellahin from the streets.

“Sarah,” I utter and everyone suddenly seems aware that I am an ‘agnabi. They all smile and chatter amongst themselves.

Despite the lack of privacy, I need to pee but the toilet in the corner of the cell is a vile hole in the concrete where the odor emanates. Feces, menstrual blood, and urine cake its sides. I gag at the sight then begin to cry. Now my basic functions are really causing me problems. More so than in the arid desert of the Red Sea Hills.

A 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 then pour the rest into the toilet to rinse it out but it merely overflows. My cellmates laugh at my frivolous attempt to change the conditions. This makes me laugh too and some of the tension I’ve been feeling goes away. But the horror of abject filth 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 ask as I sit on the cool concrete floor in the streaming sunlight. It feels good to have some part of the natural world touching me.

“Don’t know. They moved her from my cell.” The women laugh. They are whiling away their time.

Suddenly, the outer metal door to the courtyard clinks open. “*Shawisha*,” an inmate announces for my benefit. “It is 7:30.”

The matron guard, the *shawisha* from the night before opens our cell and we all pile out into a small courtyard. I walk to a barred door at one end of the courtyard and see a large dirt, recreation area surrounded by a 4-meter concrete wall topped with razor wire and two towers with sharpshooters. Beyond the wall lies Cairo; I can hear its noise and taste its smog.

The shawisha sits on a stone bench in the inner courtyard and begins crocheting a baby blanket. Probably for a grandchild, I’m thinking as I approach her and boldly ask in English, then Arabic, “When is my hearing? When can I phone my father?”

The guard merely looks at me, irritated, but says nothing as if I obviously don’t understand prison protocol.

I repeat my questions.

“Be quiet!” the shawisha snaps in Arabic. But I persist and ask again. “Shut up,” the guard declares. “Or I will see to it you never have a hearing with the magistrate.”

I back off realizing that anger gets me nowhere; it’s a lesson I’ve already 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. Hopeless, really. 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 am 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. The first thing I do is 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 jail.”

Three times each day a male trustee in a galabia brings meals to the inner courtyard on a pushcart. After lights-out at seven o’clock 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. But my efforts are fruitless. This is what it feels like to be destitute, I decide. In the pit of the whale’s stomach. I can do nothing except talk to my cellmates who also are also waiting for their trial and sentencing dates. I’m living in the pre-sentencing block, I learn, and soon know my cellmates by the crimes they’ve committed--whore, swindler, thief, pickpocket, stealer of public funds, and drug smuggler. The worst criminal in my cell seems to be me, a kidnapper of a young Egyptian boy, but my cellmates treat me with kindness. They are fascinated that I speak Arabic and they 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 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 the souls of jinn,” one cellmate tells me and I admit that I used to believe in guardian angels and jinn spirits but I no longer call upon them and I rarely pray anymore. “God and his angels have let me down,” I tell

them. They agree and call me their sister. They are women with little hope in life. Some have been imprisoned several times before and think of prison as a better place than their village on the streets. They are fed regularly and have no father, husband, or pimp to beat them. We have one another and are sisters in bondage who spend most of the day locked in a cell awaiting news about the charges brought against us.

After two weeks of confinement, I approach the shawisha during the morning. She is 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 at the time and my mind nearly snaps from frustration. I've been waiting and waiting for news about my case. "No cigarette!" I yell in desperation. "I call home now!"

"Battal el kalam. Stop talking," the guard hollers and puts down her knitting.

I am suddenly so overwhelmed with emotion and frustration that I yell in Arabic, "Eat shit you bitch!" And then, before I know what's happening, a male guard bursts through the barred doors and wrestles me to the sodden ground with the shawisha's help. They both hit me with batons, cuff and shackle me, then haul me to the dreaded "Punishment Wing" in the oldest part of the prison.

They place 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. With beautiful hands and fingers, she is combing her long black hair that has a

purple luster even in the meager light from the corridor. She is thin at the top and her bottom is heavy but not in an unattractive way. The woman indicates I get the bottom bunk, introduces herself as Noura, then turns down her music and asks me why they brought me to the punishment cell. “What did you do?”

I recline on the bed, stare at the top bunk, and tell Noura what happened with the shawisha.

“And what is your crime, mon petite?” she asks. “Drugs? I venture to guess. The only reason a foreigner ends up in al-Qanater.”

“I kidnapped my son and got caught with a turquoise wadjet that my son found in the Nubian desert, after a great sandstorm. It’s such a long story.”

Noura smiles. “We have nothing but time to tell such stories.”

I relate my adventures from the canals of Venice with Amar to the streets of Port Sudan with my son. I tell her about my apprehension in Khartoum. “When I got caught” is a story every prisoner tells.

After I’ve finished, Noura says, “You are either telling the truth or you are a great liar, *mon petite soeur*.” We both laugh.

I’m beginning to like Noura. She is different from my other cellmates, the pre-sentenced detainees. She seems cosmopolitan, sophisticated and she’s hardly fascinated that I am an ‘agnabi. I ask about her crime and what I learn is outrageous. Noura claims to be serving a death sentence for drug trafficking. “I made a rash decision at the Cairo airport. I ran from the airport police.”

Astounded, I say, “I thought this cell was just for punishment. For unruly inmates. You’re on death row? You have a radio and they put me, a pre-sentenced detainee, in the cell with you. Certainly, you’re embellishing your story.”

Noura insists that a tribunal of judges sentenced her to death for manslaughter occurring in the commission of a felony. “The police thought I was a terrorist. It was shortly after the assassination of Sadat. And I am Palestinian. I ran and the airport police chasing me fired shots and killed an old man who couldn’t move away in time. They found hashish on me and a smuggled shabti from the Middle Kingdom. I’ve been here six months writing letters of protest. Mon ami brought me the radio. He visits me once a month and pays for my protection.”

“I assumed you were Egyptian,” I say. I don’t know why. Perhaps just to make conversation because 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 have been displaced since 1948 when the British ceded our land to Israel and Jordan and expelled my father and his family from his village of Ibdis in Gaza. He’s been in Egypt thirty-seven years living without any hope of returning to his homeland. Palestine is the Holy Land of three world religions. It’s the heart of the wailing wall, the dome of the rock, and the Via Dolorosa of your Christ. My people are scattered in the world or they live under the tyranny of Israel. We call it the Diaspora of the Palestinians.”

“Are you really a PLO terrorist?” I jest, offering a little jailhouse levity, although in the back of my mind I’m thinking that maybe she really is a terrorist. “Is that your real crime?”

Noura laughs and explains she doesn’t use violence to promote her cause. But she turned to smuggling for money to help her people and educate the world about Palestine. “I do so in

honor of my widowed father,” Noura says. “He now lives alone in Cairo. My mother was Egyptian but she died soon after my birth. Ours is a complex situation, the Palestinians in Egypt. Gamal Nassar overthrew an oppressive monarchy and treated us as citizens with basic rights. After his death in 1970, my people suffered. In 1978, Egyptian Palestinian terrorists assassinated the Minister of Culture, Yusif al-Sibai, while he was in Cyprus. Then the laws of Egypt changed. The government considered Palestinians as foreigners except for those married to Egyptians. But by then my father was widowed. I am Egyptian. But Palestine is my birthright.”

“You’re a nomad,” I suggest. “Like I was in the desert.” We laugh, sharing another bond of kinship.

“I wanted to see the world beyond my father’s adopted country,” Noura continues, still brushing her lustrous hair. “I applied to the Sorbonne and won an Eiffel Scholarship for studies in Law and Political Science. After three years in France, 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. Two years ago, we met at the Sorbonne during a rally for a Palestinian homeland. It was just after François Mitterrand stood before the Knesset asking Israel to create a Palestinian State and a step-by-step road to peace through dialogue and negotiation.”

“This French Algerian?” I urge Noura on, remembering the savoir faire of Amar in Venice ten years before. Men are a favorite topic among women cellmates.

“Mon ami knew about my reputation and approached me at the fund-raising table before the Arab Union Hall. I was at the rally to support the two-state solution. Mon ami was there to recruit students to his smuggling ring. He was in his mid-thirties, very handsome, and he invited me to coffee. He seduced me with his engaging eyes and a promise of money for my cause. We discovered we had 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.”

“Paris, la ville de l’amour,” I suggest with a French accent.

“Mais oui. When we first met mon ami said, in his flowery French Algerian tongue, *‘Tout est vrai. The Sultan has a stash of jewels hidden in the Milky Way.’* Then he explained I could fly from Cairo to France smuggling ancient shabtis and amulets and from Paris to Cairo with Moroccan hashish. I liked to travel and 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 invulnerable. Smuggling became exciting and I was infatuated with Jacques, that’s his name. Mon ami. He awed me with his vast enterprise. He owns a yacht and lives in villas throughout the Mediterranean. He retrieves antiquities from wherever they are looted and procures hashish from the Rif region of Morocco. Egypt is a transit place for drugs and Jacques’ biggest source for antiquities. He has connections to the Greek Mafia, the Greek Cypriot crime families, and the Maghreb Mafia of Paris, to name a few.”

“I’m impressed,” I can’t help but say from the bottom bunk where I’ve 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 perhaps 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 myself as I'm getting to know Noura.

"Mon ami has many friends who owe him favors or just like being on his good side."

"Now I know you're embellishing," I suggest, wondering if I can believe anything my new friend says. Is Noura even my friend? Maybe she is a mole. After all, 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.

"Non, mon petite. Tout est vrai," Noura says, then quickly adds, "But it's always about how you end up." I agree and then we laugh until our eyes fill with tears.

The days pass and I continue to plead for help when the shawisha comes around for our bathroom breaks. But my requests are fruitless until one afternoon when the female warden inspects our cell for contraband and I beg for her help. She suggests that the prison has already notified the US embassy but they cannot meet with me at present. Then I tell her that I've never received a reply from my father and that I even wrote him a second letter.

"All letters are reviewed for weeks at a time before they're even sent," the warden says before she leaves our cell.

"It's a waiting game between you and them," Noura then suggests. "They will 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 always jolt me from my own disappointments and distress. What can I say? A death sentence ends any conversation.

Each day I am trying to maintain my health and sanity but by the end of my second month in prison my body seems to be deteriorating. I'm unable to bathe properly. My awkwardly cut hair grows matted and itchy because there is no good shampoo in prison and my comb is but my fingers which have dirty and broken nails. I have no appetite and suspect I have flukes from the Nile. Then one day during my toilet privilege I see blood in my stools and I vomit before returning to my punishment cell. That night I dream about my son being physically yanked from my arms at the Khartoum International Airport and I jolt awake in a cold sweat. "Jamal! Habibi," I scream.

Noura climbs from her bunk and feels my brow. "You have a fever," she says. "Perhaps from dehydration." Noura hollers for the night guard with his German Shepard knowing he will eventually hear her cry for help.

The guard takes me to the infirmary room that has a row of seven empty cots and a metal cabinet with jars of colored liquids, pills, cotton balls, and swabs. A nurse in a white kaftan and hijab seats me on a clean cot and gives me an aspirin. My stomach cramps and 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 wake up hooked to an IV. My friend Noura is sitting at my bedside. "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." Her smile is radiant.

"How can you be with me?" I gain enough strength to ask. "Are you really on death row?"

"Someone must volunteer to care for you. This isn't Hôpital Americain de Paris or the Anglo-American Hospital in Cairo."

“Or Mount Sinai in Chicago,” I weakly suggest, using humor to bolster my spirit.

Noura takes my hand and says, “Don’t you think I prefer here to our punishment cell? At least I can freely use the toilet and shower.”

I sit up for the first time in perhaps days. I don’t know how long I’ve been asleep but the fever is broken and I’ve survived. I smile at Noura. “I hear you’re a terrorist and killed dozens of innocent children,” I tease my dear friend feeling better; my stomach cramps are gone.

“My only crime is getting caught. Personally, I never killed a soul. That 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. Zenna stole my baby because he is a boy. Do you believe me?” Not since revealing my secret to Abdul Hakim have I unburdened my heart more fully. I want this compassionate woman on death row, my dearest friend in the world at this time, to embrace my sorrows as only a woman can do. We are sisters of the punishment cell.

Noura is still holding my hand when she says, “Mais oui, I believe your story. But I also believe that you shall never have the boy again. It is 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 Noura has never been a mother and from the looks of it, never will. Perhaps that’s 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 down suddenly feeling exhausted and weak from the lengthy conversation.

The next morning, I awake to the buzzing of a fly and then see that the bathroom door is wide open and the room is empty. Noura is gone. I don't like being alone and uncertain of what might happen next; it's worse than being in the punishment cell.

In a moment, 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 me a meal because 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 have not 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 have merely come to check on you. My 'agnabi prisoner. Is it any way to treat me with such sharp words?"

I sit up as he approaches my bed and smiles with teeth stained from years of smoking and drinking tea, I imagine. 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 merely laughs and says, "Why scream? I can help you, if you help me." He has no appeal, no charm. He is crass, pock-faced homely, and yet I'm completely at his mercy.

"Help me call my father?" I ask while drawing up the sheet to cover my chest.

"I am a lonely man," he pleads. "My wife pays no attention to me."

What's coming is obvious and so I summon enough strength to yell, "Leave me alone!" But then I reel back on the cot, dizzy and drained. The man strokes my short, matted hair.

"Don't touch me!" I exclaim with what little strength I have.

"Be still, I can make you well if you cooperate." He slides his hand down the side of my face and I feel myself sweat. 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 nearly fainting and 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 is no longer necessary because you don't use the IV," Muqaddam says. "In fact, you can return to your punishment cell but I assumed you would 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. "Let me call my family in America. Tell me about the letters I wrote to my father. I'm not Egyptian. I am American."

"You are 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 but he merely says, in Arabic, "Who? Old Muqaddam Basheem. No, he only checks on you, personally."

"Liar!" I scream. "You know the truth."

The guard gives me an angry look and leaves the room, bolting the door behind him. Shortly, the shawisha enters and takes me to the courtyard outside the punishment cell. She is in a good mood, perhaps her grandson spent the night. Noura is in the yard smoking a cigarette. A privilege. She smiles and welcomes me back to the “Ritz Paris.” 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 when she says, “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 and I frown at her. “You are a prisoner,” she continues. “All you own is your soul and they can pillage that too in such 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 ask. “You of all people should take the side of your friend, a woman.”

“Listen to me.” Noura grasps my shoulders. “You are my friend. Mon amie. But you have no choice. I would fuck Basheem but I’m not so desirable as you. At the very least, he will see you to a telephone.”

I step back from Noura and think for a moment realizing the drastic truth. I have 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? “But 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 are 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 and so I walk toward the guard and bend over moaning. The shawisha jumps to my aid as Noura silently laughs at my performance, I feel 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 and is about to hook me to an IV but I claim that I’m able to eat and go to the toilet and don’t want the IV. The nurse shrugs and leaves the room. After the door is bolted, I almost yell in prayer *Will no one look after me? What has happened to you, Nefertiabet? Seshet Akeru. Isis-Huthur? Where have you gone? Why do you abandon me in my greatest time of need?* But I hear no whispers in my head, no voices, and I curl up and try to fall asleep and dream about the adventures I had 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 says 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 am 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 book I had been reading--Yusif al-Sibai’s, “Life

is a Moment.” I give Noura my cigarettes and she quickly scrawls the name of her French Algerian friend, her ami, on a blank page in my book. She urges me to meet him in Paris. “Jacques will help you get back your son. Mon ami can do anything. He is master of the Mediterranean. Remember to tell him, ‘*Tout est vrai, the Sultan has a stash of jewels hidden in the Milky Way.*’ It was our password phrase when we made our international calls.”

I gaze at my friend who is 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, having a few unpleasant encounters with Basheem when the hospital room is empty. Then one day Basheem summons me to his office where I encounter a young Egyptian man sitting 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 as Ahmed Fouad Abu el-Said, a criminal defense attorney from Yehia El-Said Law Offices. He has a look of no-nonsense. He is not the type of man who would rape or even take advantage of a vulnerable woman.

I sit before my attorney and Basheem leaves the room so we can talk privately. He winks at me as he departs. The man disgusts me but he is my only hope.

Ahmed Fouad takes notes during our interview. He asks preliminary questions, all in perfect English, then he asks, “Did you see the magistrate forty hours after your arrest?”

“I’ve 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. The attorney explains that felonies are heard in a court of three judges. “Unlike in America, Egypt has no juries or lay factfinders. 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. Mr. El Said,” I exclaim. I’m convinced my father is my only recourse and lately, since leaving the punishment cell, I’ve been thinking more about Daddy than about Jamal. I’ve been spending night after night wondering if he ever received my long letters, and if so, what is he thinking? How is he reacting? Am I still his baby girl? He certainly has contacted AUC and they probably told him that I absconded. And Daddy was so proud of me for getting such a prestigious job. He even accepted that my course in life was anthropology and world travel instead of working at his trucking firm. I’ve really messed everything up! I look at my lawyer Ahmed Fouad, and repeat, “Can you help me call my father?”

“He’s here,” Ahmed says. “He’s staying at the Grand Hilton while making arrangements.” The attorney then explains that my father received my letter a month ago, flew to Cairo, met with Amar, and worked out a settlement. “The boy wasn’t hurt. He is back in school. Amar dropped the charges. Your father pays restitution. But you are 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 the words my lawyer speaks but my thoughts are on my father. He is here. I am unlocked from al-Qanater!

Later that day Basheem uncuffs my hands and then leaves me in his office to meet with my father. My heart flutters at the sight of Stanly Alan Prentice, a large man of stature and means. Dressed in a dark suit with his greying hair neatly trimmed, he is sitting beside the magistrate’s desk smoking one of Basheem’s cigars and drinking a demitasse of Cointreau.

I approach my father. He sets aside his cigar and stands. “Sarah, pumpkins,” he says. For an instant, it’s a bitter sweet reunion. I am his daughter and he is happy to see me. But the circumstances are rather dire.

I stand frozen before him. In my heart, I know he’s disappointed in me and my foolishness. For Christ’s sake I’ve landed in prison. And I simply am not the same daughter I was when we last embraced at O’Hare. How many months ago? Since then, I’ve won over the love of my son. And then I lost him. Again. Now I’m shattered into pieces without a Holy amulet to hold me together. Without the whispers of 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 simply melt into my father’s arms. “There, there, my poor baby girl. Daddy is here,” he says and holds me tightly and for a very long time.

Chapter 18: 34½ Bis Rue D’Aubervilliers

September 1984--December 1985

Sarah Prentice

It is late evening when I'm standing with my father outside the gates of Al-Qanater Women's Prison. We are waiting for a taxi at the street corner where goats are gnawing piles of discarded fruit. My freedom cost my father thirty-thousand dollars. He had agreed with Amar to keep my story quiet; an international media frenzy wasn't something Mubarak would want and Amar himself wanted no publicity. Possibly, he is afraid a mandatory blood test would determine the truth behind Jamal's parentage.

"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 cannot reshape the past. In my day, we called them bastards."

"Jamal," I argue with my last shred of dignity. "His name is Jamal. This 'Egyptian boy' is my son." I cannot believe my father's indifference toward his ONLY grandchild. "He's your own flesh and blood," I press the issue hoping for a way to regain my son with my father's help. Stanly Prentice is a powerful, influential man.

"I made a gentleman's agreement with the boy's father. Shook hands. Paid an enormous bribe," my father states. He then makes me promise to 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!"

Feeling forlorn and defeated, I humbly agree. I really have no choice but to comply with my father's 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 dreams I have 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 that they can accept. After six months I decide to stop socializing and keep to myself. All 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 am 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.

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 cannot reveal the secret and unlock the flood gates of the Nile.

But I do 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 because this would also cause me to bring up my son.

Dr. Bennett begins to focus on my childhood and draws from me memories I had suppressed for many years.

"I threw tantrums and was moody when I was a little girl," 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," I say and Dr. Bennett encourages me to talk about my mother's punishment sessions. "When I was growing up, I believe Mom was jealous of the attention Daddy showed me," I tell him. "Whenever I started crying, she would yell 'Stop it!' or 'No Sarah!' At first, she spanked me with a forsythia switch from the backyard. When I was maybe six or seven, she started taking me into the bathroom and throwing water on me. As if this would calm me down. Tame the wild animal in me. Daddy was always away and if he was around, he never threw water on me. If he did, I don't remember."

"Tell me what the little girl does," Dr. Bennett presses me deeper into the memory.

"The little girl keeps fighting, crying. Her spirit wants to survive. She doesn't understand, she is only seven. *I rip my clothes. That's all I can do until Mom finally stops, turns off the light, and closes the bathroom door. Then I lie on the tile floor because I am 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 mother. I hardly moved her. Barely got her attention."

Dr. Bennett diagnoses me as manic depressive and puts me on Librium. "Sarah," he tells me, "You were born with a strong manic mind, quick to think, quick to react, quick to

emote. Your quirky mania has driven 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 little girl and you developed dissociative personalities. An Old Kingdom priestess was your safe place to be."

For several weeks I continue with the sessions and take Librium for my "illness" but Dr. Bennett's words haunt me and I question whether my magic experiences in Egypt were real visions or just "a hill of beans" as my father would say. I don't like Dr. Bennett's diagnosis of my having "multiple personalities" and after six months I quit seeing him and toss out the Librium. The drug has too many side-affects 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 I conclude that I am not a "mentally ill" damaged person. Besides, in my opinion, a spirit enchantress is a much healthier explanation than psychotic episodes brought on by childhood abuse. Empowered by this epiphany, I decide to get Jamal back in my life despite my father's wishes and after fifteen months back in Palatine, I pack my bags and fly to Paris to enlist the help of Noura's *bon ami* and Master of the Mediterranean Sea.

Paris

December 10, 1985

At my 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 in my room.

With a gruff sexy voice, the man asks me where I met Noura. "Al-Qanater," I say, knowing he is verifying my credentials and feeling me out. Then I add, "Tout est vrai, the Sultan

stashes his jewels in the Milky Way” and the man seems more at ease and we have a lengthy conversation. He is impressed that I speak Arabic and know about the Maghreb.

“Many Parisians view North Africans as beurs, wogs, and violent criminals,” Jacques remarks. “Even Algerians with French citizenship are considered non-French.” He suggests we meet that night 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 near my pension and head to the 19th Arrondissement, a Maghreb section of Paris. My taxi pulls into a neighborhood that appears rundown and not the sort of place a woman should walk at night. I pay the taxi driver to wait beside a tenement building that resembles the 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 will never commit suicide, I tell myself, not with the chance of seeing Jamal again.

I enter the unlocked front doors of the apartment building and then climb a metal stairwell lit by bare lightbulbs. With each clanking step I anticipate meeting this Mr. Lemach. I haven’t told him what I want, only that Noura said he could help me.

Off the third-floor landing, I see “34½” posted on a door. Before I can reach for the knocker, a man’s gruff and sexy voice says, “Qui est?” Then an eye appears at the peep hole. I tightly hold onto my fringed handbag contains enough money for my taxi fare. My cache of savings is locked away in the hotel safe, for now. I plan to do my bartering first and make payments later. I’m hoping my savings of \$500,000 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, French, but not American. He wears polyester unkempt slacks, an untucked T-shirt with “Chris Evert and the French Open.” His salient eyes are blue-gray like many Egyptians I have met.

“*Entre vite vite alors.*” The man takes my arm and pulls me inside where I am nearly overcome by the aroma of cooked meat and all the spices of a Cairene souq. 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 and then continue eating with their hands while speaking Arabic. There is no furniture in the room and the drapes are closed. On the walls are posters of Tina Turner and Tom Jones. Against one wall is an amp, 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. 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 then ask the man who opened the door if he’s Jacques.

“Correct. And you know my Noura?”

“She is 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 is Abdula,” he indicates the tall

handsome Arab who extends his greasy hand and lightly shakes mine. “He is 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.

“You will sleep here,” Jacques declares.

“Oh no!” I exclaim, surprised by the suggestion and wondering about his intentions. I sip my glass of milk. It’s always the same thing with foreign men. Maybe with men in general. I am somehow beholden to their whims and negotiations. “I have a taxi waiting for me.”

Jacque tells Smokie to pay the cab and send him off. While Smokie’s gone, I decide to bring up my business. I’m feeling too pressed for time to worry about cross-cultural sensitivities. “Can we discuss my proposition?” I ask Jacques.

“*À present*,” he quickly replies and then 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 is a brilliant woman, such a downfall of magnificence.”

After the Moroccans clear away the meal and serve coffee in small copper cups, Abdulatif lights a beautiful hookah made of pink Moroccan glass and the room smells of tobacco and hashish with an exotic flare of persimmons and clementines. After Lemach takes on the hookah, he offers me the pine wood smoking stem. I decline because I want a clear head when negotiating with these strange men in the ghettos of Paris.

“Has Noura given up?” I ask Lemach, returning to the conversation. “She never talked about her appeals. She seemed very guarded, but positive. She even nursed me back to health in the prison infirmary.”

Lemach sips his coffee, and asks, “What did she tell you? About her crime? About her sentence?”

“That she was sentenced to death because of manslaughter during a felony.”

Jacques snickers and tells his Moroccan friends, amusing them too. “She is a strong woman. Mon petite chou. Perhaps that’s why you are sisters. But 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 will release her and she’ll spring back on her feet. But her career as a smuggler. *Pas encore. C’est fini.* She cannot even return to France because she’s lost her citizenship. She’ll never be a lawyer fighting for her cause. Mademoiselle, I waylaid Noura’s dreams. I am forever in her debt. To make amends I send money to her father and she is 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 that 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 things to discuss.

Just then the door creaks open. Smokie joins his brothers around the pink glass hookah. I begin telling my story from the birth of my son in Cairo to my capture in Khartoum. Jacques tells me to speak in 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.

At one point 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 have never heard such a powerful story.”

“I cannot return to Egypt,” I explain. “Will you help me get my son back? At your price.”

“Gold bangles?” he asks. Of course, Noura *had* told Lemach my story. The gold bangles had been Noura’s favorite part. He just wants to hear the story from me. Jacques’ face becomes serious and 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 rule.”

“The police are corruptible,” I suggest, drawing a smile from Jacques.

“I am not a religious man,” he says. “I am not really a very goodly man. But my efforts are often to right a wrong. Have you not wronged this Egyptian family? You are a rich American girl. Why do you trouble yourself?”

Lemach’s words throw me off track. I am 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 or not and 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 will 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, cough, and when 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, which is the bed, and the hashish sends me into a restful sleep undisturbed by dreams. When I wake up 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 that 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 seems doubtful. Preposterous, in fact. He probably says it in jest. I believe he lives someplace else in Paris, probably at a luxury apartment near the Eiffel Tower where he conducts his business.

While enjoying the evening meal that 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. The crux of the plan, yet again, is to convince Jamal to embark on another adventure with his beautiful American mother. If he refuses to leave Cairo with Lemach, the endeavor will fail. I won't allow Jacques to capture my son like a victim, knocked him out with chloroform like Abdullatif suggests on one occasion. Jamal is now twelve and in secondary school and I pray he will still have the spirit he had when ten. But nineteen months have passed and I don't know if my son still dreams of Disneyland and of a life with me in America. And 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 Chicago blizzard or a Nubian haboob.

I assume that 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, although on one occasion he proudly talks about his father who got him into the smuggling business.

"Some twenty-three years ago," he tells me. "My father immigrated to France from Algeria before the War of Independence. De Gaulle considered Algeria as part of France and granted citizenship to Algerian immigrants. After WWII, my 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 my mother on the dig. She was a student at AUC majoring in Egyptology. They 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. I took over my father's business and expanded his enterprise to include hashish from Morocco. You see, petite Mademoiselle, I had many connections with my Maghreb friends in Paris and fell into trading hashish sometimes for the antiquities themselves. No need to launder money that way."

Early on in our planning, Lemach decides he will bring Jamal to Cyprus which is 350 nautical miles from Egypt. He explains that Cyprus is as prime a place as Egypt, Turkey, and Greece for trafficking antiquities and selling hashish.

"In ancient times," he says. "During the rule of Old Kingdom Pharos, 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 terracotta figurines, Aphrodite statuettes, coins and jewelry buried on Cyprus that it's illegal to own a metal detector. The north end of the island is an autonomous region that Turkey has occupied since 1974. Only Turkey recognizes this region as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus."

"Will my son be safe?" I ask a question foremost on my mind. "I worry about how you'll be bringing him to me."

"Bien sûr, Mademoiselle. Your boy will have the adventure of his life when we travel across the sea in my fifteen-meter Ferretti motor yacht christened *the Rif*. I usually moor on the Karpas Peninsula in Northern Cyprus because it is rich with antiquities and I launder money at

their banks. 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 that your son will want to see his true mother."

"But how will you get isolate him? To show him my picture?"

"*Mademoiselle, mes amis, bien sûr. Comme toujours.* We will call his school from the Anglo-American Hospital and claim that his mother, this Zenna that 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 trades prescription drugs and deals in antiquities and hashish on the side. My friend will go to the school to escort Jamal to the hospital. In the taxi, I will show your pictures to your son. The rest is up to him, n'est pas?"

Lemach advises me not to tell my family or friends anything about my trip to Cyprus. I say he needn't worry because my family connections are already severed and I have no friends except Noura.

At one point in the negotiations, 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," he then says. "I've been in this business most of my life and I am nearly forty. Let me tell you this. Never think about getting caught. It casts the evil eye upon the job."

Chapter 19: The Rock of Hathor

1986 New Year's Day

Sarah Prentice

By noon on New Year's Day, I am sitting on a blanket in the shade of a boulder outcropping on the pebbly Petra tou Romiou beach in view of Aphrodite's Rock. For me, it's Hathor's Rock. A few people are swimming around the rock hoping to possess Hathor's beauty forever, a wish granted for such a feat. I remember thirteen years before when Amar and I were young lovers swimming to the jetty at the Lido in fifty-degree water. Now I am at the gates of the Mediterranean on an island of migrating birds and the water here is a warm seventy degrees.

For the past week I've been staying at the nearby Almyra Hotel in Paphos awaiting word from Lemach. Yesterday, a cable finally arrived at my hotel. *À bientôt, see you Petra tou Romiou. Afternoon. 1-1-86.* Obviously, Lemach had convinced Jamal to re-unite with me, his real mother. "*Hamdulila!*" I yelled in the crowded hotel lobby, overcome with joy. "I am not vanquished. *Je ne suis pas vaincu.*"

Because it's the winter season only a few tourists and locals are on the pebbly beach where I am waiting for my son to appear with Jacques. The blue Mediterranean glimmers before me under a bright clear sky. Hathor's Rock stands in the rolling surf. It's the legendary birthplace of the Lady of Cyprus. I plan to tell my son about the legend when we meet again, at any time. I will say that the rock is the goddess of beauty and daughter of Atum Ra and that she arrived ashore on an enormous conch shell in a wake of seafoam. Aphrodite is her name in ancient Greece, I will say, but to the Romans she was Venus and to the ancient Egyptians she was the goddess Isis-Hathor like my cat in Cairo. Hathor is mother goddess of all the gods. Sekhmet, Ba'ast, Tefnut, and Isis are manifestations of Hathor and so are Aphrodite and Venus.

A warm ocean breeze tousles my shoulder length auburn hair. I've dressed comfortably in my 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 Coca-Cola, Orange Fanta, and a picnic basket with the best foods of Cyprus--stuffed vine leaves, lamb kababs, and moussaka. This morning my taxi driver helped me bring everything to the beach and he promised to return for me this evening when I am together with my son. I do not doubt this because my mind and emotions, my very spirit, would not have me thinking otherwise.

For now, my every breath anticipates Jamal's arrival and I keep glancing down the beach toward Limassol and at the stone underpass behind me. I do not know where he'll appear.

Back in Chicago, after I decided Seshet Akeru was not a figment of my battered mind, I had started asking for her help again in my quest to gain back my son. Now I wonder if my Old Kingdom avatar has made this reunion possible by using her magic on Jamal in Cairo. I call her name to help calm my nerves but I don't hear her whispering and 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; birds that blow over the Mediterranean like the Scirocco Wind. People on the island catch these birds in nets and cooked them in a traditional Cypriote dish, perhaps one as old as ancient Egypt.

Will we stay in Paris a few years and then establish a new life in America? I start asking myself hundreds of questions feeling jittery with anticipation. I can teach English anywhere in the world and it doesn't matter where Jamal and I go, so long as we are together. Maybe we'll stay on Cyprus or the Greek islands and hide out for a few months. Years? Dare I dream of possibilities when I am 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 come meet me. He must have wanted to see me again. That was the deal I made with Jacques and with Seshet Akeru.

I attempt to read my Elizabeth Peters novel *The Mummy Case* but it's no use. I cannot concentrate on more than a sentence or two about Amelia Peabody, Elizabethan Egyptologist and sooth. Not long ago, I had hoped to also earn a Ph.D. in Egyptology at the University of Chicago, like Elizabeth Peters, aka Barbara Mertz. Now I will never get that chance. But that hardly matters anymore. Only one thing matters to me and that is reuniting with my son.

At two o'clock, I look down the beach then back at the underpass. Suddenly, a boy is emerging from the darkness of the underpass. He looks American, I am thinking. Then I recognize my twelve-year-old son in the T-shirt, jeans, and Nikes I had given Lemach so Jamal could change from his school clothes. Following Jamal, Jacques Richards Lemach appears from the dark tunnel, unshaven, wearing slacks, and 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 while feeling like I'm about to burst with joy. I don't want to lose my composure and upset my son by becoming a blubbering wreck, although that is what I am.

For a moment, Jamal stops at the stonework underpass. He seems to be hesitating. I quickly notice that he has grown at least two or three inches and looks less cherublike. He is a

young man. But he is still my prince Saladin, Sultan of Egypt and the Sudan. Madjay warrior of Kush. Son of Noah and Sekhmet. It's apparent he recognizes me. I haven't changed much over the months, at least not in my appearance. Although I'm weathered in spirit, my beauty remains intact. My hair is a bit breeze blown now but it's not the botched cut I had when last we saw each other in Khartoum. And I am not hiding my face behind the niqab veil.

Standing in the sun and out of the shadow, I wait for Jamal and Lemach to arrive. Jamal must make the first move, I decide. And he does when he walks up before me and we eye each other for a moment. Then he embraces me and says, "Mama. I missed you."

There is nothing more to say between us. I know my son accepts me as his mother. But I can't help but wonder if he has suffered under the pretense of Zenna as his al 'umm. Had Jamal protested and rebelled, asked for his real mother? My head is filled with questions but now is not the time for emotional recollections. Child psychology is a delicate plateau, as I well know. I must tread lightly. Besides, Lemach is standing nearby in need of his final payment made on delivery. He is a man of business.

I pay Jacques in American dollars and he jests, "What no gold bangles?" He kisses me in friendship on each cheek and then, to my surprise, he sensually kisses me on the lips, pinching my shoulders in the process. "Bonne chance, mon amore," he says then turns and walks back to the underpass probably off to cruise his Ferretti to North Cyprus where he'll launder money and acquire antiquities for the next harvest of hashish from the Rif.

I watch Jacques as he disappears into the tunnel then look at Jamal. He smiles with a gleam in his eyes. It's over. I've won back my son forever; I know this in my heart. We will now travel to Greece for a month, I decide on the spot. Then return to America. I will get a birth certificate for my son, somehow. I will work my own magic to accomplish the impossible.

Perhaps with the help of Seshet Akeru and Nefertiabet, the true wielders of divine magic.

Hathor's magic

For now, I am content to watch Jamal run to the surf and throw pebbles in the sea. He shouts that he wants to climb to the top of Hathor's Rock and I yell, "It's too dangerous to climb such a huge boulder."

"Mama," Jamal returns to me at the beach blanket. "I still want to see Disneyland."

"Habibi, life of my heart," I say. "We'll stay in Paphos a while, if you like. For now, I have a picnic feast for you. And gifts." I hand Jamal the canvas bag and he excitedly 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 of Cyprus."

Jamal then takes out a Canon T90 SLR camera, a Texas Instruments digital calculator watch, a Sony Walkman, and tapes of Michael Jackson, the Bee Gees, and Diana Ross. He lays his gifts on the blanket while he eats the picnic food like the growing young man that he is. I recall the elation he had over his new badad sulimani, Tai Basshir. Now he examines his gifts with an adept engineering mind. "And I have nothing for you, Mama." He clicks a picture of me with his new camera already loaded with Kodak film.

Yes, he has matured, I think and smile at my son. He is more in charge of his imagination and a little reserved.

Jamal eats, grins, examines his new toys, and eats more. Eventually he asks, "Why didn't you come for me sooner?"

His question surprises me. It implies he was waiting for me, hoping I would return for him. "My dear son," I say. "We were hopelessly kept apart. From your birth. But that is all behind us now."

A magpie lands on a nearby boulder with a lizard in its mouth. Children are shouting on the stony shore and in the surf. "It's New Year's Day, 1986," I say aloud, feeling enshrouded with warmth, tranquility, and an aura of promise. I am as happy as I've ever been and am hoping Jamal shares these feelings even though we are virtually strangers to each other after nineteen months apart.

For the rest of the afternoon, Jamal takes pictures, looks through the Nikons, and listens to his Walkman. I watch him and believe that he is as happy as he can be. 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 us for college. But I'm going to Stanford or Yale." I am so impressed with my son. At least Zenna did something right. Still, I can't help but wonder if Jamal struggled emotionally during our separation.

We talk about our adventures sailing on the Nile and our camel trek with the Beja nomads. "I miss Bashok and Samarr," Jamal says. "They were the best friends I ever had. Sometimes, I wonder what happened to them with the civil war now going on in the Sudan."

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. Made his own fortune. If it weren't for him, I'd still be suffering in al-Qanater. I've never lost sight of you, Jamal, since Amar grabbed you from me in Khartoum. Since your birth in Cairo, when I dreamed that you were born to do great things."

"Mama," Jamal says as he takes another picture of me. "I'm sorry I couldn't save you when they took you away. My uncle has always been very strict. But I never doubted that you are my mother from America. All my friends at school envy my travels. Most have never sailed a boat or ridden a camel. I have done both. It was the best time I ever had."

Yes, I think. My son has changed from a ten-year-old boy to a charismatic and chivalrous young man. Before, Jamal wanted to protect me as part of his imagination. Now he really does want to protect me, his real mother, and see us both on our way to a new life in America. Even his voice is an octave deeper.

As the sun is nearing Hathor's Rock Jamal proudly looks at his new watch and declares that it's 4:45. "We must start getting ready to leave," I say and Jamal jumps up to take sunset pictures of the rock and I pack up the picnic to carry to highway B6 on the other side of the underpass where my taxi will be waiting for us by six.

"Mama, tonight we can stargaze," Jamal suggests. He is now looking through his binoculars at the Sun, Atum Ra, kissing Hathor's Rock.

"We'll do whatever you like. That's why you have the Nikons," I suggest. "But for now, we must return to the hotel, Habibi. We have so many possibilities to think about."

Jamal looks at the sea's horizon and describes his exciting voyage on Jacque's speeding Ferretti yacht then he politely asks a passerby to take a picture of him with his mother. It's the last picture on his roll of film.

I look toward Limassol and notice a solitary man in a white T-shirt and black slacks. He is 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 like he is the wild beast of the red desert sands strutting down the pebbly beach to where Ra embraces Hathor as she stands against the foaming surf.

He is vaguely familiar I am thinking as I stare up the deserted beach while feeling an urgency to hurry and leave.

“It’s my uncle!” Jamal exclaims with agitation as he looks at the man through his binoculars which he then hands to me.

I gaze through the lens. Amar’s face becomes clearer and 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 Jamal and I have reunited?

Ra is now on the horizon of the mystical sea that gave birth to the goddess of beauty, love, and peace. Of motherhood. Most people have already left the beach.

Amar clearly appears to me now 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 then hugs me, and calls me *Habibti Mama*.

As I tightly hold my dear son, fear overwhelms me. *Are Jamal and I completely helpless?* I ask myself and then see the gun Amar carries, a semi-automatic pistol somehow smuggled onto the island. I have seen this gun before. It’s Amar’s Barretta 92 from his days in the Egyptian Army. When I was staying at the house in Zamalek, he had showed it to me and brandished it with pride.

Has Father Zeus forsaken me? Father Ra? My own father Stanly Alan Prentice? I ask myself and tighten my grip around Jamal, my firstborn, my falcon son, my only child. I glance at Hathor’s Rock knowing that I may die at any instant. Amar--the evil god Set, wants me gone. Out of the picture. I call upon Hathor and my guardian avatars but only in my mind because I 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. A purple glow emanates around the rock outcropping in the sea and then casts the sky colors as iridescent as a scarab beetle.

In the fading light I glance back at the underpass to see if we can run and 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 present because it contains part of the soul. Hathor as the cat calls for the powers of jackals, leopards, and scorpions to destroy Set like Ammit destroys the sinful souls at the gateway to heaven.

“Look Mommy,” Jamal suddenly says, jolting me from my thoughts. “It’s Mr. Lemach in the Rif.”

Still holding my son, I turn and see Amar approaching even more rapidly with his gun upheld. Then I look toward the sea. A large speedboat is approaching with lights illuminating Hathor’s Rock and the pebbly beach. It appears to me like a white glowing apparition.

The sun has set and there is no moon tonight until nine o’clock when the waning gibbous will rise. The beach is now empty of people, except for me, my son, and Amar.

“Come with me, Jamal.” I hear the voice of Amar. A serious voice, not like 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. Leave us alone!”

“Go away Sarah or I’ll shoot you,” Amar yells as he stops his pace about twenty feet from us.

He is pointing his Baretta straight at me, I can tell even in the darkness. I stand frozen, afraid to run while I tightly hold my son's hand. "No never," I finally scream so loudly that my throat hurts. "Leave me in peace with my son. You and your sister stole him from my womb!"

Suddenly, the Ferretti's searchlights shine on Amar, lighting up his face, blinding him and nearly blinding me. But I see Amar's expression. It is filled with anger, hatred, determination, and destruction.

"Jamal, come to me," Amar shouts again. He seems so near me now that I feel the earth shatter. And then I hear a gunshot rip through the air like thunder, like an explosion. It knocks me to my senses and I tighten my grip on Jamal's hand and we run toward the shoreline where the Ferretti is illuminating the Rock of Hathor. The light is so bright that I nearly stumble in my step.

"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. "They are not important. We can replace them." I am nearly out of breath and can scarcely utter my words.

Another gunshot rips through the air and I hear more shouting. I think it's Amar yelling threatening words, but I can't be sure. The words and the voice are blurred together and indiscernible in the chaos.

At the surf, we begin wading to the rock and over to the idling Ferretti, the Rif. I see Lemach standing at the bow, illuminated by the bright lights of his yacht. He is holding his own gun. A Glock pistol. He waves it in a gesture that we go to the back of his boat.

The light is on Amar and on the yacht itself. Jamal and I are in the dark. Evil Set cannot see us. He cannot take aim and shoot me.

In a soft wake of foam, my son and I reach the rear of the speedboat. It feels like we are about to climb aboard the boat of Atum Ra, the boat of gold inlaid with amethyst, jasper, turquoise, and lapis lazuli. I imagine that Atum Ra himself has arrived at the sandy shore before the boulder outcropping to rescue us and take us from the perils of Set.

The humming motor grows louder as I see the metal ladder at the back deck of the yacht. It is difficult to reach it in the briskly flowing surf.

I cannot see Lemach now but I hear him shout, "Come on! Hurry aboard."

I push Jamal ahead of me to climb the ladder. Suddenly, I feel exposed in the boat's brightness. Certainly, Amar can see me now, aim his Baretta like a soldier, fire, and kill me.

Another gunshot sounds and I feel it rush past my head. Then I hear it penetrate the fiberglass boat like the blow of a hammer.

Jamal is on the back deck and I fear 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. He holds out his hand for me as I grab the cold metal bars of the ladder and pull myself out of the foaming surf. Then Jamal takes my hand and helps me off the ladder, out of the sea, and onto the yacht.

I hear more shouting, another shot, but this time it's coming from the Ferretti's bow. From Lemach's Glock.

Jamal runs into the cabin to the engine controls beyond the living and kitchen area. He wants to help man the yacht like Jacques must have allowed him to do when they journeyed here from Alexandria. I'm sure Jacques taught him the basics of yachting to keep my young son engaged and occupied.

Amar is no longer shouting, only the roaring engine sounds. I don't look toward the beach but assume Jacques has killed Amar. It's probably too dark anyway to see a body lying on the pebbly sands and I don't want to know what has happened.

I enter the cabin and see Jacques at the cockpit standing beside my son at the steering wheel before the control panel illumined with blue, green, and yellow instrument lights that are like jewels on the boat of Atum Ra. Jacques is powering up the engine and pulling his Ferretti away from Hathor's Rock

I stand behind my son and place my hands on his shoulders. "Mommy," Jamal says with excitement. "We are safe. And I know how to run the engine. Jaques showed me on the way here. He let me steer. Like Majid did on the felucca two years ago. Remember?"

Once we are far enough away from the shoreline and the Rock of Hathor, Jacques allows Jamal to take over the steering. I bend down and hug my son. I don't know where we are going but I know it will be some place safe. *Jacques is Master of the Mediterranean Sea* I remember Noura telling me. "I thought you were headed to Northern Cyprus," I finally say to Jacques. "To launder money and find more antiquities."

"We *are* heading to Northern Cyprus," Jacques says as he adjusts settings on the engine control panel. "The police will not reach us there. After a few days, I can 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 nearly collapse on the padded sofa near the cockpit. The events of this New Year's Day have overwhelmed me with exhaustion. "How did Amar know where we were? What went wrong?"

Jacques looks over at me and says, “When I returned to the Rif my friend in Paris, Abdulla, radioed to warn me that Abdullatif had contacted your son’s father in Cairo. For the reward money. He betrayed our plan. The *Connard! Tas de merde!*”

“No,” I say, reminded of Naguib’s betrayal in Aswan. I cannot help but feel that Amar, or Set as he seems to be, is a very powerful force. “How?” I add.

“I don’t know,” Jacques says as he lights a cigarette and appears calm and relaxed. As if what has just happened, his killing a man and rescuing a mother and her son from the clutches of death, was another run of the mill day for him. 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 humming engine while feeling Jamal and I are safe and secure at last. I am so relieved. 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 through the power of Hathor. Or maybe it’s just happenstance and good luck that Abdulla alerted Jacques, my true hero. He 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.

My mind conjures the image of a woman in a long white gown that flows around her like moonlight. She wears a golden vulture crown over black hair with many tiny braids; a green and orange aura sparkles around her. She is holding her hands out before her, palms up, inviting me to embrace her essence. As her image grows stronger and more vivid, I know she is Hathor as the dignified lady Seshet Akeru. I then hear her whisper *When the Eye of Ra speaks the Earth trembles and gives you your victory at the eternal Temple of Life. Awake in peace, beautiful soul 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 will appear with the Golden Falcon among the imperishable stars that never set.